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Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

**Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat
for the meeting on 14 January 2020**

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. With a growing and ageing population, the number of death and cremations has been rising gradually. According to information provided by the Administration in April 2019, based on demographic and operational data, the cumulative number of cremations from 2019 to 2028 is projected to be around 513 000. The death toll was 47 479 in 2018 and it is estimated to increase from around 50 400 in 2019 to 58 600 in 2028. To cope with the long-term public demand for facilities and services for handling cremated ashes of the deceased, the Administration has been pursuing a three-pronged strategy, which includes (a) increasing supply of public niches, (b) promoting the sustainable development of the private columbaria sector through implementing a regulatory framework¹ and (c) promoting green burial.

¹ The Private Columbaria Ordinance (Cap. 630), which provides a regulatory framework for the operation of private columbaria, came into operation on 30 June 2017.

Promotion of green burial

3. Since niches are seldom recycled, the cumulative effects over time would be a severe drain on Hong Kong's scarce land resources. In the long run, reliance on the provision of new niches for disposal of cremated ashes is not sustainable. The Administration considers it imperative to promote green burial.

4. According to the Administration, efforts have been made to increase the community acceptance of green burial and to promote green burial as a more environmentally-friendly and sustainable means of handling human ashes. Major green burial initiatives that have been introduced by the Administration include: (a) scattering ashes at Gardens of Remembrance ("GoRs"); (b) scattering ashes at sea; and (c) launching the Internet Memorial Service ("IMS") and green burial website.

Scattering ashes at GoRs

5. Currently, FEHD manages 12 GoRs in eight public columbaria². Dedicated walls are erected at each GoR for mounting plaques, if so preferred, in memory of the deceased. Members of the public can perform memorial rituals and scatter the cremated ashes of their loved ones at GoRs themselves or with the help of dedicated staff of FEHD. In addition, there are two GoRs in private cemeteries, 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.

Scattering ashes at sea

6. Apart from GoRs, members of the public may apply for scattering ashes at three designated locations³, i.e. east of Tap Mun, east of Tung Lung Chau and south of West Lamma Channel, using privately arranged boats or the free ferry service provided by FEHD. FEHD arranges four memorial sailings each year, with two before the Ching Ming Festival and two before the Chung Yeung Festival to facilitate members of the public to pay tribute to their loved ones. To further enhance the service provision, FEHD is exploring the feasibility of providing additional free ferry service on one Sunday in a month in addition to the current provision on every Saturday (except public holidays).

² These columbaria are at Cape Collinson, Kwai Chung, Diamond Hill, Cheung Chau, Wo Hop Shek, Peng Chau, Fu Shan and Lamma Island.

³ These three locations were chosen after consulting the relevant Government departments and District Councils.

IMS and green burial website

7. Since June 2010, FEHD has launched IMS, a free memorial website (www.memorial.gov.hk), to enable users to create memorial webpages for their loved ones and to pay tribute to them online at any time and from anywhere. FEHD has also launched a mobile app for IMS since June 2018 to facilitate mobile device users to use the service anytime and anywhere they prefer. The mobile app provides functions for personalized profile settings, notifications and sharing via social media.

8. According to the Administration, to better facilitate the public's online access to information on green burial, FEHD has launched a dedicated and user-friendly thematic website on green burial (www.greenburial.gov.hk) since March 2018. The thematic website is a one-stop-shop and portal of online resources including a wealth of information on burial matters. Since January 2019, FEHD has further launched the Green Burial Central Register ("GBCR") under the green burial website, to enable members of the public to register their wish for green burial. Signing up in GBCR is free of charge, and can be made online, by post, fax or email.

Members' concerns

9. The Panel was briefed on the green burial initiatives and the Government's efforts in promoting green burial at the meetings on 10 May 2016 and 13 February 2018. During the discussions on the supply of public niches, development of columbarium facilities and implementation of the Private Columbaria Ordinance at meetings held between 2016 and 2019, relevant issues were also raised. Members' major views and concerns are summarized below.

Government's efforts in the promotion of green burial

10. Some members were concerned that while green burial was gaining popularity, the number of green burial cases was still on the low side. Enquiry was raised on whether further measures would be taken by the Administration to promote the adoption of green burial as a sustainable way of disposal of ashes.

