

For discussion
on 10 May 2016

Legislative Council Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

Promotion of Green Burial

Purpose

This paper updates Members on the efforts being made by the Government to promote green burial as a more sustainable means of handling human ashes, including enhancements to green burial facilities and services.

Cemeteries, Crematoria and Columbaria

2. In line with demographic changes, the number of deaths in Hong Kong is expected to increase steadily over the next twenty years. An overview is given below:

	Annual average number of deaths	Annual average number of cremations
1975 to 1994 (actual)	26 000	14 000
1995 to 2015 (actual)	38 000	32 000
2016 to 2035 (projection)	57 000	54 000

3. To meet the long term demand for facilities and services related to the disposal of cremated ashes, the Government has adopted the following three-pronged strategy –

- (a) increasing the supply of public niches;
- (b) enhancing the regulation of private columbaria; and
- (c) promoting green burial.

4. Under our current district-based columbarium development policy, we are making sustained efforts to fortify the supply of public niches in the next 10 to 15 years. The progress made on this front over the past few years has been reported to the Panel from time to time. The latest update could be found in the supplementary information we provided to the Panel in May 2016.

5. In parallel, we are working closely with the Legislative Council for early enactment of the Private Columbaria Bill with a view to putting the operation of private columbaria under regulation.

6. Under current practice, niches are seldom recycled. The cumulative effects over time would be a severe drain on our scarce land resources, to an extent even worse than residential units for the living which are recycled through generations of inhabitants. Therefore, in the long run, reliance on the provision of new niches for disposal of cremated ashes is not sustainable. It is imperative to promote green burial – scattering ashes at Gardens of Remembrance (GoRs) or at sea.

Green burial

7. The **Annex** gives an overview of the public education efforts that are being made to foster the change in culture and mindset that is called for. Also included in the **Annex** is an account of the improvements that have been or are being made to enhance the attractiveness of our green burial facilities and services.

8. The efforts we made over the years to promote green burial are beginning to bear fruit. The number of green burial cases handled by the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) in 2015 accounts for about 8.7% of the total number of deaths in Hong Kong, relative to 4.6% in 2010. The actual figures in the past 3 years are given below:

Year	Scattering ashes in GoRs (A)	Scattering ashes at sea (B)	Total no. of green burial cases (A)+(B)	% of total no. of deaths
2013	2 354	797	3 151	7.3%
2014	2 697	856	3 553	7.8%
2015	3 196	877	4 073	8.7%

We are conscious that it will take time for green burial to gain public acceptance as *the* preferred way to dispose of cremated ashes. With persistent efforts, we are optimistic that we should be able to progressively secure a paradigm shift, as vindicated by our experience in promoting cremation over land burial. Before the 1980's, the predominant approach was land burial of the deceased, with cremation taking up only a small minority. The merits of cremation gradually dawned upon the community after a few decades of persistent public education. In 2015, land burial and cremation respectively take up 7% and 91% of the annual number of deaths.¹

Way Forward

9. We look forward to receiving views and feedback from various quarters on how best the Government could further enhance the effectiveness of our endeavours in promoting green burial.

10. Having regard to the suggestions made by members of the Advisory Committee on Food and Environmental Hygiene, for instance, FEHD is now examining ways and means for targeting our publicity efforts at not only the elderly but also the middle-aged, their family members as well as the younger generation. FEHD would also endeavour to strengthen collaboration with various stakeholders, such as undertakers, religious groups and hospitals, etc. in promoting green burial.

11. Ultimately, how widely green burial is accepted as the social norm depends on the wishes of the deceased and the preference of the bereaved family. Separately, we are watching closely the efficacy of measures being pursued elsewhere, including the provision of financial incentives in some cities in the Mainland². For Members' information, we have considered the merits of waiving the charges for cremation and certain after-death services in those cases where green burial is opted for.

¹ The two figures did not add up to 100% as some of the bodies were exported elsewhere by the bereaved families while some cases were carried over to the next year for handling.

