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**Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene**

**Updated background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat  
for the meeting on 14 September 2021**

**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 year by year. According to information provided by the Administration in April 2021, based on demographic data, the cumulative number of cremations from 2021 to 2040 is projected to be around 1.2 million. The death toll was 50 563 in 2020 and it is estimated to increase by almost 50% to reach 75 500 in 2040. 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 the supply of public niches; (b) promoting the sustainable development of the private columbaria sector through implementing a regulatory framework;<sup>1</sup> and (c) promoting green burial.

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<sup>1</sup> 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 public 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 13 GoRs in nine public columbaria<sup>2</sup>. Dedicated walls are erected at each GoR for mounting commemorative 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 the Chinese Permanent Cemeteries and the other in the Pokfulam Chinese Christian Cemetery managed by the Hong Kong Chinese Christian Churches Union. According to the Administration, the Hong Kong Buddhist Association also plans to construct a GoR in a private cemetery under its management.

#### *Scattering ashes at sea*

6. Apart from GoRs, members of the public may apply for scattering ashes at three designated locations, 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. At present, FEHD's free ferry service is provided every Saturday. FEHD also arranges four memorial sailings each year, including two before the Ching Ming Festival and two before the Chung Yeung Festival to facilitate the public to pay tribute to the deceased.

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

### *IMS and green burial website*

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

8. To better facilitate the public's online access to information on green burial, FEHD has launched a thematic website on green burial ([www.greenburial.gov.hk](http://www.greenburial.gov.hk)) since March 2018. Information on burial matters (such as application procedures, locations of GoRs, designated areas for scattering ashes at sea and free ferry services, etc.) are available on the website for public browsing. Since January 2019, FEHD has further launched the Green Burial Central Register ("GBCR") under the green burial website to encourage the public to plan in advance their after-death arrangements by registering their wish for green burial and making it known to their families. Registration on GBCR is free of charge.

### **Members' concerns**

9. Members' major views and concerns on relevant issues are summarized below.

### Government's efforts in the promotion of green burial

10. When the Panel last discussed in January 2020 the work progress of the Administration on promoting green burial, members noted that green burial had gradually gained acceptance by the public in recent years. The number of green burial cases in Hong Kong (including the scattering of ashes at GoRs or sea) reached 7 909 in 2019, representing an increase of over 2 500 cases (or round 47%) as compared with the figure in 2016. This notwithstanding, members considered it necessary for the Administration to continue to strengthen its efforts in promoting green burial. A number of suggestions on enhancing green burial services were raised. For example, consideration could be given to (a) engaging non-governmental organizations ("NGOs") or private companies to undertake the promotion and publicity work; (b) offering incentives (such as waiving the fees and charges for cremation services) to bereaved families for using green burial; (c) introducing more diversified forms of ash scattering (e.g. transforming ashes into synthetic diamond, ornament or any other material) for consideration/selection by the public; and (d) providing subsidies to private boat/ferry operators who provided ashes scattering services at sea.

11. The Administration advised that it recognized the need for sustained efforts to fortify the necessary mindset changes so as to turn green burial into the mainstream mode for handling human ashes. It should be noted that the Administration had been promoting green burial through various publicity channels and also collaborating with NGOs to promote green burial with the latter providing advisory and information services to the elderly on after-death arrangements. The Administration would continue to step up promotion efforts, including promoting GBCR and cooperating with various sectors in the promotion work.

12. The Administration further advised that it had set up the Working Group on Green Burial and Related Matters under the Advisory Committee on Food and Environmental Hygiene. The Working Group assisted in formulating the strategies for promoting green burial and served as a dedicated platform for tapping public views on relevant issues. To gauge the public's views on existing green burial facilities and services, awareness of green burial as well as considerations in choosing post-death arrangements, the Administration would conduct two questionnaire surveys and would make reference to the findings in formulating long-term development plans for green burial facilities and services as well as strategies to promote green burial.

#### Provision of GoRs and scattering ashes at sea

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 (a) identify suitable sites in 18 districts (in particular newly developed districts) for constructing "standalone" GoRs of bigger size and (b) explore the feasibility of co-locating existing GoRs to government facilities (such as country parks) or providing GoR facilities in "Green Belt" sites to enable the public to pay tribute to their deceased family members in a scenic and tranquil environment.

14. According to the Administration, due to topographical constraints, some GoRs already provided in existing public columbarium facilities were not large in size. FEHD would plan for new GoR facilities with larger scale and continue to explore the feasibility of providing GoR facilities in existing columbaria where space permitted. To encourage wider use of green burial 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.

15. In response to members' enquiry as to whether worshipping facilities were provided in GoRs for members of the public to pay tribute to the deceased, the Administration advised that four electronic kiosks were provided adjacent to Kwai Chung Garden of Remembrance which was opened in January 2019. This digital worshipping facility was the first of its kind in GoRs managed by FEHD and would be provided in newly constructed GoRs. Members of the public could access the free memorial website through the electronic kiosks in GoRs or their mobile phones (using the IMS mobile application) to pay tribute to the deceased.

16. There was a view that efforts should be made to facilitate the public to pay tribute to the deceased at the waters where ashes had been scattered. According to the Administration, FEHD would, starting from 2020, increase the number of memorial sailings to be arranged before the Ching Ming Festival and the Chung Yeung Festival from four to eight each year. Some memorial sailings would be arranged on Sundays for public convenience. To raise public awareness of the ferry service for scattering ashes at sea, as a trial scheme FEHD had been inviting members of the public to attend such service on the last Saturday of each month since April 2019. FEHD had also been inviting representatives from NGOs and elderly centres/homes to attend the service of scattering ashes at sea.

17. 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.

18. The Administration advised that it was an offence to dispose of urns at sea. While the Administration would remind private boat/ferry 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.

### **Recent developments**

19. The Administration will update the Panel on the Government's efforts in respect of promoting green burial at the meeting on 14 September 2021.

**Relevant papers**

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

Council Business Division 2  
Legislative Council Secretariat  
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## Appendix

### Relevant papers on promotion of green burial

Meeting	Date of meeting	Paper
Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene	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 of</u> <u>as well as demand for public</u> <u>niches")</u>
Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene	14.1.2020 (Item V)	<u>Agenda</u> <u>Minutes</u>

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