

CONTROLLING OFFICER'S REPLY

FHB(FE)165

(Question Serial No. 2081)

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:

Under Matters Requiring Special Attention in 2020-21, it is stated that the Department will oversee the implementation of the regulatory regime for private columbaria. Please advise on:

1. the latest number of applications for public niches and the average waiting time;
2. the staff establishment and expenditure of the Private Columbaria Affairs Office in 2019-21;
3. the number of applications for a licence under the Private Columbaria Ordinance received by the Department, the number of cases approved and the time required for processing the applications;
4. the measures to be taken by the Department in light of the strong public demand for private columbaria.

Asked by: Hon YUNG Hoi-yan (LegCo internal reference no.: 37)

Reply:

1. At present, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department allocates new extendable niches to eligible applicants by open drawing of lots and computer balloting rather than on a first-come, first-served basis. In late 2019, the Department conducted a niche allocation exercise for two new public columbaria, namely Tsang Tsui Columbarium (first phase) in Tuen Mun (providing around 20 000 niches) and Wong Nai Chung Road Columbarium (providing 855 niches). In the next few years, with new columbarium projects being completed one after another, it is estimated that no fewer than 20 000 niches will be available for allocation each year.
2. In 2019-20, the Private Columbaria Affairs Office (PCAO) of the Department had about 60 staff and the revised estimated expenditure was around \$74.92 million. In

2020-21, the PCAO will increase its manpower to about 70 staff and the estimated expenditure is \$83.6 million.

3. As at 6 March 2020, the Private Columbaria Licensing Board (PCLB) has granted 5 licences and approved in principle 2 licence applications and 1 application for a temporary suspension of liability (TSOL). The PCLB was processing applications for specified instruments submitted by 116 private columbaria (91 of which had submitted licence applications). The time the PCLB takes to process a licence application depends on the actual circumstances of the case, particularly on whether the private columbarium has complied with all the requirements for licence application stipulated in the Private Columbaria Ordinance (Cap. 630) and those specified by the PCLB (including the requirements relating to planning, land, buildings, fire safety, electrical and mechanical safety, management plan, right to use the premises, environmental protection, etc.), and whether the applicant has submitted sufficient documents to prove that the private columbarium has complied with the requirements. Upon receiving the documents or information required for an application, the PCAO will invite the relevant departments to provide comments. The applicant will then be asked to take the necessary follow-up actions and submit reports, which will be forwarded to the relevant departments for their vetting. After confirming that a licence application has complied with the application requirements, the PCAO will arrange for the submission of the application to the PCLB for determination.
4. With a view to speeding up the processing of applications for specified instruments, the PCLB announced the implementation of three measures on 30 August 2019, namely granting exemption without requiring the applicant to restore the ash interment quantity first, administrative arrangements for “Approval-in-principle for TSOL Application”, and requiring applicants to submit the documents/information required for their TSOL applications on or before the deadline of 31 December 2019. After the expiry of the said deadline, the PCLB has carefully examined the status of the documents/information received and has decided to cease the vetting of the TSOL applications submitted by 15 private columbaria, and will hold open meetings to determine these applications by batches. The list of the private columbaria concerned has been uploaded onto the dedicated website for public information. As for other applications for specified instruments being processed, the PCAO will continue to liaise closely with the applicants and the relevant departments and strive to assist the PCLB in expediting the vetting work.

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