² For example, the municipal authorities in Shanghai, Guangzhou and Beijing are offering cash subsidies to encourage families to scatter ashes at sea. The Guangzhou Bureau of Civil Affairs has launched a pilot scheme since 24 January 2013 for five years, under which a cash subsidy of RMB 1,000 is granted to each application for scattering of ashes at sea, in addition to provision of free ferry services. The Beijing Municipal Bureau of Civil Affairs has implemented since 2009 a subsidy scheme to promote the scattering of ashes at sea. The amount of subsidy has been adjusted from RMB 2,000 to RMB 4,000 since March 2014.

But on balance, we do not consider it ripe to pursue such an idea at this stage, for fear that some may misconstrue this as according a greater importance to financial considerations than filial piety. Nevertheless, we maintain an open mind towards waiver of certain fees and charges as a modest financial incentive in appreciation of people's support for more environmental friendly modes of ash disposal, should there be such calls in the community.

12. To strengthen strategy formulation on this front, we are setting up under the Advisory Committee on Food and Environmental Hygiene a working group focusing on green burial and related issues. This will allow us to have a dedicated platform for tapping the views from a wide cross-section of the community.

13. The Government will continue to step up our efforts to improve and increase our green burial facilities and services and strengthen our promotional efforts on green burial.

Advice Sought

14. Members are invited to note the measures being taken to support and promote green burial.

**Food and Health Bureau
Food and Environmental Hygiene Department
May 2016**

Efforts being made to Promote Green Burial

Publicity and public education on green burial

Whilst mindful that it takes time for the community to accept green burial as a socially laudable way to handle ashes, we recognise the need for proactive and sustained efforts to fortify the necessary mindset changes. Details of the on-going publicity and education endeavours are given below.

Exhibitions, Public Seminars and Talks

2. The Health Education and Resource Centre (HEERC) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) has been visiting elderly centres / homes to provide talks on green burial. Public seminars are also conducted to promote green burial. An exhibition area dedicated to the promotion of green burial is also provided at the Centre located in the Kowloon Park at Tsim Sha Tsui. The exhibition panels and electronic display equipment in the area have been revamped and enhanced in March 2016. In 2015, 18 such public seminars and 100 talks to elderly centres / homes have been held, with some 4 600 participants.

3. In 2014 and 2015, around 70 400 and 73 000 people attended the annual Retiree and Senior Fair. We consider this occasion a good opportunity to reach out to the elderly and FEHD will continue to participate in the 2016 Fair scheduled for July and set up an exhibition booth there and make good use of the Fair to distribute promotional publications and souvenirs, broadcast relevant videos and demonstrate the use of the Internet Memorial Service.

4. To help promote green burial to young people, the HEERC includes green burial messages in its school talks. In 2015, the HEERC organised 45 such school talks, reaching out to some 3 600 students. An essay competition on the Internet Memorial Service was held among senior secondary students between October 2014 and March 2015 to promote the students' awareness of and interest in the Internet Memorial Service.

Announcement in Public Interest (API) and Promotional Videos

5. Three promotional videos on IMS and scattering of ashes at GoRs and at sea respectively were broadcast inside buses and MTR trains and stations in January 2016. A new television API has been broadcast since March 2016 through the mass media and at various public places.

Publications, Posters and Banners

6. We have produced the booklets “Returning to Nature What Nature Creates” (回歸自然 生生不息) and “A Guide to After-Death Arrangements” (辦理身後事須知) and various pamphlets on IMS and scattering of ashes at GoRs and at sea respectively. These publications are available on FEHD’s website and at various FEHD’s offices. A new poster promoting green burial was displayed at bus shelters throughout the territory in December 2015 and January 2016 and at MTR stations in January 2016. Large banners have also been or will be put up in various public places.

Collaboration with Relevant Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)

7. At present, a number of NGOs have been promoting green burial when providing advisory and information services to the elderly on after-death arrangements. FEHD has established contact with some of these NGOs to explore opportunities of joint publicity or activities. FEHD invites and welcomes relevant NGOs and elderly centres / homes to visit GoRs and to attend the service of scattering ashes at sea. In 2015, 66 such visits were organised for some 2 100 visitors. The promotional video and pamphlet on green burial were distributed to the after-death service units of Government departments / NGOs, green groups, day care centres and homes for the elderly, etc. Also, hyperlinks to the green burial section of FEHD’s website are available on the websites of some relevant NGOs and Government departments. We will continue to explore opportunity to collaborate with these NGOs.

