

CONTROLLING OFFICER'S REPLY

FHB(FE)140

(Question Serial No. 1149)

Head: (49) Food and Environmental Hygiene Department

Subhead (No. & title): (-) Not specified

Programme: (2) Environmental Hygiene and Related Services

Controlling Officer: Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene (Miss Vivian LAU)

Director of Bureau: Secretary for Food and Health

Question:

With regard to public niches, please provide information on:

- (a) the number of deaths (Hong Kong residents) and the means of disposal of the dead (by burial, cremation or green burial) in the past 3 years;
- (b) the number of applications for public niches in Hong Kong, the number of niches allocated, the total number of applications on the waiting list and the average waiting time for a public niche in the past 3 years;
- (c) the relevant plan and timetable, including the differences between the new and previous niche allocation arrangements in the fees charged and the term of use, given that the Department will resume allocation of new public niches as mentioned under the Programme;
- (d) the number of public and private niches to be provided in the next 10 years, and whether there is any long-term planning for the provision of public and private niches (such as setting targets for the supply of public and private niches) so that a comprehensive plan for the supply of niches can be formulated; and
- (e) the usage rate of the green burial services in Hong Kong, with a breakdown by type of green burial, in the past 3 years, as well as the new measures for promoting green burial.

Asked by: Hon HO Chun-yin, Steven (LegCo internal reference no.: 39)

Reply:

- (a) The information sought is provided as follows -

Year	No. of Deaths	No. of Burials	No. of Cremations	No. of Green Burial Cases*
2016	46 662	3 253	43 556	5 366
2017	45 883	2 962	42 809	6 539
2018	47 479	3 136	43 803	7 046

* Inclusive of cases handled by private cemeteries.

- (b) New niches are allocated through computer balloting. The last public niches allocation exercise at Kiu Tau Road Columbarium was completed in March 2016. Thereafter, there was no supply of new public niches for allocation to members of the public generally.

The waiting list applies only to the allocation of niches returned to the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (the Department). In the past 3 years, on average about 324 niches per annum were returned to the Department. These niches were re-allocated according to the priority in the waiting list of the respective columbarium. The information sought is provided as follows -

Year	Re-allocated niches			
	No. of applications received	No. of niches re-allocated	No. of applications on the waiting list	Average waiting time (months)
2016	6 923	271	24 280	42
2017	7 931	346	29 168	46
2018	8 410	448	35 693	50

Note: The average waiting time is dependent on the number of niches that are returned to the Department for re-allocation.

- (c) The Department plans to allocate about 20 000 niches in Tsang Tsui Columbarium (first phase) in Tuen Mun together with 855 niches in Wong Nai Chung Road Columbarium in Wan Chai in the coming niche allocation exercise in mid 2019.

To cope with the increasing demand for disposal of ashes and to make the most of the future stock coming on stream, the Government has proposed to introduce, starting from the coming allocation exercise, a new set of arrangement in allocating public niches. Major features of the new arrangements are set out below -

- (i) public niches will be allocated for use for an initial period of 20 years, followed by extension every 10 years upon application by the niche allocatee or nominated representative(s) and payment of the prevailing prescribed fees. This extendable arrangement will not affect existing public niches already allocated on a permanent basis;
 - (ii) to expedite the process, public niches will be allocated by drawing of lots and computer balloting to assign a specified niche randomly to successful applicants. Applications involving co-location of ashes or failure to subscribe a public niche in the last allocation exercise will be given an additional “ballot paper” (or heavier weighting) to enhance their chance of success in the coming allocation exercise; and
 - (iii) we propose to set the fees for the initial interment period of 20 years for a standard niche at \$2,400 and a large niche at \$3,000. Thereafter, use of the niches may be extended at 10-year intervals at prevailing fees. Other fees applicable to specific circumstances are also proposed. Relevant amendments to the Public Health and Municipal Services (Fees) Regulation (Cap. 132CJ) were tabled on 20 February 2019 for negative vetting by the Legislative Council. The Department will invite applications for allocation of public niches upon commencement of the Amendment Regulation.
- (d) A total of 24 potential sites have been identified in the 18 districts under the district-based columbarium development scheme. Between the second quarter of 2011 and the end of 2018, the Government consulted the relevant District Councils (DCs) on projects at 14 sites to which the DCs indicated support or no-objection, which would provide around 590 000 new niches in total. As regards the remaining projects, the Government will continue the planning work and consult the relevant DCs when ready. If taken forward, they would provide an additional 300 000 niches.

The future supply of private niches is contingent upon a host of factors including private columbarium operators’ business decisions, the number of private columbaria that comply with the application requirements for licence and the number of niches that they may provide. The Department is not in a position to make projection of supply of private niches. Given scarce land resources, the Government has been promoting green burial as a more sustainable form of ash disposal. It provides an alternative to depositing ashes in niches and may work to alleviate the demand for niches over time with change in mindset.

- (e) The information sought is provided as follows -

Year	Number of cases	Scattering of ashes		Percentage of Total Number of Deaths
		At sea	In Gardens of Remembrance*	
2016	900	4 466	5 366	11.5%
2017	966	5 573	6 539	14.3%
2018	972	6 074	7 046	14.8%

* Inclusive of cases handled by private cemeteries.

The Department has been promoting green burial through different channels, including Announcement in the Public Interest on television and radio, promotional videos, posters and banners, a mobile application, a dedicated website, collaboration with non-government organisations and promotional activities at senior exhibitions, etc. The Green Burial Central Register was launched in January 2019 to encourage the public to register their wish for green burial. The Department will continue with its efforts to promote green burial including the Green Burial Central Register.

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