

申訴專員公署
Office of The Ombudsman



主動調查行動報告
Direct Investigation Operation Report

政府提供辦理先人過世手續相關的公共服務
Government's Provision of Public Services
Relating to the After-death Arrangements

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Executive Summary **Direct Investigation Operation Report**

Government's Provision of Public Services Relating to the After-death Arrangements

Introduction

In Hong Kong, public services relating to after-death arrangements including death registration, mortuary services, cremation and coffin burial services are provided by different government departments. Taking care of after-death arrangements requires time and effort and dealing with the loss of a loved one at the same time is not an easy process.

2. While overcoming with grief for the loss of a beloved family member, the bereaved have to deal with various formalities for after-death arrangements. If the Government can improve the dissemination of information on related public services, simplify the application procedures for such services and digitalise or personalise the workflows of death registration and related applications, it should significantly reduce the pressure and emotional stress on the bereaved in dealing with the formalities for after-death arrangements, as well as enhancing the work efficiency of relevant government departments.

3. Moreover, government statistics show that with an ageing trend in Hong Kong's population, the demand for public services relating to the after-death arrangements, including death registration, mortuary services and burial arrangements, continues to rise. Members of the public are increasingly concerned about the arrangements for such services and dissemination of related information. Hence, the Office has examined the Government's provision of public services relating to the after-death arrangements and dissemination of related information. Based on our findings, we have the following observations and comments.

Our Findings

Creating A One-stop Thematic Website

4. Currently, information about the formalities for after-death arrangements can be found on the webpage, "Services and Support for the Bereaved" of the government

website, Gov.HK. Nevertheless, it is difficult for the bereaved to find the information they need because they have to click on the links, one by one, to look for the information from the website of different government departments. Take death registration as an example, clicking on “Forms related to deaths registration” will link to the webpage of “Births and Deaths Registration” on ImmD’s website. On that page, nine application forms relating to births and deaths registration and other services are available, including the forms for “Application for Search of Record of Birth in Hong Kong”, “Application for a Certified Copy of an Entry in the Deaths Register” and “Application for Search of Record of Death in Hong Kong”. Members of the public will have to spend time browsing the websites of different departments and checking one webpage or another before they can find the forms or information they need.

5. In our view, for better support and assistance to the bereaved in dealing with after-death arrangements for the deceased, relevant departments should explore developing a one-stop thematic website on after-death public services offered by all the relevant departments to provide standard and consistent information. The contents of the website may include information on the application procedures for related services provided by FEHD, ImmD, DH and HA, clear guidelines, relevant legal procedures and required documents as well as answers to frequently asked questions.

6. We noticed that in the past the bereaved had to go to the offices of individual departments to complete the formalities for after-death arrangements in person due to the lack of digitalised services. For that reason, some chose to engage a funeral agent to deal with the formalities for related public services. The Office has from time to time received complaints about inadequacy in the digitalisation of public services relating to the after-death arrangements. For example, even if the bereaved have submitted an online application for allocation of a renewable new niche via FEHD’s online system, the Platform for Cemeteries and Crematoria Services, they still have to complete the verification of death documents and pay the fee at FEHD offices because the online system does not support verification of cremation cases on the same day. Subsequent to our intervention, FEHD launched the “After-death Arrangements” thematic website in November this year to provide an integrated platform for the public to handle cemeteries and crematoria services. Upon launching of the online platform, the same situation in the aforesaid example can be handled, that is, verification of cremation cases on the same day could be handled and the bereaved need not complete the verification formality and settle the payment at FEHD offices in person.

7. In recent years, the Government has stepped up the pace of building a digital government and promoting digitalisation of government services. We consider that in keeping with this, the relevant departments should provide online application for more public services relating to the after-death arrangements on the one-stop thematic website. They should also make good use of the “iAM Smart+” mobile app to promote digitalised after-death public services so that the bereaved could complete relevant procedures more quickly. That could save the bereaved the trouble of having to make such applications in person. We have noticed that FEHD had launched the “After-death Arrangements” thematic website to facilitate the bereaved to apply for green burials online and to search for information about licensed undertakers of burials. In this light, we recommend that based on the online platform launched by FEHD, the Government further explores the development of a one-stop thematic website, offering inter-departmental and relevant e-service applications relating to after-death public services provided by all relevant departments.

8. In the long run, as people have become more open-minded about after-death arrangements, the relevant departments may study the feasibility of expanding the functions in the one-stop thematic website to provide personalised services and collect data for sharing among the departments so as to assist the public to plan ahead for their after-death arrangements. For example, the website may allow the public to pre-set their personal medical directive and indicate their choices of end-of-life care service and burial. Besides, the Government may develop a central database to document all these types of information so that the relevant departments and HA can use the data collected to follow up on the decisions of members of the public on after-death arrangements. The one-stop thematic website should also include the function to allow the bereaved to learn about the deceased’s decision on their after-death arrangements. For example, members of the public can give consent to sending a timely notification to their family of their option for after-death arrangements by activating the function of an email reminder. That would make it easier for the bereaved to take care of the after-death arrangements according to the wish of the deceased. It can also save the bereaved the trouble of having to provide information of the deceased to different departments separately, thus lessening the impact on their lives at the time they are still mourning the death of their beloved ones.

9. While we acknowledge the importance of safeguarding personal data, we consider that relevant departments should promote digitalisation of public services relating to the after-death arrangements and at the same time examine how the information including the after-death arrangements that involve the deceased’s privacy

should be managed and maintained in the central database. In devising the information system, the departments should also draw up guidelines and formulate measures to ensure data protection for workflows including collection, storage, use and transfer of data.

Thematic Website Should Cater for Needs of Ethnic Minorities and Different Cultures

10. Hong Kong is a multicultural society and home to over 300,000 ethnic minorities. The Government of HKSAR is determined to build a caring and inclusive community and has been providing comprehensive support to ethnic minorities. Handling after-death formalities for the deceased involves legal and administrative procedures, which would prove to be even more complicated for non-Chinese speakers, not to mention that different cultures have different customs and taboos surrounding the topic of death. We consider that the one-stop thematic website, in addition to providing information in more languages, should be culture-sensitive and careful in the choice of wording and graphics, as well as provide answers to frequently asked questions among ethnic minorities. Better still, the content of the one-stop thematic website can be categorised by religion and ethnicity.

Stepping up Promotion through Seminars And Publicity

11. The Government is vigorously promoting green burials in the society so that cremains of the deceased can be handled in a more environmentally-friendly and sustainable manner. Green burials are gaining popularity, and latest statistics show that this option was adopted in after-death arrangements of 18.2% of the total number of deaths in a year. We agree with FEHD that changing customs and traditions takes time. The Department should collaborate with other government departments so that green burial can gradually become the preferred option of the public when they handle cremated ashes.

12. In this light, we consider that the Government should strengthen publicity and public education such as coordinating relevant departments or public organisations to hold seminars or forums periodically (e.g. every quarter) for the public, inviting staff of the relevant government departments and professionals (such as legal consultants and funeral service providers) to explain the services relating to after-death formalities and answer public queries so that members of the public can better understand after-death arrangements and relevant issues. Such seminars or forums can also serve as a platform for the public to reflect their views on the procedural arrangements for after-death formalities to the Administration.

13. Furthermore, the Government has amended relevant legislation to facilitate the choice of dying in place for terminally ill patients in prescribed residential care homes in accordance with the wish and needs of the patients and their family. The amended legislation is intended for provision of quality and comprehensive end-of-life care for those patients, allowing them to spend their final days in a familiar place of their choice such as their home, an elderly home or a nursing home. In our view, relevant departments or authorities including HA should provide more information on dying in place to those using the services of prescribed care homes so that the public can better understand the new arrangements in the amended legislation.

Considering the provision of additional storage facilities for dead bodies in mortuaries

14. According to the data provided by DH, taking into account the population growth and the number of deaths in Hong Kong, it is estimated that the public mortuaries in Hong Kong will need to provide a total storage capacity of about 1,300 bodies by 2031 to meet the projected demand. DH has already reprovisioned the Fu Shan Public Mortuary in 2022 and plans to reprovision the Victoria Public Mortuary, so as to increase the total storage capacity of public mortuaries to cope with the demand in the longer term. In addition, HA has been closely monitoring the utilization of hospital mortuaries and has indicated that it will rationalize the planning and increase the storage capacity of facilities for storing dead bodies.

15. We are of the view that with the growth and ageing of the population in Hong Kong, DH and HA should review the utilisation of mortuaries from time to time and consider in a timely manner the need to increase the number of storage facilities for the dead in public mortuaries and hospital mortuaries to cope with the challenges that may arise in the future.

Formulating Emergency Plans for Public Services Relating to Formalities for After-death Arrangements

16. All the departments and the authority concerned should explore the formulation of an emergency response system and make good plans for risk management to prepare for any upsurge in demand for public services relating to after-death arrangements following major accidents or emergencies. Specifically, the government departments should plan for measures and coordination for provision of such public services in case of different emergencies to ensure that they could respond to such emergencies in the most efficient and quickest way.

17. Meanwhile, all the departments and the authority concerned should arrange regular staff training to increase their staff's alertness to emergencies of difficult magnitude and enhance the coordination and capability of the departments and the authority in providing public services relating to after-death arrangements. In the long run, they should also consider redeploying manpower or adding resources to meet the rising demand for public services relating to after-death arrangements in view of the ageing trend in Hong Kong's population.

Recommendations

18. In light of the above, The Ombudsman's main recommendations to FEHD, DH, HA and ImmD are as follows:

- (1) **All the departments** should discuss and examine the feasibility of developing a one-stop thematic website providing information about the public services provided by each of them regarding after-death arrangements;
- (2) **All the departments** should explore using a one-stop thematic website to further digitalise public services relating to after-death arrangements. They should consider providing more electronic application procedures and personalised services to make it more convenient for the bereaved;
- (3) **All the departments** should examine how the content of the thematic website can meet the needs of people of different races and cultures;
- (4) **FEHD and the department or authority concerned** should organise seminars or forums to explain information and share experiences relating to after-death arrangements on a regular basis;
- (5) **HA and the department or authority concerned** should provide more information on dying in place to their service users as well as giving more publicity to the new arrangements in the amended legislation that make it more convenient for patients to choose to die in place;

- (6) **DH** should regularly review the availability of body storage facilities in public mortuaries and consider installing additional units in response to the population growth and the ageing trend in Hong Kong;
- (7) **HA** should regularly review the availability of body storage facilities in hospital mortuaries and consider installing additional units in response to the population growth and the ageing trend in Hong Kong;
- (8) **All the departments** should consolidate previous experiences and explore the establishment of an emergency response system and implementation of relevant measures regarding provision of public services relating to after-death arrangements at the time of emergencies or major accidents to prepare for sudden challenges;
- (9) **All the departments** should conclude previous experiences and arrange regular training to staff providing public services relating to after-death arrangements at the time of emergencies or major accidents, with the aim of increasing the staff's alertness and capability in handling emergencies of a sizeable magnitude; and
- (10) **All the departments and the authority concerned** should be flexible in redeploying internal resources to meet the rising demand for public services relating to after-death arrangements alongside the ageing trend in Hong Kong's population.

Office of The Ombudsman

December 2024

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I

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

1.1 In Hong Kong, public services relating to after-death arrangements including death registration, mortuary services, cremation and coffin burial services are provided by different government departments and public organisations. Taking care of after-death arrangements requires time and effort and dealing with the loss of a loved one at the same time is not an easy process.

1.2 Government statistics show a continuing ageing trend in Hong Kong's population¹. The life expectancy in Hong Kong increases alongside with the advancements in medical services. Nevertheless, the annual mortality rate of Hong Kong has been rising due to an ageing population. Given that the demand for public services relating to after-death formalities (including death registration, mortuary services and burial arrangement) will continue to increase, the public are more concerned about the arrangement for such services and dissemination of related information.

1.3 In view of the above, the Ombudsman was concerned about the sufficiency and appropriateness of the Government's provision of public services relating to after-death arrangements (including death registration, mortuary services and burial arrangements) and dissemination of related information. Against this background, the Ombudsman initiated a direct investigation operation against the Department of Health ("DH"), the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department ("FEHD"), the Hospital Authority ("HA") and the Immigration Department ("ImmD") pursuant to section 7(1)(a)(ii) of The Ombudsman Ordinance (Cap. 397, Laws of Hong Kong) on 19 December 2023.

¹ According to the information provided by the Census and Statistics Department, the proportion of elderly persons aged 65 and above reached 1.715 million (22.7%) as at mid-2024, and such proportion is projected to progressively increase to 29.1% in 2033 and up to 32.7% in 2043.

SCOPE OF INVESTIGATION

1.4 The scope of this direct investigation operation covers:

- an overview of the public services relating to after-death arrangements;
- the emergency tactics and measures formulated by relevant departments and organisations in relation to after-death arrangements;
- the way forward for departments and organisations to provide public services relating to after-death arrangements; and
- any areas for improvement.

PROCESS OF INVESTIGATION

1.5 On 19 December 2023, we announced the launch of this direct investigation operation and invited views from members of the public on the topic.

1.6 On 20 November 2024, we issued a draft investigation report to FEHD, DH, HA and ImmD for comments. This final report, upon considering and duly incorporating their comments, was completed on 16 December 2024.