11. The Administration advised that it recognized the need for proactive and sustained efforts to fortify the necessary mindset changes so as to turn green burial into the mainstream mode for handling human ashes. On the educational front, the Administration had been promoting green burial through various publicity channels, such as broadcasting Announcement in the Public Interest and producing booklets, posters and banners for publicity purpose. The Administration had also collaborated with non-governmental organizations to

promote green burial when the latter provided advisory and information services to the elderly on after-death arrangements. In 2020, the Administration would step up promotion efforts, including promoting GBCR and cooperating with various sectors in the promotion work. To strengthen strategy formulation on the promotion of green burial, the Administration had set up the Working Group on Green Burial and Related Matters under the Advisory Committee on Food and Environmental Hygiene as a dedicated platform for tapping public views from a wide cross-section of the community.

12. There was a suggestion that consideration be given to offering incentives to bereaved families for using green burial, such as waiving the fees and charges for cremation services relating to green burial. The Administration advised that it had considered the merits of waiving the charges for cremation and certain after-death services in those cases where green burial was opted for. The Administration did not consider it ripe to pursue such an idea, for fear that some might misconstrue this as according a greater importance to financial considerations than filial piety. Nevertheless, the Administration maintained an open mind towards waiver of certain fees and charges as a modest financial incentive in appreciation of people's support for more environmentally-friendly modes of ash disposal, should there be such calls in the community.

Provision of GoRs

13. Some members opined that GoRs should be provided at convenient and easily accessible locations with sufficient space for mounting plaques of the deceased on memorial walls. There were suggestions that the Administration should identify suitable sites in 18 districts (in particular newly developed districts) for constructing "standalone" GoRs of bigger size and explore the feasibility of co-locating existing GoRs to government facilities such as country parks, so as to enable the public to pay tribute to their lost loved ones in a scenic and tranquil environment.

14. According to the Administration, due to topographical constraints, some of the GoRs built at a later stage in existing public columbarium facilities were not large in size. To encourage wider use of GoRs and to provide more choices, more GoRs of bigger size had been and would be included in the planning stage of new columbarium facilities as part of the projects. FEHD would continue to explore with relevant Government departments the feasibility of providing "standalone" GoRs in the future and liaise with various religious bodies and operators of private cemeteries to solicit their support in providing more GoRs as far as practicable.

Scattering ashes at sea

15. Some members had received complaints that FEHD only arranged a few memorial sailings on weekdays before the Ching Ming Festival and the Chung Yeung Festival for members of the public who needed to pay tribute to their ancestors whose ashes had been scattered at sea. These members considered that improvements should be made in this regard, as it could enhance the attractiveness of adopting green burial.

16. Concern was also raised that some unscrupulous private operators who provided ashes scattering services at sea had thrown the urns into the sea. Some members pointed out that the netting of the disposed urns had brought unease to the fishermen. The Administration was urged to monitor the conduct of ashes scattering services and to step up enforcement actions against unauthorized scattering of ashes at sea.

17. The Administration advised that it was an offence to dispose of urns at sea. While the Administration would remind private operators to comply with the relevant requirements in conducting ashes scattering services at sea, fishermen could report illegal activities to the relevant authorities for taking out enforcement action. Regarding the scattering of ashes at sea, members of the public could use the free ferry service provided by FEHD. The funeral director on board would assist bereaved families in the memorial ceremonies, and bio-degradable bags (which would decompose in the water within one day) were provided for holding ashes to be scattered into the water to minimize the impact on marine environment. The Administration further advised that it had reviewed the propriety of the three designated locations of Hong Kong waters for scattering ashes and confirmed that there were no fish farms, beaches or ports nearby. The strong current there could also carry the scattered ashes away rapidly.

Recent developments

18. The Administration will update the Panel on the Government's efforts in the promotion of green burial at the meeting on 14 January 2020.

Relevant papers

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

Relevant papers on promotion of green burial

Meeting	Date of meeting	Paper
Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene	10.5.2016 (Item IV)	<u>Agenda</u> <u>Minutes</u>
	8.11.2016 (Item VII)	<u>Agenda</u> <u>Minutes</u>
	9.5.2017 (Item IV)	<u>Agenda</u> <u>Minutes</u>
	13.2.2018 (Item VII)	<u>Agenda</u> <u>Minutes</u>
	12.3.2019 (Item IV)	<u>Agenda</u> <u>Minutes</u>
Council meeting	17.4.2019	<u>Official Record of Proceedings</u> <u>Pages 8783 to 8788 (Written</u> <u>question raised by Hon Jeremy</u> <u>TAM on "Circulation and supply</u> <u>of as well as demand for public</u> <u>niches")</u>
Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene	29.10.2019 (Item I)	<u>Agenda</u> <u>Minutes</u>