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Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

**Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat
for the meeting on 10 May 2016**

Promotion of green burial

Purpose

This paper provides background information on green burial services provided by the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department ("FEHD") and summarizes major concerns of members of the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene ("the Panel") on the subject.

Background

2. The Government's columbarium policy is underpinned by a three-pronged strategy which included enhancing the supply of public niches, regulating private columbaria and promoting green burial. According to the Administration, green burials, which include scattering human ashes in Gardens of Remembrance ("GoRs") or at sea and paying tribute to the deceased through the Internet Memorial Service ("IMS") website launched by FEHD, provide a more sustainable and environmentally friendly way for the disposal of ashes.

Gardens of Remembrance

3. There are currently 11 GoRs in operation under the management of FEHD. These GoRs are located in the eight public columbaria in Cape Collinson, Diamond Hill, Wo Hop Shek, Fu Shan, Kwai Chung, Cheung Chau, Peng Chau and Lamma Island. Dedicated walls are erected in GoRs for mounting plaques in memory of the deceased. Memorial rituals may be performed before scattering cremains. The public can choose to have the ashes of the deceased scattered by themselves or by FEHD staff. In addition, there are two GoRs,

one in the Junk Bay Chinese Permanent Cemetery managed by the Board of Management of Chinese Permanent Cemeteries and the other in the Pokfulam Chinese Christian Cemetery managed by the Hong Kong Chinese Christian Churches Union. A list of the 13 GoRs is in **Appendix I**.

Scattering cremains at sea

4. Apart from GoRs, members of the public can also choose to scatter cremains in three designated Hong Kong waters, i.e. east of Tung Lung Chau, east of Tap Mun and south of West Lamma Channel. In January 2010, FEHD introduced for the first time a free ferry service for the public for scattering cremains at sea. Since January 2012, FEHD has enhanced the free ferry service by employing a bigger vessel which can accommodate over 300 passengers per sail. As the free ferry service has become popular, since January 2013, FEHD has further increased the number of sails to four times per month.

Internet Memorial Service

5. A memorial website (www.memorial.gov.hk) has been launched by FEHD since June 2010 to enable users to pay tribute to their lost loved ones at any time and from anywhere in place of burning joss sticks and paper offerings. Users can create a free memorial webpage in memory of the deceased. They can self-design or select a thematic layout, write the deceased's life story, express condolences, upload photos and videos and select electronic offerings, etc. In September 2011, FEHD further launched the mobile version of the IMS website. Assistance is provided to families using GoRs and the free ferry service for scattering cremains to create memorial webpages for their lost loved ones. For applicants who have provided email address in the application form for cremation, FEHD will automatically create an IMS account for them to create memorial webpages for the deceased.

Members' concerns

6. The Panel was briefed on the usage of green burial services and the Government's effort in promoting green burial at the meeting on 8 January 2013. Members have also raised concerns about green burial during discussions on the supply of public niches and development of columbarium facilities at a number of Panel meetings since 2013. Members' major views and concerns are summarized below.

Government's efforts in the promotion of green burial

7. Some members were concerned about the low usage of green burial in Hong Kong, which amounted to only about 8% of the annual number of deaths. They considered that green burial could help address the problem of insufficient columbarium facilities and hence urged the Administration to step up publicity to promote green burial and to contemplate measures to fortify mindset changes, so as to turn green burial into the mainstream mode for handling cremated ashes. There were suggestions that the Administration should engage more sessions of Announcements in the Public Interest ("APIs") on television and radio, organize seminars on green burial at elderly homes and schools and reduce fees and charges for all services relating to green burial, with a view to promoting the adoption of green burial. Some members further suggested that consideration be given to establishing a registration scheme for the elderly to indicate their willingness to adopt green burial, similar to the existing registration scheme for organ donation.

8. According to the Administration, it had constructed new GoRs of bigger size in recent years, and would provide GoRs in public columbarium projects under planning wherever feasible. The Administration also planned to install additional memorial walls at the Cape Collinson GoR for mounting plaques for the deceased whose ashes were scattered there. To encourage scattering of ashes at sea, FEHD had increased the number of free ferry trips and employed a bigger vessel for more comfortable sea voyages. Starting from the Ching Ming Festival in 2014, FEHD invited descendants to a free ride on ferry around the grave-sweeping seasons to pay respect to the deceased whose ashes had been scattered at sea.

9. The Administration also advised that in addition to the IMS website, FEHD had launched its mobile version and was planning to introduce a mobile application by the end of 2015 to facilitate paying tribute to the deceased via computer or mobile devices any time and anywhere. Starting from July 2014, apart from the family members and friends of the deceased whose bodies/exhumed remains/cremated ashes were interred or kept in public cemeteries, crematoria or public columbarium facilities of FEHD, IMS was also made available to the family members and friends of the deceased who were Hong Kong residents and whose bodies/exhumed remains/cremated ashes were interred or kept in Hong Kong private cemeteries or private columbaria.