2

AN OVERVIEW OF PUBLIC SERVICES RELATING TO AFTER-DEATH ARRANGEMENTS

2.1 Various government departments and public organisations including HA, DH, ImmD and FEHD are responsible for the public services relating to after-death arrangements. The joint offices set up by FEHD, ImmD and DH handle deaths which are **not** among the types of **reportable deaths**² (in particular cases where cremation is opted for) under the Coroners Ordinance (Cap. 504, Laws of Hong Kong) to allow members of the public to register deaths, apply for a Cremation Permit and book cremation services in one location, making it more convenient for them to handle death registration and after-death arrangements for the deceased. For burials, the public may also register deaths and apply for the Certificate of Burial at the joint offices.

2.2 Pursuant to relevant legislation, there are two types of death case in Hong Kong, namely **reportable deaths** and **non-reportable deaths** (see **Note 2**).

2.3 **Reportable deaths** are deaths that must be reported to a coroner under the Coroners Ordinance. Specifically, they fall into one of the 20 categories of deaths set out in Part 1 of Schedule 1 to the ordinance. Deaths under these categories are usually cases where the deceased had not been treated by a registered medical practitioner, or had died as a result of accidents, poison or violence. Nevertheless, these categories also include deaths attributable to different kinds of fatal diseases.

2.4 **Non-reportable deaths** are deaths other than those set out in Part 1 of Schedule 1 to the Coroners Ordinance, which are not required to be reported under the ordinance. They are mainly deaths from natural causes as confirmed by medical practitioners.

² The public usually refer to these cases as “deaths from natural causes”.

2.5 Workflows for handling deaths differ based on the place of occurrence and the nature of the death. Details are set out in the related workflows compiled by this Office (see **Tables 1 and 2**) and this chapter.

Table 1: Workflow of handling reportable deaths

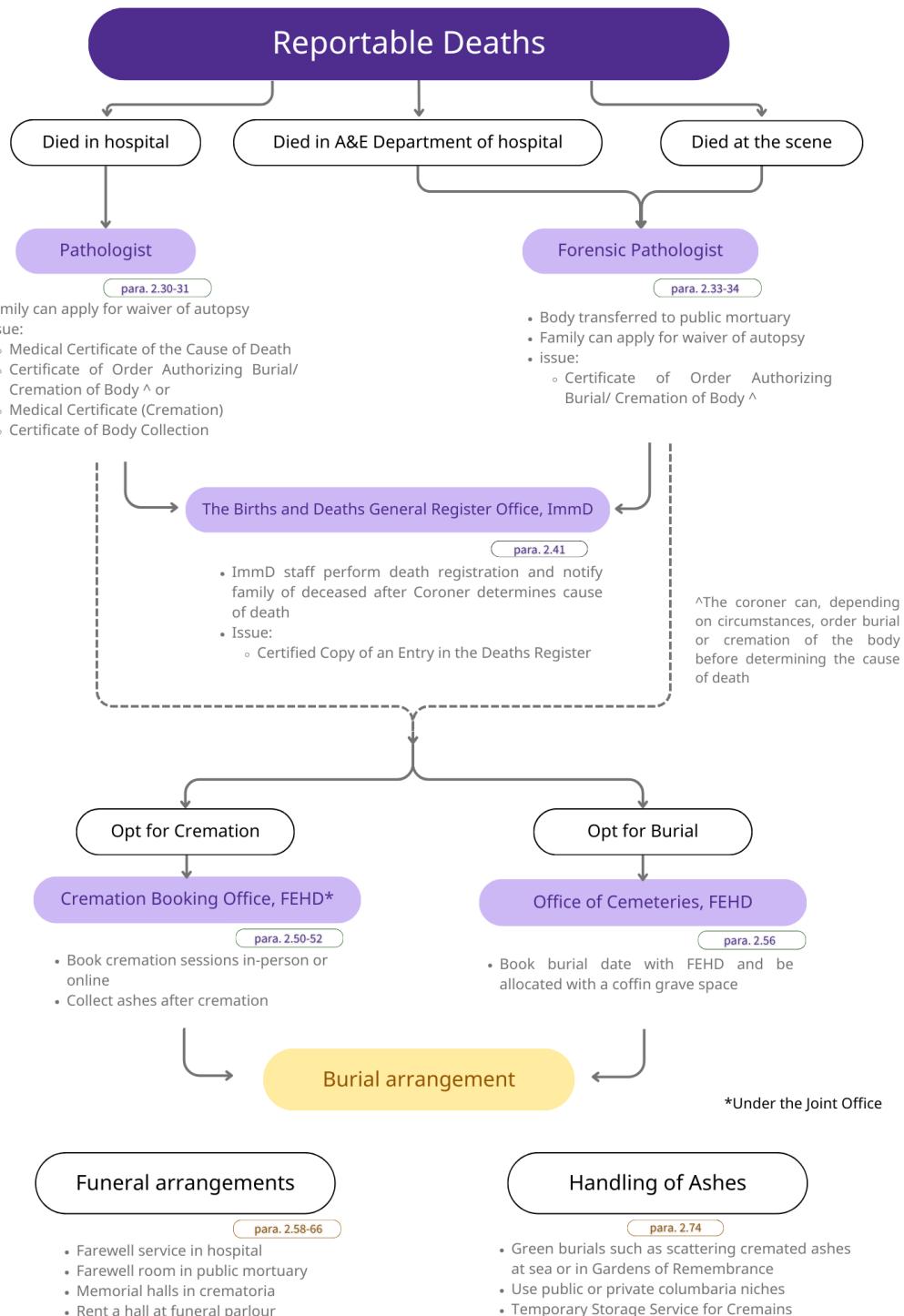
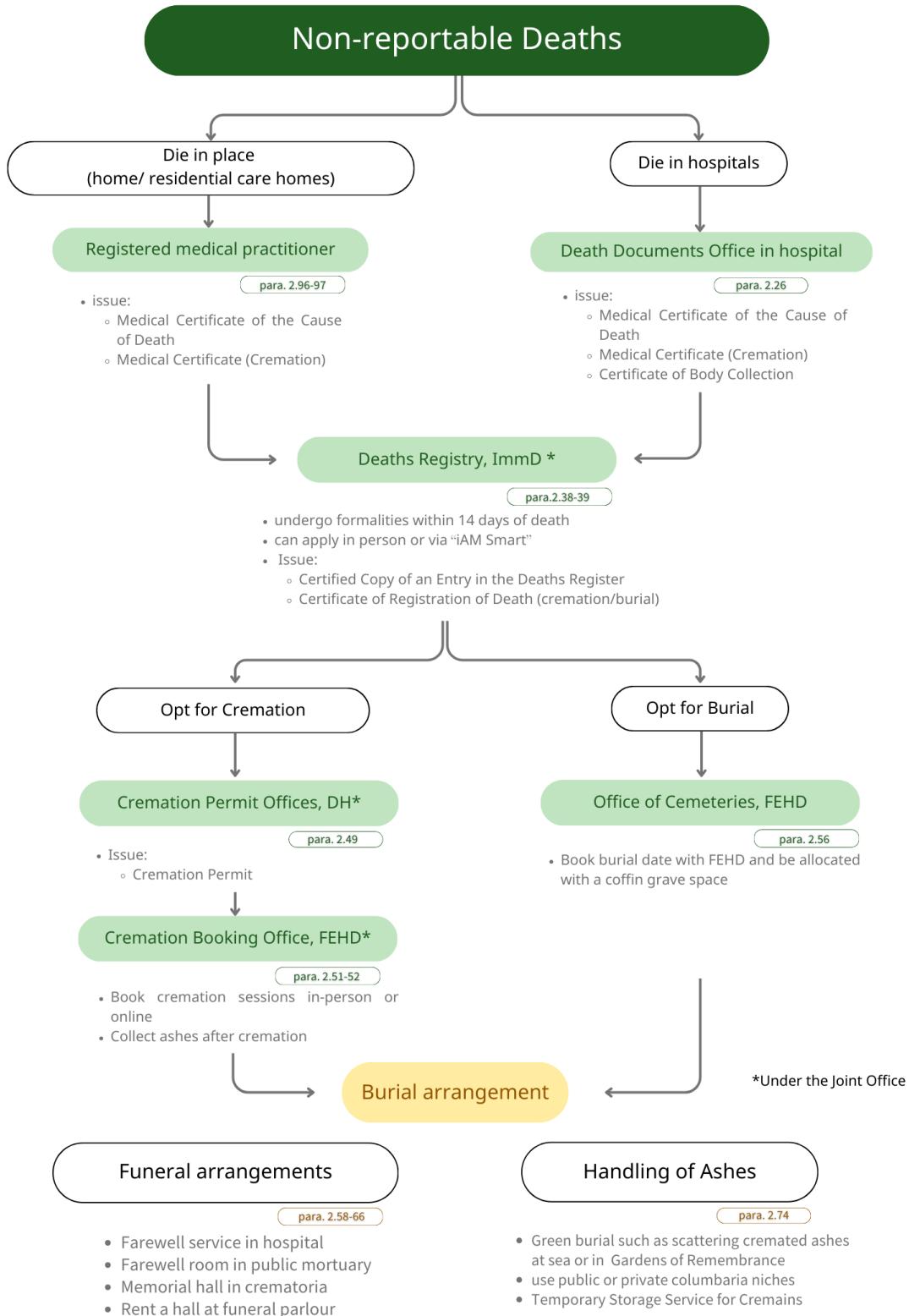


Table 2: Workflow of handling non-reportable deaths



MORTUARY SERVICES

2.6 Both **HA** and **DH** have mortuaries to store bodies. The workflows of handling after-death arrangements for **reportable deaths** and **non-reportable deaths** differ. The public mortuaries operated by DH's Forensic Pathology Service ("FPS") are facilities where medico-legal examinations of bodies involving reportable deaths under the Coroners Ordinance are conducted (see **para 2.3**).

2.7 For most patients whose deaths are certified as natural by medical practitioners in hospitals (including public hospitals under HA and private hospitals), their bodies will be placed in the hospital mortuary and their families will claim the bodies and handle the after-death arrangements. For patients who died in the accident and emergency department ("A&E") of hospitals or before arriving at the hospitals, cases of suspicious deaths, or cases where the persons died while in custody, their bodies will be taken to FPS under DH for examination. For natural deaths in private hospitals, the bodies of deceased patients will not be taken to mortuaries of public hospitals or public mortuaries. If the deceased's family needs to rent body storage space in the mortuary of private hospital, they must pay the required service fees to the hospital concerned.

Body Storage Facilities

HA

2.8 Currently, 38 of the 43 public hospitals and medical institutions under HA have mortuaries. HA's body storage facilities are divided into two types, namely cold rooms and deep freezers (see **Figures 1-3**). The numbers of body storage facilities in all mortuaries under HA are set out in **Appendix I**.

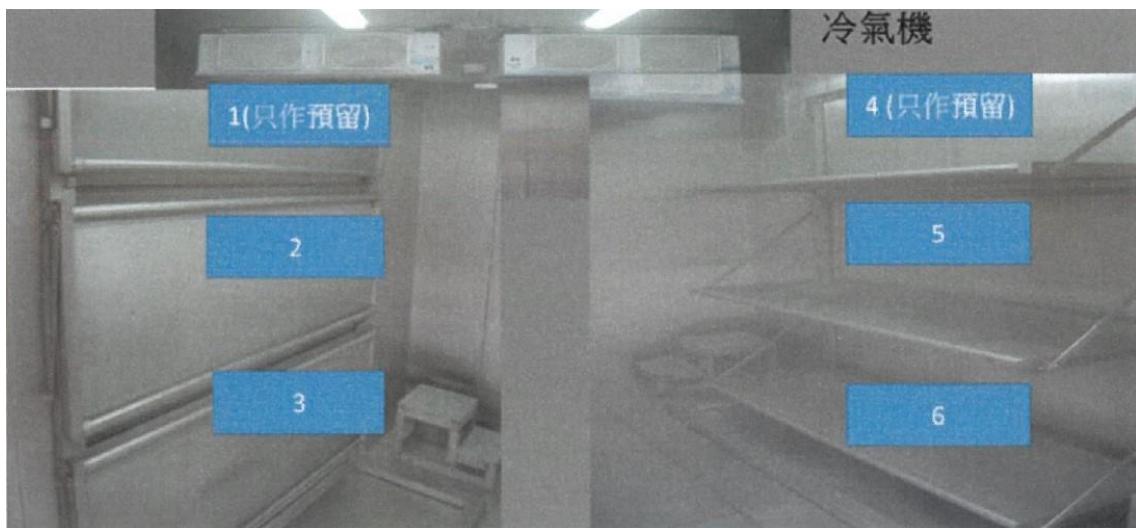
Figure 1: Cold rooms in Princess Margaret Hospital



Figure 2: Cold rooms in Queen Mary Hospital



Figure 3: Deep freezers in St John Hospital



2.9 HA adheres to the Government's practice of providing free body storage services in public mortuaries. Since taking up the management of all public hospitals in Hong Kong in 1991, HA has not charged any fees for body storage in the hospital mortuaries.