Improvements that have been or are being made to enhance the attractiveness of green burial facilities and services

Scattering of ashes at GoRs

8. FEHD is currently managing 11 GoRs in eight columbaria¹. Dedicated walls are erected at each GoR for mounting plaques, if so preferred, in memory of the deceased. Taken together, they provide space for about 29 500 plaques. From 2001 to 31 March 2016, a total of 15 327 bereaved families have applied for scattering the ashes of their family members in these GoRs. Currently, about 11 000 memorial plaques have been mounted.

9. The GoRs have scenic and tranquil settings and are decorated with seasonal flowers regularly. Members of the public may perform memorial rituals and scatter the cremated ashes of their beloved ones at the GoRs by themselves or with the help of dedicated staff of FEHD. This service is free of charge. They may also mount memorial plaques at the GoRs.

10. To encourage wider use of GoRs and to provide more choices, new and bigger GoRs have been constructed in recent years. The new Diamond Hill GoR was commissioned in 2012. The GoR at Wo Hop Shek Kiu Tau Road Columbarium Phase V was commissioned in 2013, with a Western garden and a Chinese garden. The results of questionnaire surveys showed that users appreciated being given the choice to mount memorial plaques at GoRs. To plan ahead, some 6 000 new plaque spaces have been provided in the Cape Collinson Columbarium as recently as April 2016. An additional 10 000 plaque spaces will be provided at the new GoR in Tsang Tsui scheduled for completion in 2019. We will continue to look for suitable sites for building more GoRs to encourage people to use these facilities.

11. In addition to GoRs managed by FEHD, the Board of Management of Chinese Permanent Cemeteries also operates a GoR in the Junk Bay Chinese Permanent Cemetery and the Hong Kong Chinese Christian Churches Union manages a GoR in the Pokfulam Chinese Christian Cemetery.

¹ These columbaria are at Cape Collinson, Diamond Hill, Wo Hop Shek, Fu Shan, Kwai Chung, Cheung Chau, Peng Chau and Lamma Island.

Scattering ashes at sea

12. The public may apply for scattering ashes at three designated locations² using privately arranged boats or the free ferry service provided by FEHD. From July 2007 to March 2016, there were some 5 600 applications for scattering ashes at sea.

13. FEHD began to provide free ferry service for scattering ashes at sea in 2010. A funeral director is on board to assist family members and friends in the memorial ceremonies, and facilities are provided to accommodate different religious rituals. To meet rising demands and improve the service, FEHD has since 2012 used a bigger vessel to accommodate more passengers, and increased the number of sailings. Currently, we are providing free ferry service every Saturday (except on public holidays). From 2010 to March 2016, a total of about 4 300 applications have been received for using the free ferry service.

14. To facilitate the public to pay tribute to their loved ones whose ashes were scattered at sea, FEHD arranges four memorial sailings each year with two before the Ching Ming Festival and two before the Chung Yeung Festival. These memorial sailings are well-received. In light of the positive feedback, we would continue to provide such services and seek improvements.

Internet Memorial Service

15. As a complementary service for green burial, in June 2010, FEHD launched the Internet Memorial Service (IMS), a free memorial website (www.memorial.gov.hk) which enables users to create memorial webpages for their loved ones and to pay tribute to them at any time and from anywhere. Users can design the memorial webpages, furnish the webpages with stories, photos and videos of the deceased, express condolences, give electronic offerings, etc. In September 2011, FEHD launched the mobile version of the IMS. As at 31 March 2016, IMS had about 7 500 users and about 8 400 memorial pages, with about 2.73 million hit counts. We will continue to monitor the utilisation of IMS and identify additional promotion measures as appropriate.

² The three designated locations are at the east of Tap Mun, east of Tung Lung Chau and south of West Lamma Channel. These three locations were chosen after consulting the relevant Government departments and District Councils.

16. FEHD provides assistance to families using the GoRs and free ferry service in creating memorial webpages for their loved ones using the IMS. For applicants who have provided their email addresses in the application forms for cremation and some other cemeteries and crematoria services, an IMS account will be automatically created for them.

17. FEHD is now developing a mobile app for IMS to facilitate mobile device users to use the service anytime and anywhere they prefer. The mobile app will provide functions for personalised profile settings, notifications and sharing with social media. The mobile app is expected to be launched later in 2016.