10. Apart from the above measures, FEHD had also stepped up publicity and launched educational programmes to enhance public awareness and acceptance of sustainable alternatives for handling ashes as well as paying tribute to the deceased. Major publicity efforts included participation at the annual Hong Kong Senior Fair, publication of handbooks and promotion materials on green

burial and production of APIs, etc. Relevant information compiled by FEHD was hyperlinked with websites of other related government departments (including the Department of Health, the Environmental Protection Department and the Social Welfare Department) and non-governmental organizations providing after-death services, as well as with portals for the elderly and the youth. Following the promulgation of an API on green burial in 2013, a new television API was in production for broadcasting in 2015.

11. According to the Administration, its promotion work started to bear fruit in that the total number of cases where ashes were scattered in GoRs and at sea had kept increasing in the past 10 years. The respective numbers of deaths and cases in which cremated ashes were scattered in GoRs and at sea in each of the past 10 years is in **Appendix II**. Moreover, up to December 2014, about 6 400 persons had registered for IMS and about 7 000 memorial webpages had been created. The Administration assured members that it would continue to improve its green burial facilities/services while stepping up the promotion efforts.

Scattering cremains at sea

12. There was concern that some unscrupulous operators had been providing cremains scattering services at sea without the Administration's permission. Some operators even recklessly threw into the sea cremated ashes with the urns/ash containers, posing threats to the marine environment. It was also noted that certain families of the deceased scattered cremains and carried out burial ceremonies at the dykes of typhoon shelters. Members urged the Administration to take enforcement actions against unauthorized scattering of cremains at sea.

13. The Administration advised that it was an offence to dispose of urns at sea. FEHD and the Marine Department had provided guidelines to private operators for the conduct of cremains scattering services at sea. Surprise inspections had also been conducted and no illegal activities had been detected so far. The Administration would enhance public education and communication with private operators to ensure the latter's observation of the requirements/conditions pertinent to scattering cremains at sea.

14. Some members were of the view that some of the designated locations, especially those close to the Tung Lung Chau marine fish culture zones and fishing grounds, were not suitable for conducting cremains scattering services. They called on the Administration to review and consider the feasibility of removing the waters close to Tung Lung Chau from the list of designated sea burial zones and if desired, identify other waters, such as the waters east of the Ninepin Group, for conducting cremains scattering services.

15. According to the Administration, it had reviewed the locations of the designated waters including the area close to Tung Lung Chau and confirmed that there were no fish farms, beaches or ports nearby. In addition, the strong current there could carry the scattered cremains away rapidly. The Administration believed that the scattering activities would not cause any environmental problem. This notwithstanding, it would continue to closely monitor the conduct of cremains scattering services at all the three designated waters and would review the situation if necessary. Regarding the suggestion of conducting the service in the waters east of the Ninepin Group, the Administration advised that in looking for suitable designated waters, it was necessary to ensure that the location should not be too remote to avoid a long and unpleasant journey across the sea.

Recent developments

16. The Administration will update the Panel on the Government's efforts in the promotion of green burial at the meeting on 10 May 2016.

Relevant papers

17. A list of the relevant papers on the Legislative Council website is in **Appendix III**.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
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Gardens of Remembrance

(A) run by the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department

- (1) The new Cape Collinson GoR
- (2) Cape Collinson GoR
- (3) The new Diamond Hill GoR
- (4) Diamond Hill GoR
- (5) Fu Shan GoR
- (6) Kwai Chung GoR
- (7) The new Wo Hop Shek GoR
- (8) Wo Hop Shek GoR
- (9) Cheung Chau GoR
- (10) Lamma GoR
- (11) Peng Chau GoR

(B) run by Others

- (12) GoR of the Junk Bay Chinese Permanent Cemetery under the Board of Management of the Chinese Permanent Cemeteries
- (13) GoR in the Pokfulam Chinese Christian Cemetery operated by the Hong Kong Chinese Christian Churches Union

Appendix II

The respective number of deaths, the number of cases in which cremated ashes were scattered in gardens of remembrance (GoRs) and at sea in each of the past ten years, and the proportion of these cases expressed as a percentage of the total number of cremations in the relevant year

Year	No. of deaths	No. of cremations	No. of cases of scattering ashes in GoRs	As a percentage of no. of cremations	No. of cases of scattering ashes at sea	As a percentage of no. of cremations
2005	38 683	33 288	37	0.11%	17 (before 2007)	N.A.
2006	37 415	32 215	58	0.18%		
2007	39 963	34 427	175	0.51%	160	0.46%
2008	41 530	36 410	383	1.05%	243	0.67%
2009	41 034	36 486	650	1.78%	279	0.76%
2010	42 705	38 006	1 171	3.08%	804	2.12%
2011	42 188	37 916	1 648	4.35%	661	1.74%
2012	43 672	39 494	2 023	5.12%	791	2.00%
2013	43 399	38 914	2 354	6.05%	797	2.05%
2014	45 710	41 244	2 697	6.54%	856	2.08%

Appendix III

Relevant papers on promotion of green burial

Meeting	Date of meeting	Paper
Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene	8.1.2013 (Item V)	Agenda Minutes
	8.7.2014 (Item III)	Agenda Minutes
	10.3.2015 (Item V)	Agenda Minutes
	14.4.2015 (Item IV)	Agenda Minutes
Council meeting	29.4.2015	Written question raised by Hon CHAN Hak-kan on "Promoting green burials"

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