2.10 However, the practice at Bradbury Hospice ("BBH") under HA's New Territories East Cluster is different. Established by the Society for the Promotion of Hospice Care in June 1992, BBH charges a daily fee of HK\$550 for body storage for more than three working days, with the fees calculated from the fourth working day onwards. Since 1 April 1995, HA has taken up the management of BBH. Having discussed with the Society for the Promotion of Hospice Care, HA decided to maintain the existing charges for the service. BBH has a fee waiver mechanism to provide proper assistance to surviving families having financial difficulty.

DH

2.11 Currently, FPS under DH manages and operates public mortuaries. The core functions of the public mortuaries include the round-the-clock receipt of bodies of **reportable deaths** and the necessary coroner's procedures, which encompass interviews with family members, external examinations of bodies, identification of bodies, autopsies, and assistance to families in claiming bodies.

2.12 At present, DH has three public mortuaries in service: the Fu Shan Public Mortuary³, the Kwai Chung Public Mortuary, and the Victoria Public Mortuary. The Kowloon Public Mortuary in Hung Hom was closed in 2005 following the opening of the Kwai Chung Public Mortuary. It functions as a reserve mortuary, providing services when the capacity of the three operational mortuaries approaches or reaches saturation.

2.13 After reprovisioning of the Fu Shan Public Mortuary, the former site (now known as the Fu Shan Body Storage Facility) has also become a reserve mortuary for diversion. Given the substantial storage capacity of the current premises of the Fu Shan Public Mortuary at the New Territories (Shatin) Forensic Medicine Centre, the Kowloon Public Mortuary and the Fu Shan Body Storage Facility will only be used in case of emergency.

2.14 Public mortuaries are equipped with both fixed and non-fixed temporary body storage facilities (see **Figures 4-7**). The numbers of body storage facilities in the aforementioned five public mortuaries are set out in **Appendix II**.

**Figure 4: Fixed body storage facilities in the cold room
of the new Fu Shan Public Mortuary**



³ Fu Shan Public Mortuary, previously located at 10 Yau On Street, Sha Tin, has been reprovisioned. The new premises of Fu Shan Public Mortuary completed in December 2022 is located at the New Territories (Shatin) Forensic Medicine Centre at Lower Shing Mun Road, Sha Tin.

Figure 5: Temporary body storage facilities in Kwan Chung Public Mortuary



Figure 6: The Modular Refrigerated Mortuary Units in Victoria Public Mortuary

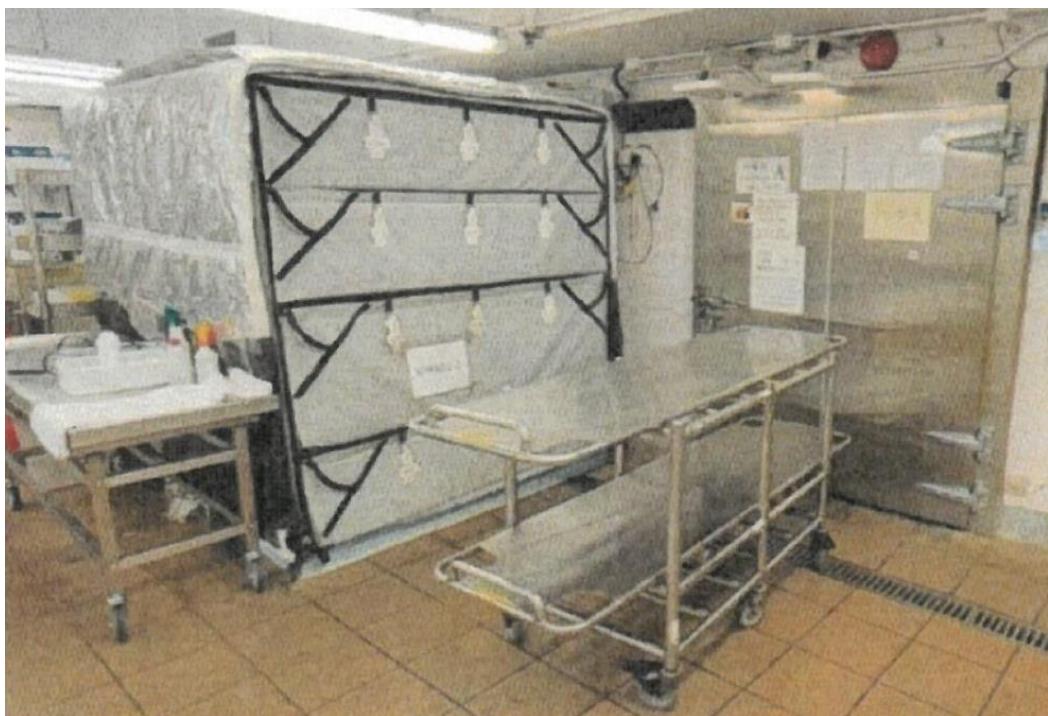
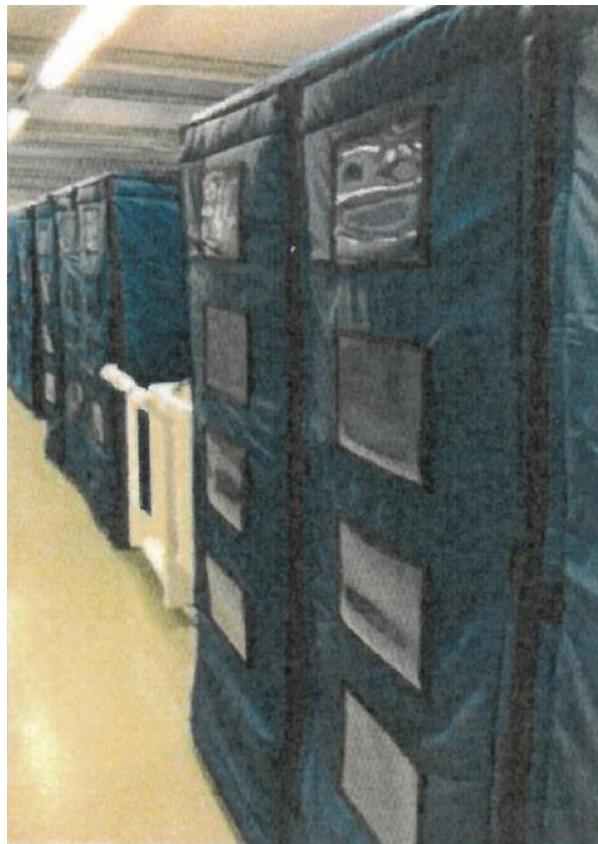


Figure 7: The Modular Refrigerated Mortuary Units inside the temporary structure adjacent to Kowloon Public Mortuary⁴ during the pandemic



2.15 DH handles bodies related to reportable deaths in accordance with relevant legislation. Since the time required for processing each case depends on the complexity of the case, DH has not set a time limit or charged any fees for body storage in public mortuaries.

Operation of Mortuaries and Arrangements for Body Storage

HA

2.16 HA's Mortuary Information System is a computer information system used to manage bodies stored in its mortuaries. The system retains records concerning the identification of all bodies stored in the mortuaries and their storage and transfer. It enables real-time monitoring of mortuary utilisation so that HA staff can make appropriate arrangements for body storage. Besides, HA has established the "Standard

⁴ DH demolished the temporary structure after the pandemic. As at December 2024, Kowloon Public Mortuary had maintained fixed body facilities with a storage capacity of 152 bodies for emergency use.

Operating Procedures for Handling Bodies in Mortuaries” to illustrate all the steps in handling bodies including the receipt and storage of bodies in hospital mortuaries.

2.17 In case the body storage of a hospital mortuary exceeds the capacity of available storage compartments, the hospital will consider implementing one of the following contingency measures: (1) temporarily storing two bodies of the same gender in one storage compartment; or (2) transferring a body to another public hospital mortuary for storage, with the family's consent. The factors to be considered before implementing such measures include family concerns and wishes, the actual operation of the mortuary concerned, infection control considerations, and the overall condition and suitability of the bodies.

2.18 According to HA, where there is a genuine need for more than one body to be stored in a single storage compartment in a hospital mortuary, its staff will comply with the requirements in the “Standard Operating Procedures for Handling Bodies in Mortuaries” including, among others:

- (i) The principle of “one storage compartment for one body” (i.e. each storage compartment should accommodate only one body, unless the mortuary has reached full capacity);
- (ii) Staff should ensure small bodies (generally referred to the bodies of those who died at the age of 10 or below) will not share a storage compartment with larger bodies if storage compartment sharing is absolutely necessary;
- (iii) Bodies of different genders must not be stored in one storage compartment;
- (iv) To meet operational needs, each mortuary must also reserve a reasonable number of storage compartments for accommodating bodies receiving beyond office hours.

DH

2.19 DH has in place the mechanism for monitoring the utilisation of public mortuaries and their body storage capacity, and it has formulated the necessary diversion measures. When the number of bodies stored in public mortuaries continues to rise

and is expected to approach or reach saturation in the fixed storage facilities in a short time, the department will take measures to increase storage capacity, including adding non-fixed temporary body storage facilities and reopening the Kowloon Public Mortuary.

2.20 DH considered that utilisation of public mortuaries is primarily influenced by the inflow and outflow rates of bodies. The inflow rate is proportional to the population structure in Hong Kong (i.e. total population, mortality rate and elderly ratio) while the outflow rate is related to after-death arrangements covering the supply of cremation services, burials, and other funeral services, etc.

2.21 Currently, the utilisation of the three public mortuaries in service is close to saturation during each winter influenza season and the time around the Lunar New Year holiday⁵. Since 2008, DH has reopened the Kowloon Public Mortuary during the Lunar New Year holiday to alleviate heavy burden of body storage on the three operating public mortuaries. The Kowloon Public Mortuary has not maintained permanent staff since its closure in 2005, and the staff previously based there were transferred to the Kwai Chung Public Mortuary. Where reopening of the Kowloon Public Mortuary is necessary, DH will redeploy staff from the other three public mortuaries, and overtime work is required to meet the demand for mortuary services. Since the Fu Shan Public Mortuary commenced its service at the current site in 2022, neither the Kowloon public mortuary nor the Fu Shan Body Storage Facility had been reopened for services in 2023 and 2024.

2.22 On the other hand, DH has since 2005 adopted a public mortuary information system combining a 2D barcode system and radio frequency identification technology to speed up verification of body identity information and track the location and status of each body in the storage so as to facilitate documentation of handling, receipt and transfer of bodies.

2.23 In explaining body storage arrangements, DH noted that the utilisation rate of all body storage facilities (including fixed and non-fixed body storage facilities) in public mortuaries had never reached saturation between 2017 and 2021. Hence, the body storage facilities in the mortuaries were rarely used for holding more than one body. Since the Fu Shan Public Mortuary commenced services at the current site, the capacity for body storage in public mortuaries has increased, and the facilities will only hold one body.

⁵ Cultural traditions incline families to avoid holding funerals around the Lunar New Year.

2.24 Although the public mortuaries are usually not utilised at capacity, the sudden surge in the number of bodies received by the Kwai Chung Public Mortuary at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic⁶ had caused the utilisation of the storage facilities of the mortuary (including fixed and non-fixed body storage facilities) to reach saturation quickly. However, diversion of bodies to the Kowloon Public Mortuary for storage could not be arranged in time. As some of the fixed body storage facilities at the Kwai Chung Public Mortuary are relatively wider and sizeable⁷, the mortuary staff had arranged for two smaller bodies of the same gender to be temporarily stored together in these facilities with prior notification to the families and no objections from them. It was unnecessary to make similar arrangements in other public mortuaries.

After-death Arrangements

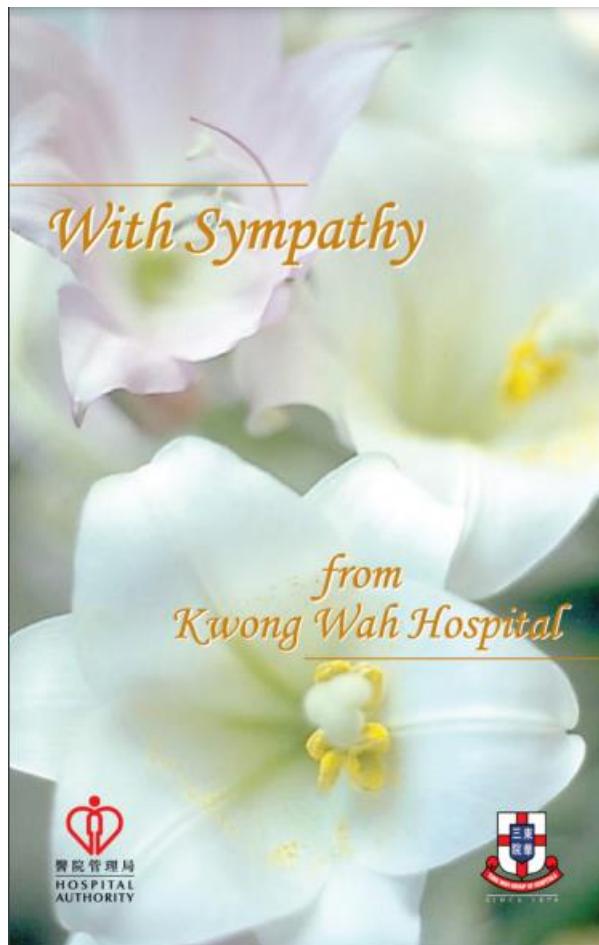
HA

2.25 For **general non-reportable cases in hospitals**, the body of a patient who passes away in the ward and is certified by a medical practitioner as having died of natural causes will be transferred to and stored at the hospital mortuary. HA's ward staff will provide the deceased's family with information on death registration or the procedures for claiming the body from the hospital. They will provide relevant leaflets or booklets (see **Figure 8**) and explain the procedures for obtaining the Medical Certificate of the Cause of Death and claiming the body.

