

## LCQ13: Circulation and supply of as well as demand for public niches

Following is a question by the Hon Jeremy Tam and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (April 17):

Question:

To enhance the circulation of niches, the Government has introduced legislative amendments to a piece of subsidiary legislation (which will be in operation with effect from April 26 this year) to implement an extendable arrangement for public niche allocation. Under that arrangement, the initial deposit period for ashes in niches is 20 years, which upon expiry may be extended for 10 years each time on application and payment of the prevailing prescribed fees. The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department will remove ashes from those niches whose deposit period has not been extended upon expiry. Quite a number of members of the public have expressed to me their concern over the arrangement. Some elderly people living alone have remarked that they are deeply upset that as they have no descendants to apply for extension of the deposit period for their niches, their ashes will be removed after 20 years. Regarding the circulation and supply of as well as demand for public niches, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether the Government will suspend the implementation of the extendable arrangement for niche allocation and comprehensively consult the public and relevant stakeholders (including elderly centres, elderly care homes and relevant non-governmental organisations (NGOs) on the arrangement, and make a further decision in the light of the consultation outcome; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) as the Government has indicated that some NGOs provide assistance to members of the public in need in applying for public niches or extension of the deposit period, of the names of such NGOs and the details of such assistance;

(3) given that some elderly people have no descendants or relatives to apply for the extension of the deposit period for their niches, whether the Government will exercise discretion to waive the requirement that the deposit period for niches must be extended every 10 years; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(4) of the number of public niches to be provided by the Government in the coming 10 years, as well as their respective commissioning dates and locations, together with a breakdown by District Council district;

(5) whether the Government will, in constructing new public columbaria, adopt designs that can accommodate more niches, so as to increase the supply of

public niches; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(6) how the Government will, in the coming three years, step up efforts in promoting green burial so as to change the traditional public concept of burial bringing peace to the deceased, thereby reducing the demand for niches?

Reply:

President,

(1) to (3) To cope with the increasing demand for niches due to the growing and ageing population in Hong Kong, the Government introduces the extendable niche arrangement to set an initial deposit period of 20 years to newly allocated public niches, followed by extension for 10 years recurrently on application. So long as the related persons (i.e. the niche allocatee or nominated representative(s)) apply for extension of the deposit period, there is no time limit for the use of an allocated niche. This extendable arrangement would not affect existing public niches allocated for permanent use (including ashes co-located in the same niche).

The Legislative Council Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene was consulted on the extendable arrangement in February and April 2018. Most Panel members expressed in-principle support. The Panel also invited members of the public, including the 18 District Councils (DCs), to submit written views, which we have reverted in writing. We have also consulted 18 DCs or their relevant committees, the majority of which supported in principle the extendable arrangement. We consider that it is high time to implement the extendable arrangement.

We understand that some non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are currently providing after-death care services to elderly people without descendants or close relatives. The main objective is to help them make solemn, dignified choices for peace of mind in the rest of life. Their services include counselling, funeral, cremation and final disposal of ashes by green burial, etc. Temporary storage of cremated remains and application for a niche when an allocation exercise is available are also included. Upon the implementation of the extendable niche allocation arrangement, the services currently provided by such NGOs to the elderly could continue and would not be affected.

The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) has touched base with some NGOs providing the above-mentioned services and encouraged them to make use of the nomination arrangement, i.e. the niche allocatee can nominate two representatives, which can be staff of NGOs, and any of them can apply for extension in future. The arrangement also allows nomination of successors or other persons to take the places of the related persons anytime when necessary. We consider it necessary to let the NGOs explore and study in detail and hence inappropriate for us to disclose their names.

(4) The Government strives to take forward the district-based columbarium

development scheme to increase the supply of public niches. We received support from relevant DCs on a number of projects, which are under different planning and design stages and which will altogether provide around 590 000 new niches. We will continue to press ahead remaining projects and consult the relevant DCs when ready. If taken forward successfully, they will provide another 300 000 niches.

Projects which have gone through DC consultation and obtained funding approval are as follow –

District	Location	Number of niches	Anticipated Year of Completion
Wan Chai	Hong Kong Cemeteries and Crematoria Office (Part) of FEHD at Wong Nai Chung Road	855	2019
Tuen Mun	Tsang Tsui	163 320	2019
North District	Wo Hop Shek Cemetery (Phase 1)	44 000	2019
Islands	Cheung Chau Columbarium Extension#	1 250	2020
Islands	Lai Chi Yuen Cemetery Extension	790	2020
Eastern District	Cape Collison Road	25 000	2022

#Not under the district-based columbarium development scheme.

Furthermore, we consulted the Panel on April 16 on the public columbarium projects located in Shek Mun, Sha Tin and Sandy Ridge Cemetery, North District, which can provide around 40 000 and 54 000 niches respectively. We will seek funding approval from the Public Works Subcommittee and Finance Committee of the Legislative Council in due course.

(5) We have to conduct various preliminary studies and assessments on the proposed sites before pursuing columbarium projects, including those relating to topography, compatibility with adjacent land uses, supporting infrastructure as well as traffic and environmental impacts. Besides, the total number of niches to be provided hinges upon several factors including the outcome of traffic impact assessment, site and planning constraints. At present, the columbarium buildings under construction in Tsang Tsui and Wo Hop Shek are multi-storey. All along, we have built as many public niches as possible where feasible, taking into account geographical conditions.

(6) The efforts of the Government made in recent years to promote green burial have begun to bear fruit. The number of green burial cases handled by FEHD in 2018 accounted for about 13.3 per cent of the total number of deaths in Hong Kong (relative to 4.6 per cent in 2010). Taking into account those cases handled by private cemeteries, the total green burial cases in 2018

accounted for about 14.8 per cent of the number of deaths in the same year.

We understand that it takes time to make green burial as the preferred choice of handling of ashes of the public. The FEHD has deployed additional resources to promote green burial, including organising more exhibitions, public seminars and talks, producing and broadcasting promotional videos, distributing publications, putting up posters and banners as well as collaboration with relevant NGOs. We will continue with our efforts to enhance the existing green burial facilities and services, including identifying more suitable sites for building Gardens of Remembrance and continuing to provide free ferry service to scatter ashes of the deceased and pay tributes at designated areas.

The FEHD launched the Green Burial Central Register (GBCR) in January 2019 to encourage the public to register their wish for green burial. As at end March 2019, over 1 000 individuals have registered in the GBCR.