⁶ Between 20 February and 24 March 2020.

⁷ In general, the width of the fixed body storage facilities at public mortuaries is 66 centimetres, but some of the fixed body storage facilities at the Kwai Chung Public Mortuary is of a width of 73 centimetres.

Figure 8: Leaflet on after-death arrangements published by Kwong Wah Hospital under HA



(Source: HA's website)

2.26 Applicants handling the after-death arrangements for deceased patients will need to visit the Death Documentation Office in hospitals and obtain relevant documents, including:

- (i) Medical Certificate of the Cause of Death (i.e. Form 18 of the Births and Deaths Registration Ordinance (“BDRO”));
- (ii) Medical Certificate (Cremation) (i.e. Form 2 of the Cremation and Gardens of Remembrance Regulation (“CGRR”)) (applicable only to cremation of remains); and
- (iii) Certificate of Body Collection.

In normal circumstances, the hospital will prepare and issue the relevant documents within three working days after the patient's passing away.

2.27 Once the family of the deceased has decided on funeral arrangements (such as cremation or burial), the applicant should take the original copies of the aforesaid documents issued by the hospital and the deceased's identity document to the joint office under FEHD, ImmD and DH for obtaining the following documents for the deceased:

- (i) Certificate of Registration of Death (i.e. Form 12 of the BDRO); and
- (ii) (Applicable only to cremated remains) Cremation Permit (i.e. Form 3 of the CGRR); or
- (iii) (Applicable only to buried remains) Burial Permit (i.e. Form 10 of the BDRO).

2.28 Upon obtaining the relevant documents from the joint office, the family can arrange for the funeral. They can make a reservation for claiming of body with the hospital's Death Documentation Office and bring along documents including the Certificate of Body Collection, the Certificate of Registration of Death (i.e. Form 12 of the BDRO) and the identity documents of the deceased and the applicant, to the hospital mortuary for identification and collection of the body. Then the deceased's body will be transferred from the hospital with the assistance of funeral service practitioners.

2.29 In **reportable death** cases where a patient dies in the A&E and the cause of death is undetermined, the hospital must report it the Coroner's Court, and the body will be transferred from the A&E of the hospital to a public mortuary under DH for statutory processes. While the transfer is pending, the body may be temporarily stored in the hospital's A&E and the police will take over the follow-up. FEHD's dead removal teams will transport the body to the public mortuary.

2.30 As regards HA's handling of **reportable deaths** in accordance with the Coroners Ordinance, staff of the hospital's Death Documentation Office will arrange a meeting for the family with the police to record a brief statement and identify the body at the hospital's mortuary as well as a meeting with a pathologist. The family can apply, through the pathologist, for an exemption from autopsy to the Coroner, who may arrange to meet the family depending on the circumstances. If the Coroner grants

waiver of autopsy, the family can bring the original copy of the deceased's identity document to the hospital's Death Documentation Office during office hours to obtain the Certificate of Order Authorizing Burial/Cremation of Body (i.e. Form 11 of the BDRO) and the Certificate of Body Collection for subsequent funeral arrangements.

2.31 When HA receives an autopsy order from the Coroner's Court, the mortuary staff and the responsible pathologist will arrange the autopsy as soon as practicable. After the autopsy, the pathologist will issue a Medical Certificate of the Cause of Death (i.e. Form 18 of the BDRO). The family can complete the formality at the hospital's Death Documentation Office and collect the certificate, together with the Medical Certificate (Cremation) (i.e. Form 2 of the CGRR) and the Certificate of Body Collection for claiming the deceased's body and proceeding with claiming of body and funeral arrangements.

2.32 In general, according to HA's operational notice regarding reportable deaths, such reports should be made to the Coroner as soon as reasonably practicable, ideally within 24 to 48 hours⁸. When HA receives an autopsy order from the Court, mortuary staff and the responsible pathologist will promptly arrange the autopsy, and the autopsy report is usually submitted to the Coroner within three months after the autopsy is completed.

DH

2.33 All deaths handled by public mortuaries must be reported to the Coroner and the Hong Kong Police Force for investigation. After FEHD sends the body of a deceased to a public mortuary, the police will arrange for the family to meet with DH's forensic pathologist to identify the body. If necessary, the family can apply for a waiver of autopsy. After the family has met the forensic pathologist and identified the body, DH's Forensic Pathology Service will submit a report to the Coroner, who will then study the report and decide whether an autopsy, further investigation or inquest is necessary to determine the cause of death.

2.34 Depending on the circumstances (i.e., before determining the cause of death), the Coroner may sign the Certificate of Order Authorizing for Burial/Cremation of Body (i.e. Form 11 of the BDRO). Apart from cases that require autopsies, the

⁸ According to the information provided by HA, the average time of reports of **reportable deaths** was around 15 hours in October 2024.

certificate will usually be available for collection by the family within two working days after the family has identified the body. Upon obtaining the certificate, the family can proceed with funeral arrangements and claim the body. Where an autopsy is required, the family should wait until the forensic pathologist has completed the autopsy before claiming the body. Generally speaking, autopsies can be completed within three working days after body identification.

REGISTRATION OF DEATHS

2.35 Under the BDRO (Cap. 174, Laws of Hong Kong), all deaths in Hong Kong must be registered with the Registrar of Birth and Deaths. Section 14 of the ordinance stipulates that the death of a person who is not a reportable death (i.e. **non-reportable death**) must be registered to the registration official within 14 days after the death and by the deceased's family or other related persons by way of submission of a signed register form in respect of the death. The applicant may choose to register the death in person at a Deaths Registry or if eligible, make the registration online.

2.36 **Reportable deaths**, such as those involve poisoning or violence, will be reported to the Coroner, who may conduct an inquest to determine the cause of death and notify the Registrar of Births and Deaths to handle the death registration.

2.37 There are three Deaths Registries under ImmD, namely the Births and Deaths General Register Office, Hong Kong Island Deaths Registry and Kowloon Deaths Registry. The Births and Deaths Register Office mainly handles registration of deaths referred by the Coroner on weekdays and **registration of non-reportable deaths** on Sundays and public holidays while the other two Deaths Registries only process **non-reportable death registrations** from Monday to Saturday and they are closed on Sundays and public holidays.

Non-Reportable Deaths

2.38 **Non-reportable deaths** can be **registered** by the deceased's family or related persons⁹, and such informant may choose to register the deaths free of charge in

⁹ Section 14 of the BDRO provides that the deceased's family or related persons include: any one of the nearest relatives of the deceased present at the death or in attendance during the deceased's last illness; every person present at the death or in attendance during the deceased's last illness; an occupier of the house in which, to the occupier's knowledge, the death took place; every occupier of the house; or a person who caused the body of the deceased to be buried.

person at a Deaths Registry, bringing along the original copy of the death documents of the deceased¹⁰ to complete the formality of the registration. The informant can complete the death registration process on the same day and receive a Certificate of Registration of Death (i.e. Form 12 or Form 10 of the BDRO). A fee of HK\$140 will be charged for a certified copy of a Death Entry (commonly known as a “Death Certificate”, i.e. Form 2 of the BDRO).

2.39 Apart from completing the formalities in person, the informant may register the death of a person online by using mobile application of “iAM Smart+”¹¹ to verify his/her identity and complete the formalities for registration. After identity verification is completed, the informant may provide and upload the information for death registration and the supporting documents required (**Note 10**) through the mobile application or government website¹². ImmD staff will then examine and verify the information. If all the required information and documents are submitted, the death registration can normally be completed on the submission date of the form with the informant’s digital signature or on the following working day. After completing the registration process, the informant can apply for a Death Certificate for the deceased (i.e. Form 2 of the BDRO) and choose to collect it personally at a Deaths Registry or receive it by mail.

Reportable Deaths

2.40 **Reportable deaths** refer to deaths specified in Part 1 of Schedule 1 to the Coroners Ordinance (Cap 504, Laws of Hong Kong). They generally include cases where the deceased passed away without being attended by a registered medical practitioner before death or in situations involving accidents, poisoning or violence. In such cases, the deceased’s family needs not handle the death registration in person.

¹⁰ Including: the Medical Certificate of the Cause of Death signed by the registered medical practitioner who treated the deceased during the deceased’s last illness (Form 18 of the BDRO); the deceased’s Hong Kong Identity Card or travel document; the informant’s Hong Kong Identity Card or travel document; and information on profession, nationality, marital status, etc. provided by the informant in accordance with the relevant legislation.

¹¹ There are two versions of “iAM Smart”, namely “iAM Smart” and “iAM Smart+”, with the latter version having the additional function of digital signing.

¹² For example, the Immigration Department Mobile Application, the website of ImmD or GovHK (www.immd.gov.hk/edearthreg).

2.41 All cases falling into the category of **reportable deaths** will be reported to the Coroner (usually through the police). The Coroner may conduct an investigation (including an autopsy) or an inquest to determine the cause of death. Depending on the circumstances, before determining the cause of death, the Coroner may order the burial or cremation of the body and issue the Certificate of Order Authorizing Burial/Cremation of Body (i.e. Form 11 of the BDRO). Once the Coroner determines the cause of death, the registration official will be notified to proceed with the death registration and notify the family of the deceased in writing after the registration is completed. Upon receiving the relevant notification, the family can apply to ImmD for a certified copy of the Death Entry (i.e. Form 2 of the BDRO).

CREMATION AND BURIAL

Cremation-related Arrangements

Cremation Facilities

2.42 There are six Government-operated crematoria (at Cape Collinson on Hong Kong Island, Diamond Hill in Kowloon, Fu Shan, Kwai Chung and Wo Hop Shek in the New Territories, and Cheung Chau), with 34 body cremators and one bone cremator all together, that provide services for cremating dead bodies and skeletal remains.

2.43 Since 2000, FEHD has pledged to arrange cremation sessions for applicants within 15 days of the application date. In order to ensure a sufficient number of cremation sessions available for application within those 15 days, FEHD considers a number of factors¹³ when drawing up a daily plan for cremation sessions available for booking.

2.44 If there are fewer than ten cremation sessions available within 15 days¹⁴, FEHD will, according to the established mechanism, arrange for additional cremation sessions at the designated crematoria to meet the demand. Given the consistently

¹³ For instance, the demand for cremation during the same period of the year before, projected death rate for the year, and the daily maintenance schedule for cremators drawn up by the Electrical and Mechanical Services Department.

¹⁴ Excluding the Cheung Chau Crematorium which has a low utilisation rate.

higher demand for cremation services during weekends, more cremation sessions are available on Saturdays and Sundays than on weekdays.

2.45 Moreover, there are currently six private crematoria in the territory, which are located inside Buddhist monasteries and not open for public use¹⁵. Those six crematoria come under FEHD's purview in accordance with the CGRR. FEHD requires that a written application together with the necessary documents¹⁶ be submitted at least 48 hours prior to the conduct of any planned cremation at a private crematorium. FEHD staff will be present to monitor the process on the day of cremation.

Cremation Arrangements

2.46 Cremation arrangements differ between **reportable deaths** and **non-reportable deaths**.

2.47 For **non-reportable deaths**, DH would issue a Cremation Permit (i.e. Form 3 of the CGRR) pursuant to the CGRR (Cap. 132M). For **reportable deaths**, the Coroner would issue a Certificate of Order Authorizing Burial/Cremation of Body (i.e. Form 11 of the BDRO, Cap. 174).

2.48 In respect of **non-reportable deaths**, the deceased's family should obtain the following documents before applying for a Cremation Permit:

- (i) a Medical Certificate of the Cause of Death (i.e. Form 18 of the BDRO) issued by a registered medical practitioner;
- (ii) a Medical Certificate (Cremation) (i.e. Form 2 of the CGRR) issued by a registered medical practitioner; and
- (iii) a Certificate of Registration of Death (i.e. Form 12 of the BDRO) issued by ImmD.

¹⁵ All private crematoria are listed in Part 6 of Schedule 5 to the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance (Cap. 132). They are the four crematoria (namely Kwun Yam Temple, Keung Shan, Tai O; Po Lin Monastery, Ngong Ping; Ling Yan Monastery, Keung Shan; and Po Lam Monastery) in Lantau and the two crematoria (namely Chuk Lam Sim Yuen and Sai Chuk Lam Temple) in Tsuen Wan.

¹⁶ Including the statutory "Cremation Permit" (i.e. Form 3 of the CGRR), or Certificate of Order Authorizing Burial/Cremation of Body (i.e. Form 11 of the BDRO, Cap. 174).

2.49 Subsequently, the applicant must submit to a Cremation Permit Office under DH a completed “Application to Cremate” (i.e. Form 1 of the CGRR) together with the deceased’s and the applicant’s identity documents as well as the original of the three certificates listed above. Upon receipt of the necessary documents, DH would issue a Cremation Permit (i.e. Form 3 of the CGRR). The application formalities usually take around 30 to 60 minutes.

2.50 For **reportable deaths**, the deceased’s family need not go to DH’s Cremation Permit Office to apply for a Cremation Permit after they have obtained a Certificate of Order Authorizing Burial/Cremation of Body (i.e. Form 11 of the BDRO) issued by the Coroner. They can simply make the cremation arrangement with FEHD’s Cremation Booking Office at the joint office.

2.51 Once the formalities to obtain a Cremation Permit (i.e. Form 3 of the CGRR) or a Certificate of Order Authorizing Burial/Cremation of Body (i.e. Form 11 of the BDRO, Cap 174) have been completed, the deceased’s family can book a cremation session either by themselves, or via a Licensed Undertaker of Burials (“Licensed Undertaker”) or another person¹⁷ they have authorised. Applicants may complete the application formality at a Cremation Booking Office or on FEHD’s website and its Online Cremation Application and Pre-paid System.¹⁸

2.52 Four days after the cremation ceremony, the applicant, the Licensed Undertaker or the authorised person can collect the ashes at the chosen collection point¹⁹. FEHD will issue a Permit to Take Away Cremated Ashes (FEHB 153) to the person collecting the ashes.

¹⁷ If the applicant authorises the staff of a Licensed Undertaker or another person to book the cremation session, the applicant or the authorised person shall complete and sign on the relevant parts of the Application for Private Cremation (FEHB 135). The Licensed Undertaker shall also sign and affix its company chop on the relevant parts of the application form.

¹⁸ FEHD has introduced an updated online system – the Platform for Cemeteries and Crematoria Services, which has replaced the "Online Cremation Application and Pre-paid System" to provide online application services relating to cremation since October 2024.

¹⁹ That is, the relevant crematorium or the Cemeteries and Crematoria Offices on Hong Kong Island or in Kowloon.

Burial-related Arrangements

Burial Facilities

2.53 FEHD manages ten public cemeteries, namely Hong Kong Cemetery, Mount Caroline Cemetery, New Kowloon Cemetery No. 8 (Diamond Hill Urn Cemetery), Prison Cemetery (Stanley), Wo Hop Shek Cemetery, Cheung Chau Cemetery, Tai O Cemetery, Lai Chi Yuen Cemetery and two cemeteries in Sandy Ridge.

2.54 At present, coffin burial spaces are available for application at four public cemeteries including Wo Hop Shek Cemetery, Cheung Chau Cemetery, Tai O Cemetery and Lai Chi Yuen Cemetery. Applicants intending to arrange for coffin burial in Cheung Chau Cemetery, Tai O Cemetery or Lai Chi Yuen Cemetery must produce the original and the duplicate copy of the letter from the relevant rural committee and a statutory declaration made by the legal representative or next of kin of the deceased person to certify that the deceased was an indigenous villager, a bona fide resident of the island concerned, or a minor child of such villager or resident for approval of their applications.

2.55 Burials in the aforesaid four public cemeteries are not permanent. The current regulation requires the exhumation of all human remains that have been buried in public cemeteries for more than six years. Every year, FEHD issues an exhumation order in the Government Gazette, requiring the removal from graves of all human remains which have been interred in the aforesaid public cemeteries for more than six years. If the remains are not exhumed after expiry of the exhumation order, the Government will disinter and cremate the remains, and re-inter the ashes in the Communal Grave at the Sandy Ridge Cemetery. Members of the public can arrange for an undertaker to have the remains exhumed and cremated, or reburied in an urn grave in the Wo Hop Shek Cemetery.

Burial Arrangements

2.56 Upon completion of death registration for the deceased, the family can arrange for the burial. The applicant (or the Licensed Undertaker²⁰ appointed) must book a burial date at the respective cemetery office. On the day of burial, the applicant

²⁰ The List of Licensed Undertakers of Burials is available on the FEHD webpage:
<https://www.fehd.gov.hk/english/cc/lu.pdf>

should bring along the completed form of Application for Burial at Public Cemetery (FEHB 144) and the Certificate of Registration of Death (i.e. Form 10 of the BDRO), or the Certificate of Order Authorizing Burial/Cremation of Body (i.e. Form 11 of the BDRO) to the respective cemetery office for handling the necessary formalities. Upon verification of the relevant documents, FEHD will allocate a coffin burial space to the eligible applicant on the day of application.

FUNERAL-RELATED ARRANGEMENTS

Farewell Facilities

2.57 The existing legislation provides that a valid Undertaker's Licence must be obtained from FEHD for the trade or business operated by a person who carries on the business of a funeral parlour.

2.58 Currently, there are seven licensed funeral parlours in Hong Kong²¹ which are also holders of an Undertaker's Licence and have service halls and mortuary facilities for storing and handling human remains. Their services mainly include transportation of bodies, arrangement of funerals and rental of funeral parlours. Three of these funeral parlours are operated by non-profit making organisations. Families who need to rent service hall and mortuary facilities in a funeral parlour for their deceased family member may engage a Licensed Undertaker for the arrangements or make enquiries with the funeral parlours direct.

2.59 Apart from the seven licensed funeral parlours, government departments and public organisations also provide farewell facilities.

HA

2.60 Most hospital mortuaries under HA have small halls or farewell rooms for the relatives of patients who died in the hospitals to hold simple memorial rites and arrange for mortuary make-up and funeral dressing before sending the body directly to a crematorium or cemetery for cremation or burial.

²¹ The List of Licensed Funeral Parlours is available on the FEHD webpage:
<https://www.fehd.gov.hk/english/cc/lfp.pdf>

2.61 The aforementioned rites are in general referred to as “Farewell Service in Hospitals”, a free-of-charge compassionate arrangement for patients who passed away in HA hospitals. Families who need the service can enquire about and book the service at the Death Documentation Office or General Office of the hospitals. FEHD has compiled a “Guide to After-death Arrangements” to assist the bereaved with necessary arrangements. The guide includes a list of hospitals providing the service, along with their telephone numbers for enquiries and office hours.

DH

2.62 Public mortuaries managed by DH also provide facilities similar to those in hospitals. After a simple farewell rite, families can transport the deceased’s body to a crematorium for cremation or a cemetery for burial.

2.63 DH indicated that, among the three public mortuaries, the old Fu Shan Public Mortuary previously had a covered outdoor farewell pavilion available on a first-come-first-served basis for the families of deceased persons to conduct simple memorial ceremonies. The Kwai Chung Public Mortuary also has a covered quasi-outdoor space for the same purpose. Nevertheless, due to space constraints, the Victoria Public Mortuary does not have any similar facilities for such ceremonies. DH may allow families with a genuine need to hold a simple memorial ceremony near the entrance of the mortuary.

2.64 The New Territories (Shatin) Forensic Medicine Centre, the present site of the Fu Shan Public Mortuary, completed in 2022 has three indoor farewell rooms for families to hold simple memorial ceremonies in a quiet and highly private environment. When the deceased’s family collect the body, the staff there will ask whether they need to use the farewell rooms, which are allocated on a first-come-first-served basis. Registration or service fee is not required for using the farewell rooms.

2.65 Besides, DH is planning to make space for farewell rooms in the reprovisioned Victoria Public Mortuary, so that families who need to hold simple farewell rites can do so at the mortuary.

FEHD

2.66 Service halls are available in all crematoria under FEHD for the bereaved to hold simple farewell rites. Families who have booked cremation service can use the

designated hall inside the crematorium free-of-charge on the day of cremation. Upon completion of identification formalities, staff at the crematoria will allocate a hall to the families separately for the farewell rites in accordance with their time of arrival. The recommended time for each session should not exceed 30 minutes.

Licensed Funeral Parlour and Licensed Undertaker

2.67 The legislation requires that any person who would like to conduct the business of a funeral parlour must obtain from FEHD a valid Funeral Parlour Licence (see **para. 2.58**). For those who undertake all or any duties related to the cremation or burial of human cadavers, a valid Undertaker's Licence must be obtained from FEHD for the trade or business operated by them.

2.68 There are currently around 130 licensed undertakers in Hong Kong, categorised into two groups: List A and List B (see **Note 20**). Licensed Undertakers on both lists have to abide by six major licensing conditions, including the provision of eco-coffins as an option for sale to customers, and that the eco-coffins provided for sale shall meet FEHD's specifications. Licensed Undertakers on List B shall also comply with seven specified licensing conditions, among which no corpse, remains, or dead bodies or burnt ashes from dead persons shall be placed in the premises; the business area shall be screened off from public view; and coffins are not permitted within the licensed premises.

FEHD Licensing Requirements and Regulation

2.69 FEHD issues Funeral Parlour Licence and Undertaker's Licence pursuant to the Funeral Parlours Regulation (Cap 132AD, Laws of Hong Kong) and the Undertakers of Burials Regulation (Cap 132CB, Laws of Hong Kong), which are subsidiary legislation under the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance (Cap 132, Laws of Hong Kong).

2.70 FEHD enforces the above regulations with a view to safeguarding public health. In processing the relevant applications, FEHD mainly consider whether the shop under application for operating the trade can comply with the hygiene requirements, government lease conditions and restrictions on statutory plans, etc. Upon receipt of the application documents, FEHD will refer the application to the departments concerned (including the Home Affairs Department, the Lands Department and the Planning Department) for comments. After obtaining full clearance, a letter of

licensing requirements containing the various hygiene requirements and conditions together with an attachment of the comments and requirements of the departments concerned (if any) will be issued to the applicant for compliance. Once full compliance with all licensing requirements is confirmed, FEHD will issue the relevant licence to the applicant. Upon receiving the licence, the licensee shall observe all licensing requirements and conditions at all times.

2.71 For regulation of Licensed Funeral Parlours and Licensed Undertakers, FEHD will take enforcement action against violations, such as issuance of warnings, temporary licence suspension and cancellation of licence. In general, FEHD conducts routine inspections at Licensed Funeral Parlours monthly, and at Licensed Undertakers quarterly. Routine inspections are conducted by the health inspectors of the Cemeteries and Crematoria Section (“CC Section”) of FEHD, and the inspection includes checking whether the shop has complied with the licensing conditions. Any breaches of licensing conditions will result in a verbal warning issued by the CC Section and the case will be referred to the respective District Environmental Hygiene Office for further follow-up.

2.72 Complaints against Licensed Funeral Parlours and Licensed Undertakers are handled and followed up on by FEHD’s complaint handling unit (i.e. the respective District Environmental Hygiene Office overseeing the licensed premises in question). In addition, the CC Section conducts surprise inspections every month to randomly check the Licensed Undertakers’ compliance with the requirements with respect to the Register as set out in section 10 of the Undertakers of Burials Regulation (Cap 132CB). FEHD may instigate prosecution in case of breaches.

2.73 On the other hand, mortuaries operated by government departments, public organisations or private institutions are not subject to the Undertakers of Burials Regulation²².

²² Interpretation to section 3 of the Funeral Parlours Regulation (Cap. 132AD) stipulates that funeral parlour means a mortuary, but does not include any place set apart under the provisions of the Coroners Ordinance (Cap. 504) for the reception of dead bodies for the purpose of post mortem examination, or any mortuary situated in the precincts of any hospital or similar institutions, or any mortuary situated within the precincts of a hospital within the meaning of the Private Healthcare Facilities Ordinance (Cap. 633) for which a licence under the Ordinance is in force.

DISPOSAL OF CREMATED ASHES

2.74 Families of deceased persons shall decide on the method to dispose of the ashes upon cremation of the bodies and collection of the ashes. There are different ways to dispose of cremated ashes. The common options are:

- (i) green burial: scattering the ashes in the designated waters or a Garden of Remembrance managed by the Government or a private cemetery;
- (ii) traditional burial: placing the ashes additionally in an urn grave of a public cemetery, or depositing them at a columbarium managed by the Government or a licensed private columbarium; or
- (iii) Other methods of handling the ashes include keeping them at home²³ or using FEHD's temporary storage service for cremains.

Green Burial

2.75 With a growing and ageing population in Hong Kong, there is an increasing demand for burial facilities. To cope with the demand, the Government is vigorously promoting green burial and encouraging more environmentally-friendly and sustainable methods of handling ashes. Currently, green burial includes scattering cremated ashes at sea or in Gardens of Remembrance, so that the ashes of the deceased can return to nature. Scattering ashes at sea does not take up any extra land, while the land in Gardens of Remembrance can also be recycled and reused. Both methods can help conserve precious land resources, which is in line with the principle of sustainable development and may help alleviate the demand for and pressure on columbarium facilities in the long run. **Table 3** sets out the details on the utilisation of green burial in recent years.

²³ As cremated ashes have been processed at a high temperature, they will not pose any threat to public health. According to section 7 of the Private Columbaria Ordinance (Cap. 630), no more than ten containers of ashes are permitted to be kept in domestic premises and each container shall only contain the ashes of only one deceased person.

Table 3: Utilisation of Green Burial

Year	Scattering of ashes in Gardens of Remembrance		Scattering of ashes at sea (3)	No. of Green Burial cases (1)+(2)+(3)	Percentage over total no. of deaths
	FEHD (1)	Private Cemeteries ²⁴ (2)			
2016	4,004	462	900	5,366	11.5%
2017	4,966	607	966	6,539	14.3%
2018	5,352	722	972	7,046	14.8%
2019	6,280	730	899	7,909	16.2%
2020	6,247	575	854	7,676	15.2%
2021	6,544	568	906	8,018	15.6%
2022	7,695	742	1,012	9,449	15.4%
2023	7,465	772	1,144	9,381	16.5%
2024 (As at October)	6,471	678	870	8,019	18.2%

2.76 According to FEHD, the public has become more receptive to green burial in recent years. However, changing customs and traditions takes time. Therefore, FEHD will continue to enhance green burial facilities and services as well as public education and publicity (such as setting up the Green Burial Central Register) so that green burial can gradually become a mainstream arrangement for handling cremated ashes. On the other hand, to encourage wider adoption of green burial, FEHD will keep developing more Gardens of Remembrance, including a new Garden of Remembrance in Shek Mun, Sha Tin, which is expected to be completed and commissioned next year. Moreover, the Government encourages non-governmental and religious organisations to build Gardens of Remembrance at suitable sites.

²⁴ Including the Junk Bay Chinese Permanent Cemetery Garden of Remembrance and the Pokfulam Chinese Christian Cemetery Garden of Remembrance.

Figure 9: Tsang Tsui Garden of Remembrance in Tuen Mun under FEHD



(Source: FEHD website)

Scattering Cremated Ashes at Sea

2.77 Families of deceased persons may apply for arranging their own vessels or the free ferry service provided by FEHD to scatter ashes at designated areas in Hong Kong waters. There are three designated sea areas: east of Tap Mun, east of Tung Lung Chau and south of West Lamma Channel.

2.78 FEHD currently provides the ferry service several times a month for the scattering of cremated ashes in designated local water areas by members of the public. The ferry departs once every Saturday morning (except public holidays). Family members may scatter the cremated ashes of the deceased approved for scattering and a handful of natural petals into the sea.

2.79 As regards the specific application procedures, applicants²⁵ are required to complete the “Application for Scattering of Cremated Ashes in Hong Kong Waters” (FEHB 198). The completed application form (FEHB 198), together with the original “Permit to Take Away Cremated Ashes” (FEHB 153) and a copy of the Hong Kong identity document of the deceased, should be submitted to an office of the CC Section of FEHD at least 10 days before the proposed date for the scattering of ashes. Approval

²⁵ The applicant must be the holder of the “Permit to Take Away Cremated Ashes” (FEHB 153) or the person authorised by the holder.

will be granted by FEHD normally within 5 working days from the date of receipt of the application for scattering cremated ashes at sea.

Scattering Cremated Ashes in Gardens of Remembrance

2.80 FEHD manages 12 public columbaria, which together contain 13 Gardens of Remembrance, as listed in the following table.

Table 4: Gardens of Remembrance at public columbaria under FEHD

Gardens of Remembrance			
1.	Cape Collinson Garden of Remembrance (No.1 (Old))	8.	Tsang Tsui Garden of Remembrance
2.	Cape Collinson Garden of Remembrance (No.2 (New))	9.	Wo Hop Shek Garden of Remembrance (Phase III)
3.	Diamond Hill Garden of Remembrance (No.1 (Old))	10.	Wo Hop Shek Garden of Remembrance (Phase V)
4.	Diamond Hill Garden of Remembrance (No.2 (New))	11.	Cheung Chau Garden of Remembrance
5.	Fu Shan Garden of Remembrance	12.	Lamma Garden of Remembrance
6.	Kwai Chung Garden of Remembrance (No.1 (Old))	13.	Peng Chau Garden of Remembrance
7.	Kwai Chung Garden of Remembrance (No.2 (New))		

2.81 Families may hold farewell ceremonies at the Gardens of Remembrance, and choose to scatter the ashes themselves or seek assistance from FEHD staff. FEHD provides scattering devices at the Gardens of Remembrance for free use (see **Figure 10**) while the families of the deceased may also bring their own device. In addition, families can mount commemorative plaques at the Gardens of Remembrance in memory of their loved ones.

Figure 10: Scattering device provided by FEHD at Gardens of Remembrance



(Source: FEHD website)

2.82 Specifically, applicants²⁶ are required to complete the “Application for Scattering Cremated Ashes/Mounting Commemorative Plaques at Gardens of Remembrance” (FEHB 219). The completed application form (FEHB 219), together with the original “Permit to Take Away Cremated Ashes” (FEHB 153) and a copy of the Hong Kong identity document of the deceased, should be submitted to an office of the CC Section of FEHD²⁷ at least 14 days before the proposed date for scattering the ashes. Normally, approval will be granted by FEHD within 10 working days from the date of receipt of the application for scattering cremated ashes in a Garden of Remembrance.

²⁶ The applicant must be the holder of the “Permit to Take Away Cremated Ashes” (FEHB 153) or the person authorised by the holder.

²⁷ If an applicant intends to scatter ashes in a Garden of Remembrance in the Islands District, the applicant is required to provide additional supporting documents to prove that the deceased was an indigenous villager of the Islands District or a bona fide resident who continuously resided in the Islands District, or their minor child.

2.83 There are also gardens of remembrance in private cemeteries for members of the public to scatter ashes. Families of the deceased may contact the relevant private cemeteries for further details.

Niches in Government Columbaria

2.84 There are two types of niches available at the columbaria under FEHD: (1) standard niche, which may hold more than two sets of cremated ashes; and (2) large niche, which may hold more than four sets of cremated ashes.

2.85 The ashes of any deceased person meeting the prescribed criteria²⁸ may be deposited at one of the 12 columbaria under FEHD, which are listed in the following table.

Table 5: Public Columbaria under FEHD

Public Columbaria			
1.	Cape Collinson Columbarium	7.	Wo Hop Shek Columbarium
2.	Cape Collinson-San Ha Columbarium	8.	Wong Nai Chung Road Columbarium
3.	Diamond Hill Columbarium	9.	Cheung Chau Columbarium
4.	Fu Shan Columbarium	10.	Lai Chi Yuen Columbarium
5.	Kwai Chung Columbarium	11.	Lamma Columbarium
6.	Tsang Tsui Columbarium	12.	Peng Chau Columbarium

2.86 At present, there is an adequate supply of public niches and applicants generally do not have to wait. In addition to the annual comprehensive allocation of public niches, FEHD releases about 1,700 new niches at the Tsang Tsui Columbarium every month for application by the public.

2.87 Starting from April 2019, all public niches allocated by FEHD are extendable niches. FEHD allocates niches in an open, fair and just manner. All

²⁸ Those criteria include the deceased being a Hong Kong resident at the time of death and whose remains were cremated in a government crematorium within 3 months after his/her death; or a Hong Kong resident for at least 10 years in the 20 years immediately preceding his/her death and whose remains were cremated outside Hong Kong; or a deceased person whose remains were lawfully exhumed and cremated at a government crematorium.

niches under application will be allocated to applicants by drawing of lots and computer random balloting. Each successful applicant will be allotted a designated niche, rather than given a choice among the niches. Applicants are required to submit applications in accordance with the announced arrangements.

2.88 According to FEHD, applications for placing additional cremated ashes in allocated niches can be made at any time. For effective use of government resources, FEHD encourages the public to make optimum use of allocated public niches. Hence, apart from applying for new extendable niches, applicants may also apply for placing in allocated niches additional cremated ashes of deceased persons who are close relatives of or in close relationship²⁹ with the first deceased person. Applicants are required to submit documentary proof of the relationship between the first deceased person and the other deceased person(s)³⁰.

2.89 There are 13 licensed private columbaria in Hong Kong. Members of the public may refer to the Register of Private Columbaria on the website of the Private Columbaria Licensing Board, or make enquiries with the relevant private columbaria for further details.

2.90 In addition, FEHD indicated that since the enactment of the Private Columbaria Ordinance (Cap. 630) on 30 June 2017, its Private Columbaria Affairs Office has been responsible for enforcing the Ordinance in an effort to regulate private columbaria, including taking enforcement action against columbaria operating illegally and disposing of ashes improperly, etc.

Placing Additional Ashes in Urn Graves of Government Cemeteries

2.91 Additional ashes or skeletal remains can be placed in urn graves in use at public cemeteries. Apart from those of the first deceased person, an urn grave can accommodate up to two additional urns or cinerary urns. The deceased whose remains to be added must be a close relative of or in close relationship with the first deceased person (see **Note 29**). Similar to the application for placing additional cremated ashes

²⁹ It generally refers to kinship, e.g. the spouse, parent, grandparent, grandparent-in-law, brother, sister, father-in-law, mother-in-law, daughter-in-law, son-in-law or a direct descendant of either the paternal or maternal line of the deceased person whose ashes were the first to be kept in the niche. Furthermore, if the subsequent deceased was in close relationship with the first deceased, FEHD will consider the application as well.

³⁰ If no valid proof is available, the applicant is required to take an oath at FEHD's Hong Kong or Kowloon Cemeteries and Crematoria Office.

in allocated niches as mentioned above, applicants for placing additional ashes or skeletal remains in urn graves of government cemeteries are also required to provide documentary proof of the relationship between the first buried person and the other deceased person(s) (see **Note 30**).

Alternative Means of Disposal of Ashes

2.92 Temporary Storage Service for Cremains in government facilities is a transitional arrangement. The cremains of any person who meets the specified criteria³¹ may be stored in FEHD's temporary facility upon application. At present, the temporary storage facility for cremains in Kwai Chung Crematorium is limited to storing cremains bags only while that in Wo Hop Shek Crematorium is limited to storing cinerary urns only. Members of the public who wish to pay tribute to their beloved ones may use the existing worshipping facilities in the columbarium near the temporary storage facility for cremains.

OTHER ARRANGEMENTS TO SUPPORT GREEN BURIAL

2.93 In June 2010, FEHD launched the Internet Memorial Service³² ("IMS") which provides a free memorial website for users to create memorial webpages for their deceased loved ones and to pay tribute to them online at any time and from anywhere. In 2018, a mobile application of the IMS was launched, with functions such as personalised profile setting, message notification and social media sharing, offering an alternative way for the public to pay tribute to their deceased family members and friends with their mobile devices. During the COVID-19 pandemic, IMS assisted the public in paying tribute to the deceased from home.

2.94 In addition, the Government launched the Green Burial Central Register in 2019 to enable the public to register their wish for green burial free of charge, so that

³¹ Including the deceased being a person who was a resident of Hong Kong at the time of his/her death and whose remains were cremated within three months after his/her death in a government crematorium, or whose remains were cremated in a private crematorium specified in Part 6 of Schedule 5 to the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance (Cap. 132); or who was a resident of Hong Kong for at least 10 years in the 20 years immediately preceding his/her death and whose remains were certified to be cremated in a lawful crematorium outside Hong Kong; or whose remains were lawfully exhumed and cremated at a government crematorium; or whose cremains were interred in a private columbarium in Hong Kong prior to the submission of the application.

³² www.memorial.gov.hk

they can plan in advance their after-death arrangements and make it known to their families. When a registered person passes away, FEHD will be able to ascertain his/her wish from the computer system upon booking of cremation service by the family members.

ARRANGEMENTS FOR DYING IN PLACE

2.95 In recent years, more people tend to opt for “dying in place”, i.e. staying with their families in a familiar environment until the last moment. This arrangement generally allows patients to spend their final days in a setting of their choice, such as at home, in a residential care home (“RCH”), or a nursing home. In the past, the law stipulated that only **non-reportable deaths** at home or in nursing homes were exempted from reporting to the Coroner (see **para. 2.96**), whereas deaths in RCHs for the elderly that are not nursing homes or RCHs for people with disabilities were **reportable deaths**. To provide terminally ill patients with more choices in respect of their own treatment and care arrangements, the Government has amended the relevant legislation to facilitate the choice of dying in place for terminally ill patients residing in RCHs (see **para. 2.97**).

2.96 According to the Coroners Ordinance, if a patient who died of natural causes at home or in a nursing home was diagnosed as having a terminal illness while alive, was attended to by a registered medical practitioner during his or her last illness within 14 days before the death, and a registered medical practitioner diagnosed and confirmed that he or she died of natural causes and issued a Medical Certificate of the Cause of Death (i.e. Form 18 of the BDRO) after the death, the death is not reportable to the Coroner and the body is not required to be sent to a public mortuary under DH for medico-legal examination. If cremation is needed for the deceased patient, the registered medical practitioner may at the same time issue a Medical Certificate (Cremation) (i.e. Form 2 of the CGRR).

2.97 Amendments to the two pieces of subsidiary legislation of the Coroners Ordinance and the BDRO relating to dying in place have come into effect in June 2024. After the amendments, if a resident who passed away in an RCH was diagnosed as having a terminal illness while alive and was attended to by a registered medical practitioner during his or her last illness within 14 days before passing away, and the resident’s cause of death certificate states that he or she died of natural causes, the case is not considered a reportable death.

2.98 HA respects patients' will and endeavours to provide support (such as palliative home care services), depending on individual circumstances, for discharged patients in need to facilitate their return to the community and reduce unnecessary hospitalisation. It also provides patients with information on non-governmental organisations that provide dying-at-home support services in Hong Kong, including at-home assessment and symptom management by doctors, regular home visits by doctors and community nurses, home visits to confirm the cause of death by doctors, and handling of bodies, etc.

2.99 On the other hand, for those who choose dying at home or in an RCH, their families may, after obtaining confirmation of the cause of death and a Medical Certificate of the Cause of Death (i.e. Form 18 of the BDRO) issued by a registered medical practitioner, follow the normal procedures for **non-reportable deaths** to register the death at a Deaths Registry of ImmD or through the "iAM Smart+" mobile application (see **paras. 2.38 and 2.39**) and proceed with the subsequent after-death arrangements.

3

WAY FORWARD

3.1 As regards provision of public services relating to formalities for after-death arrangements at the time of emergencies such as natural disasters, public health issues and safety incidents, government departments should examine the establishment of an emergency response system and relevant measures and define the lines of demarcation among them. The emergency countermeasures adopted by the four government departments including DH, FEHD, HA and ImmD for public services relating to formalities for after-death arrangements are set out below.

DH

3.2 In tackling the excessive demand for public mortuary services caused by an ageing population and the resulting increase in deaths, DH has formulated and implemented a series of short-term measures and long-term plans. The short-term measures implemented include the deployment of movable temporary body storage facilities to rapidly expand capacity when public mortuaries approach or reach full utilisation, and reserving the closed Kowloon Public Mortuary as a reserve mortuary for diversion. The long-term plans include reprovisioning of the Fu Shan Public Mortuary, which has been in use since late 2022, and of the Victoria Public Mortuary, whose funding will be submitted to the Legislative Council (“LegCo”) for approval, after which the project is targeted for completion in four and a half years. Upon completion of the reprovisioning projects and commissioning of the respective mortuaries, the fixed body storage capacity of the two public mortuaries will be over four times greater than their current capacity³³, meeting the rising demand driven by an ageing population.

³³ After reprovisioning, the Fu Shan Public Mortuary offers 830 fixed storage spaces, which is nearly four times the existing number of fixed storage spaces (216). The Victoria Public Mortuary will have about 360 fixed storage spaces after reprovision, the number of which is five times the existing 76 fixed storage spaces. Moreover, DH will optimise the non-fixed temporary body storage facilities at the reprovisioned Victoria Public Mortuary so as to further increase the capacity of body storage.

3.3 Moreover, in response to any sudden increase in the demand for public mortuary services caused by emergencies and large-scale incidents, DH has stepped up its emergency measures, which include rapidly expanding the body storage facilities within a short timeframe, speeding up the procedures for handling and claiming bodies by means of special arrangements and internal staff deployment, etc.

HA

3.4 HA continues to monitor closely the body storage in mortuaries. It has also taken emergency measures to instruct the mortuary unit to discuss and prepare for emergencies, and maintain internal communication in coordinating work so that resources can be fully utilised.

3.5 HA's mortuary unit oversees mortuary services in hospitals managed by the Authority, coordinates and consolidates such services in each cluster and make improvement proposals. Following the completion of new hospitals (such as Tin Shui Wan Hospital and Hong Kong Children's Hospital), and installation of additional refrigerated body storage units, the body storage capacity in hospital mortuaries has increased. Moreover, the redevelopment plans of hospitals will include assessment of demand for mortuary services and related planning.

3.6 Meanwhile, the ageing population and the rising overall mortality rate and number of deaths have caused the projected demand for HA's mortuary services to increase in parallel. Based on the assessment of public mortuary services, HA and relevant government departments have planned for additional capacity of body storage facilities. By enhancing administrative processes, such as reviewing documentary procedures and setting time limits and storage fees, the duration of body storages can be shortened.

3.7 In particular, if the relatives fail to claim the body of a deceased patient within 14 to 21 days after the death, the Death Documentation Office of the respective hospital will contact the relatives and offer any possible assistance. In exceptional circumstances, hospital mortuaries may provide greater flexibility for families to claim bodies by offering additional body claim sessions or extending services beyond regular office hours.

3.8 Furthermore, HA is of the view that administrative measures, such as establishing time limits or imposing a fee for body storage, may help improving the clearance of body storage facilities, thereby reducing the number of overdue cases. HA's review of storage fees of hospital mortuaries should conform to the overall government policy, consult various stakeholders and balance different factors including hospitals' operation, compassion for the relatives, social impression and the public's expectation, etc.

FEHD

3.9 Between February and May 2022, FEHD had increased the availability of its cremation service by offering additional sessions each day to meet the demand. The two new cremators in Wo Hop Shek commenced their service earlier, and have maintained at more than 300 sessions per day since 10 April 2022. Apart from Cheung Chau Crematorium with the lowest utilisation rate, other crematoria are almost operating around the clock. Available dates in the cremation booking system have been extended from 15 to 20 days after the application date to ensure that families will have sufficient cremation sessions to choose from.

3.10 With an ageing population (see **Note 1**) and the rising trend in the overall mortality rate and number of deaths in Hong Kong, FEHD also expects that the demand for cremation service will continue to increase. In the long run, the Government will estimate the overall demand for cremation service and introduce new crematorium projects in a timely manner. Meanwhile, FEHD is exploring the use of video image analysis through artificial intelligence in relocation and construction of crematoria so that cremation time can be further shortened to enhance efficiency and increase the number of cremation sessions per day.

3.11 As regards services provided by licensed funeral parlours and undertakers of burials, FEHD pointed out that there are sufficient funeral halls of licensed funeral parlours to meet the demand³⁴. Normally, the waiting time for Kowloon Funeral Parlour and Po Fook Memorial Hall are one to three days and seven days respectively while the other five licensed funeral parlours are available on weekdays, weekends and public holidays or traditional auspicious days and no waiting is required. FEHD

³⁴ Between January and October 2024, the average annual letting rate of the seven licensed funeral parlours in Hong Kong was around 73%.

maintains communication with the funeral parlours and keeps observing the actual utilisation of funeral parlours. Besides, FEHD created a one-stop online platform for funeral services in November 2024 to facilitate public access to licensed undertakers of burials and completion of related formalities.

3.12 Apart from providing more public columbarium niches and facilitating the development of private columbarium through regulation, the Government vigorously promotes green burial and encourages the public to dispose the cremains of the deceased in an environmentally friendly and sustainable manner, such as scattering cremated ashes at Gardens of Remembrance and at sea. FEHD continues to provide and improve green burial facilities and services as well as putting efforts into public education and publicity, which include creating the Green Burial Central Register with an aim to gradually develop green burial as a mainstream arrangement, thus achieving the policy objective of promoting a more environmentally friendly and sustainable means of handling cremated ashes.

ImmD

3.13 ImmD has worked closely with DH and FEHD in exploring the feasibility of cooperation on electronic services including electronic receipt of death information from hospitals to simplify the procedures for public submission in applying for such services.

WAY FORWARD

3.14 The Government has committed to establishing and promoting smart government initiatives. By means of innovative technology, and further promotion of consolidated data and operations among government departments, the Government intends to expedite the digitalisation of public services, enhance work efficiency and improve users' experience.

Electronic Dissemination of Consolidated Information

3.15 At present, information on public services relating to the formalities for after-death arrangements provided by various government departments and public organisations include death registration, cremation and coffin burial arrangements,

scattering of cremains, import and export of human remains, memorial service, financial assistance and bereavement support. Such information can be found on the webpage, “Services and Support for the Bereaved” of the government website, Gov.HK. The bereaved have to click on the links, one by one, to look for the information from the website of relevant government department. Besides, “A Guide to After-death Arrangements”, the leaflet published by FEHD provides lists of private cemeteries and licensed funeral parlours, undertakers of burials and registered service providers with the contact information in addition to details and application procedures regarding public services provided by various government departments.

3.16 In view of the Government’s proactive promotion of digitalised services in recent years, FEHD set up an online platform for burial services to facilitate applications for green burial. Meanwhile, FEHD will also improve the design of the existing website for burial services and provide useful information such as “A Guide to After-death Arrangements”, and videos, and details of licensed undertakers of burials and related formalities. After we initiated this direct investigation operation, FEHD launched the “After-death Arrangements” thematic website in November 2024.

Electronic Procedures for Relevant Applications

3.17 Government departments leverage technology to incorporate more smart living elements into their general public services. For example, ImmD has amended the requirement in the BDRO for registering births and deaths in person to provide the legal basis for introducing electronic services in handling registration of births and deaths. The bereaved or any persons related to the deceased may submit registration applications electronically, eliminating the need to handle the formality in person at a Deaths Registry. Upon completing an online death registration, the applicant may opt to receive the death certificate by mail or collect it in person at a Deaths Registry, based on their preference.

3.18 ImmD indicated that it would be pleased to see relevant departments introduce electronic services, including an electronic version of the Medical Certificate of the Cause of Death for the convenience of the public. Meanwhile, ImmD will observe the trend of electronic services, and, depending on the actual situation and public opinions, will review the feasibility of introducing an electronic version of death certificate in a timely manner. ImmD added that the death certificate is an important legal document, which is used in handling formalities at government departments and public service organisations, and is recognised as a certification document by many

private organisations. Besides, data on death registrations can be utilised in the compilation of statistics on deaths for use in medical and health related studies, and they are also useful for the establishment of public health objectives and policies. Taking into account death certificates are special documents that the public usually keep and use for a long period of time, ImmD shall further explore the legitimacy of electronic death certificates and examine appropriate technologies to meet the requirements for security and long-time maintenance.

3.19 Moreover, DH commenced a study to examine the feasibility of processing and issuing electronic cremation permits to align with the work of the Digital Policy Office and other relevant departments.

3.20 On the other hand, the Government proposed to LegCo's Panel on Health Services ("the Panel") a legislative framework regarding advance medical directives ("AMDs") and dying in place in May 2023. The Government also accepted the Panel's opinions regarding storage of AMDs in the Electronic Health Record Sharing System ("eHealth System") to allow access by designated healthcare professionals to the AMD records to foster better communication between treatment providers and patients as well as enabling information exchange among public and private treatment providers. As the Advance Decision on Life-sustaining Treatment Bill was passed in LegCo after the third reading on 20 November 2024, the Government planned to progressively introduce the full electronic route of AMDs, with eHealth System serving as the designated electronic system to support the making, storage, revocation and retrieval of electronic AMDs by the public. The Government will implement paper AMDs and electronic AMDs in phases. In the first phase, AMDs will be given in paper route and stored electronically. Members of the public can decide whether to store their paper AMDs electronically. When relevant functions of the designated electronic system are fully ready for use, the Government will enable the making of AMDs directly in the electronic system. Members of the public, public medical institutions and private healthcare facilities will be able to access electronically stored or made AMDs via eHealth System.

3.21 Basically, HA has accepted that any persons who are willing to take part in this arrangement may input their AMDs in eHealth System. HA supports the Government's implementation of electronic AMDs, that is, to first allow members of the public to give paper AMDs and compile electronic records of the directives. In the long run, AMDs could be made and revoked electronically.

4

OUR COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 While overcoming with grief for the loss of a beloved family member, the bereaved have to deal with various formalities for after-death arrangements. If the Government can improve the dissemination of information on related public services, simplify the application procedures for such services and digitalise or personalise the workflows of death registration and related applications, it should significantly reduce the pressure and emotional stress on the bereaved in dealing with the formalities for after-death arrangements, as well as enhancing the work efficiency of relevant government departments.

4.2 Based on the findings of this investigation, we have the following observations and comments on the Government's provision of public services relating to after-death arrangements.

CREATING A ONE-STOP THEMATIC WEBSITE

4.3 As mentioned in **paragraph 3.15**, currently, information about the formalities for after-death arrangements can be found on the webpage, “Services and Support for the Bereaved” of the government website, Gov.HK. Nevertheless, it is difficult for the bereaved to find the information they need because they have to click on the links, one by one, to look for the information from the website of different government departments. Take death registration as an example, clicking on “Forms related to deaths registration” will link to the webpage of “Births and Deaths Registration” on ImmD’s website. On that page, nine application forms relating to births and deaths registration and other services are available, including the forms for “Application for Search of Record of Birth in Hong Kong”, “Application for a Certified Copy of an Entry in the Deaths Register” and “Application for Search of Record of Death in Hong Kong”. When handling after-death arrangements, members of the public will have to spend time browsing the websites of different departments and checking one website or another before they can find the forms or information they need.

4.4 In our view, for better support and assistance to the bereaved in dealing with after-death arrangements for the deceased, relevant departments should explore developing a one-stop thematic website on after-death public services offered by all the relevant departments to provide standard and consistent information. The contents of the website may include information on the application procedures for related services provided by FEHD, ImmD, DH and HA, clear guidelines, relevant legal procedures and required documents as well as answers to frequently asked questions.

4.5 We noticed that in the past the bereaved had to go to the offices of individual departments to complete the formalities for after-death arrangements in person due to the lack of digitalised services. For that reason, some chose to engage a funeral agent to deal with the formalities for related public services. We are pleased to learn that ImmD amended the legislation in 2023 to remove the requirement for registrations of births and deaths in person in the BDRO and launched electronic services in handling death registrations. Now, the bereaved can submit online applications for death registration, choose to collect the death certificate by post, and pay the fee online (see **paras. 2.39 and 3.17**). Nevertheless, the Office has from time to time received complaints about inadequacy in the digitalisation of public services relating to the after-death arrangements. For example, even if the bereaved have submitted an online application for allocation of a renewable new niche via FEHD's online system, the Platform for Cemeteries and Crematoria Services, they still have to complete the verification of death documents and pay the fee at FEHD offices because the online system does not support verification of cremation cases on the same day. Subsequent to our intervention, FEHD launched an online platform for burial services, which is an integrated platform for the public to handle cemeteries and crematoria services, to enhance the overall efficiency of operation. Since the launch of the online platform, the same situation in the aforesaid example can be handled, that is, verification of cremation cases on the same day can be handled and the bereaved need not complete the verification formality and settle the payment at FEHD offices in person.

4.6 In recent years, the Government has stepped up the pace of building a digital government and promoting digitalisation of government services. We consider that in keeping with this, the relevant government departments should provide online application for more public services relating to the after-death arrangements on the one-stop thematic website. They should also make good use of the "iAM Smart+" mobile application to promote digitalised after-death public services so that the bereaved could complete relevant procedures more quickly. That could save the bereaved the trouble

of having to make such applications in person. We notice that FEHD launched the “After-death Arrangements” thematic website in November 2024 to facilitate the bereaved to apply for green burials online and to search for information about licensed undertakers of burials (see **para. 3.16**). In this light, we recommend that based on the online platform launched by FEHD, the Government further explore the development of a one-stop thematic website, offering inter-departmental and relevant e-service applications relating to after-death public services provided by all relevant departments.

4.7 In the long run, as people have become more open-minded about after-death arrangements, the relevant departments may study the feasibility of expanding the functions in the one-stop thematic website to provide personalised services. Members of the public may, on their own volition, make use of the data collection and sharing function of the online platform to assist them to plan ahead for their own after-death arrangements. For example, the one-stop thematic website may allow the public to pre-set their personal medical directives and indicate their choices of end-of-life care service and burial. Relevant government departments may also develop a central database to document all these types of information. Based on such information, the relevant departments and HA can follow up on the decisions of members of the public on after-death arrangements. The one-stop thematic website should also include the function to allow the bereaved to learn about the deceased’s decision on their after-death arrangements. For example, members of the public can give consent to sending a timely notification to their family of their option for after-death arrangements by activating the function of an email reminder. That would make it easier for the bereaved to take care of the after-death arrangements according to the wish of the deceased. It can also save the bereaved the trouble of having to provide information of the deceased to different departments separately, thus lessening the impact on their lives at the time they are still mourning the death of their beloved ones.

4.8 We acknowledge the importance of safeguarding personal data, and consider that relevant departments should promote digitalisation of public services relating to the after-death arrangements and at the same time examine how the information including the after-death arrangements that involve the deceased’s privacy should be managed and maintained in the central database. In devising the information system, the departments should also draw up guidelines and formulate measures to ensure data protection for workflows including collection, storage, use and transfer of data.

Thematic Website Should Cater for Needs of Ethnic Minorities and Different Cultures

4.9 Hong Kong is a multicultural society and home to over 300,000 ethnic minorities. The Government of HKSAR is determined to build a caring and inclusive community and has been providing comprehensive support to ethnic minorities. Handling after-death formalities for the deceased involves legal and administrative procedures, which would prove to be even more complicated for non-Chinese speakers, not to mention that different cultures have different customs and taboos surrounding the topic of death. We consider that the one-stop thematic website, in addition to providing information in more languages, should be culture-sensitive and careful in the choice of wording and graphics, as well as provide answers to frequently asked questions among ethnic minorities. Better still, the content of the one-stop thematic website can be categorised by religion and ethnicity.

STEPPING UP PROMOTION THROUGH SEMINARS AND PUBLICITY

4.10 The Government is vigorously promoting green burial in the society so that cremains of the deceased can be handled in a more environmentally-friendly and sustainable manner. As mentioned in **paragraph 2.75** above, green burials are gaining popularity, and latest statistics show that this option was adopted in after death-arrangements of 18.2% of the total number of deaths in a year (see **Table 3**). We agree with FEHD that changing customs and traditions takes time. The Department should collaborate with other government departments so that green burial can gradually become the preferred option of the public when they handle cremated ashes.

4.11 FEHD organises thematic seminars or publicity programmes about green burial on a regular basis. We consider that the Government should strengthen publicity and public education such as coordinating relevant departments or public organisations to hold seminars or forums periodically (e.g. every quarter) for the public, inviting staff of the relevant government departments and professionals (such as legal consultants and funeral service providers) to explain the services relating to after-death formalities and answer public queries so that members of the public can better understand after-death arrangements and relevant issues. Such seminars or forums can also serve as a platform for the public to reflect their views on the procedural arrangements for after-death formalities to the Administration.

4.12 Furthermore, the Government has amended the relevant legislation to facilitate the choice of dying in place for terminally ill patients living in a residential care home, which is not a nursing home, or in a residential care home for persons with disabilities in accordance with the wish and needs of the patients and their family (see **para. 2.97**). The amended legislation is intended for provision of quality and comprehensive end-of-life care for those patients, allowing them to spend their final days in a familiar place of their choice such as their home, an elderly home or a nursing home, etc. In our view, relevant departments or authorities including HA should provide more information on dying in place to those using the services of prescribed care homes so that the public can better understand the new arrangements in the amended legislation.

CONSIDERING THE PROVISION OF ADDITIONAL STORAGE FACILITIES FOR DEAD BODIES IN MORTUARIES

4.13 According to the data provided by DH, taking into account the population growth and the number of deaths in Hong Kong, public mortuaries are projected to require a total storage capacity of about 1,300 bodies by 2031 to accommodate demand. After the reprovisioning of the Fu Shan Public Mortuary in 2022, the total storage capacity of the five public mortuaries under DH have reached 1,964, which include 1,494 fixed storage facilities and 470 non-fixed storage facilities (see **Appendix II**). Moreover, DH has planned to reprovision the Victoria Public Mortuary to cope with the demand in the longer term.

4.14 In addition, HA has been closely monitoring the utilisation of hospital mortuaries and has indicated that it will rationalise the planning and increase the capacity of body storage facilities.

4.15 We are of the view that with the growth and ageing of the population in Hong Kong, DH and HA should review the utilisation of mortuaries from time to time and consider in a timely manner the need to increase the number of storage capacities for the dead in public mortuaries and hospital mortuaries to cope with the challenges that may arise in the future.

FORMULATING EMERGENCY PLANS FOR PUBLIC SERVICES RELATING TO FORMALITIES FOR AFTER-DEATH ARRANGEMENTS

4.16 As mentioned in **paragraph 3.1**, all the departments and the authority concerned should explore formulation of an emergency response system and make good plans for risk management to prepare for any upsurge in demand for public services relating to after-death arrangements following major accidents or emergencies. Specifically, the government departments should plan for measures and coordination for provision of such public services in case of different emergencies to ensure that they could respond to such emergencies in the most efficient and quickest way.

4.17 Meanwhile, all the departments and the authority concerned should arrange regular staff training to increase their staff's alertness to emergencies of different magnitude and enhance the coordination and capability of the departments and the authority in providing public services relating to after-death arrangements. In the long run, they should also consider redeploying manpower or adding resources to meet the rising demand for public services relating to after-death arrangements in view of the ageing trend in Hong Kong's population.

RECOMMENDATIONS

4.18 In light of the above, The Ombudsman's main recommendations to FEHD, DH, HA and ImmD are as follows:

- (1) **All the departments** should discuss and examine the feasibility of developing a one-stop thematic website providing information about the public services provided by each of them regarding after-death arrangements (see **para. 4.4**);
- (2) **All the departments** should explore using a one-stop thematic website to further digitalise public services relating to after-death arrangements. They should consider providing more electronic application procedures and personalised services to make it more convenient for the bereaved (see **para. 4.6**);

- (3) **All the departments** should examine how the contents of the thematic website can meet the needs of people of different races and cultures (see **para. 4.9**);
- (4) **FEHD and the department or authority concerned** should organise seminars or forums to explain information and share experience relating to after-death arrangements on a regular basis (see **para. 4.11**);
- (5) **HA and the department or authority concerned** should provide more information on dying in place to their service users as well as giving more publicity to the new arrangements in the amended legislation that make it more convenient for patients to choose to die in place (see **para. 4.12**);
- (6) **DH** should regularly review the availability of body storage facilities in public mortuaries and consider installing additional units in response to the population growth and the ageing trend in Hong Kong (see **para. 4.15**);
- (7) **HA** should regularly review the availability of body storage facilities in hospital mortuaries and consider installing additional units in response to the population growth and the ageing trend in Hong Kong (see **para. 4.15**);
- (8) **All the departments** should consolidate previous experience and explore the establishment of an emergency response system and implementation of relevant measures regarding provision of public services relating to after-death arrangements at the time of emergencies or major accidents to prepare for sudden challenges (see **para. 4.16**);
- (9) **All the departments** should conclude previous experiences and arrange regular training to staff providing public services relating to after-death arrangements at the time of emergencies or major accidents, with the aim of increasing the staff's alertness and capability in handling emergencies of a sizeable magnitude (see **para. 4.17**); and

(10) **All the departments and the authority concerned** should consider flexibly redeploying internal resources to meet the rising demand for public services relating to after-death arrangements alongside the ageing trend in Hong Kong's population (see **para. 4.17**).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

4.19 The Ombudsman thanks FEHD, DH, HA and ImmD for their cooperation in the course of this investigation.

Office of The Ombudsman

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Appendices

**Number of body storage facilities in mortuaries
under Hospital Authority as at 26 November 2024**

Hospital	Mortuary	No. of storage compartments
Cheshire Home, Chung Hom Kok	Cheshire Home, Chung Hom Kok Mortuary	6
Pamela Youde Nethersole Eastern Hospital	Pamela Youde Nethersole Eastern Hospital Mortuary	177
Ruttonjee and Tang Shiu Kin Hospital	Ruttonjee and Tang Shiu Kin Hospital Mortuary	112
St. John Hospital	St. John Hospital Mortuary	6
Tung Wah Eastern Hospital	Tung Wah Eastern Hospital Mortuary	21
Wong Chuk Hang Hospital	Wong Chuk Hang Hospital Mortuary	8
Tung Wah Group of Hospitals Fung Yiu King Hospital	Tung Wah Group of Hospitals Fung Yiu King Hospital Mortuary	32
Grantham Hospital	Grantham Hospital Mortuary	55
Queen Mary Hospital	Bereavement Suite and Mortuary	159
Tung Wah Hospital	Tung Wah Hospital Mortuary	41
Hong Kong Buddhist Hospital	Hong Kong Buddhist Hospital Mortuary	59
Hong Kong Children's Hospital	Hong Kong Children's Hospital Mortuary	31
Kowloon Hospital	Kowloon Hospital Mortuary	43
Kowloon Hospital Rehabilitation Building	Kowloon Hospital Rehabilitation Building Mortuary	27
Kwong Wah Hospital	Kwong Wah Hospital Mortuary	311
Our Lady of Maryknoll Hospital	Our Lady of Maryknoll Hospital Mortuary	(Hospital re-construction underway)
Queen Elizabeth Hospital	Queen Elizabeth Hospital Mortuary	289
TWGHs Wong Tai Sin Hospital	TWGHs Wong Tai Sin Hospital Mortuary	58
Haven of Hope Hospital	Haven of Hope Hospital Mortuary	136
Tseung Kwan O Hospital	Tseung Kwan O Hospital Mortuary	174
United Christian Hospital	United Christian Hospital Mortuary	154

Appendix I

Hospital	Mortuary	No. of storage compartments
Caritas Medical Centre	Caritas Medical Centre Mortuary	156
North Lantau Hospital	North Lantau Rest-in-peace Home	40
Princess Margaret Hospital	Princess Margaret Hospital Lai King Building Rest-in-peace Home	37
Princess Margaret Hospital	Princess Margaret Hospital Mortuary	146
Yan Chai Hospital	Yan Chai Hospital Mortuary	141
Alice Ho Miu Ling Nethersole Hospital	Alice Ho Miu Ling Nethersole Hospital Mortuary	60
Bradbury Hospice	Bradbury Hospice Mortuary	20
Cheshire Home, Shatin	Cheshire Home, Shatin Mortuary	15
North District Hospital	North District Hospital Mortuary	104
Prince of Wales Hospital	Prince of Wales Hospital Mortuary	172
Shatin Hospital	Shatin Hospital Mortuary	63
Tai Po Hospital	Tai Po Hospital Mortuary	50
Pok Oi Hospital	Pok Oi Hospital Main Block Mortuary	79
Pok Oi Hospital Tin Ka Ping Infirmary	Pok Oi Hospital Tin Ka Ping Infirmary Mortuary	9
Tuen Mun Hospital	Tuen Mun Hospital Mortuary	253
The Rehabilitation Block of Tuen Mun Hospital	The Rehabilitation Block of Tuen Mun Hospital Mortuary	41
Tin Shui Wai Hospital	Tin Shui Wai Hospital Mortuary	79
Total no. of storage compartments in HA mortuaries		3,364

**Number of fixed body storage facilities and non-fixed body storage facilities
in public mortuaries as at 10 December 2024**

Storage Facility	Capacity of fixed body storage facilities	Capacity of non-fixed storage facility		Total
		Temporary body storage facilities	Modular refrigerated mortuary units	
Victoria Public Mortuary	76	8	36	<u>120</u>
Kwai Chung Public Mortuary	220	98	132	<u>450</u>
Fu Shan Public Mortuary	830	0	0	<u>830</u>
Fu Shan storage facility (former site of Fu Shan public mortuary) (reserve mortuary for diversion)	216	90	60	<u>366</u>
Kowloon public mortuary (reserve mortuary for diversion)	152	46	0	<u>198</u>
Total	1,494	242	228	<u>1,964</u>