

Executive Summary

Direct Investigation Operation Report

Allocation of Public Niches

Our Findings and Comments

Bereaved families share the wish to make after-death arrangements for their loved ones respectfully without delay, so that the departed may rest in peace early.

2. The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (“FEHD”) is responsible for providing and managing public burial services. In recent years, cremation has been the mainstream mode of after-death arrangements in Hong Kong. In response to the demand, FEHD adopts a three-pronged strategy, i.e. increasing the supply of public niches, actively promoting green burials, and strengthening the regulation of private niches. Since 2019, FEHD has been conducting an allocation exercise once a year by drawing of lots and computer random balloting for allocating the public niches in extendable lease. Following the completion of Tsang Tsui Columbarium in 2020 with a relatively large supply of niches, FEHD has introduced a pilot scheme for monthly allocation of niches in Tsang Tsui, while the allocation of niches in other columbaria remains on annual basis. FEHD pointed out that due to the adequate supply, there was no need for eligible applicants to wait for niches in recent years.

3. However, the Office has noted from the allocation exercises over the past few years that for applicants wishing to place the ashes of the deceased in a columbarium other than Tsang Tsui, if they happened to miss the annual application period, they might have to wait around nine months for the next allocation exercise. In this light, when we initiated an inquiry into this topic and met with FEHD representatives in November 2025, we recommended that FEHD consider conducting allocation exercises at least quarterly rather than yearly, or even adopting the practice of monthly allocation of niches in Tsang Tsui. FEHD stated at the time that any changes to allocation frequency must be considered from a macro perspective at the policy level. The Office is pleased to note that the Department has finally implemented the above recommendation. With effect from August 2026, allocations of available public niches are standardised to a monthly basis¹. The Office commends FEHD for its pragmatic and responsive

¹ The four columbaria involved are Tsang Tsui Columbarium, Shek Mun Columbarium at On Hing Lane, Sha Tin, Cape Collinson-San Ha Columbarium and Wo Hop Shek Columbarium Phase VI.

attitude.

4. The Office notes that under the new arrangements, the frequency for allocation of public niches in the three columbaria other than Tsang Tsui is changed from once a year to once a month. Accordingly, FEHD has to modify its administrative arrangements and the available quota of niches in each allocation. Before implementation, FEHD has explained the key points of the new arrangements through various channels, and it would make corresponding adjustments in light of the actual situation of niche applications. Having said that, as the new arrangements have just been launched and the first allocation has yet to take place, the Office recommends that FEHD continue to closely monitor the actual operation and, where necessary, consider redeploying internal resources and adjusting the available quota of niches to ensure effective use of resources and orderly supply of niches. Taking a step further, FEHD should continue to ensure the smooth operation for monthly allocation of niches, so that niches can be allocated to members of the public in need in a timely manner. Meanwhile, FEHD should continue to step up explaining the features of new arrangements and the differences from former arrangements to the public and stay connected with the funeral industry to ensure that the public could obtain sufficient information.

5. On the other hand, the Office notes that the pilot scheme for monthly allocations was introduced as early as 2020 upon the completion of Tsang Tsui Columbarium, but FEHD did not extend it to other columbaria until we launched an inquiry and made this recommendation in 2025. In this regard, FEHD explained that following the completion of Shek Mun Columbarium at On Hing Lane, Sha Tin, in the fourth quarter of 2025, the Department ensured that a consistent supply of niches was available which made it sufficiently ready and experienced to fully implement the monthly allocation of niches. The Office agrees that public niches are scarce public resources. This is exactly why public niches should be fully utilised rather than left idle. In our view, if FEHD had gradually extended the pilot scheme to other columbaria, such as increasing the frequency of allocation commensurately with supply, it could have balanced the use of resources and the fulfillment of demands, while avoiding the long waits under the annual arrangements and allocating niches to applicants in need expeditiously. The Office recommends that FEHD, when introducing pilot schemes for other public services in future, properly decide on the way forward for the relevant services or make gradual adjustments by conducting timely reviews with comprehensive consideration from the perspective of the most effective use of public resources and fulfillment of public demands.

6. Apart from the recommendations for improving the allocation arrangements for public niches in **paragraphs 3 to 5**, the Office considers that there is room for FEHD to make further improvement or enhancement in several other areas, including the application and allocation procedures for niches, inter-departmental collaboration, information dissemination and future planning of niches. Details are elaborated below.

Application and Allocation Procedures for Public Niches

7. At present, applications for public niches can be made by paper forms, email, or via FEHD's online platform or forms. FEHD takes an average of 50 days to process applications made by paper forms and email, including data entry and verification. As for applications made via online platform and forms, provided that specific criteria are met, applicants are not required to submit supporting documents, while FEHD's computerised system can directly match and verify the information of applicants for "automatic approval", which takes just one day. The Office notes that one of the specific criteria is that the applicant for a niche must also be the one applying for the cremation of the deceased, which is often the case for many applicants. If most or all of these applicants were to use the online platform or forms, it would streamline FEHD's administrative procedures and shorten processing time, while applicants can skip the preparation of copies of supporting documents.

8. In recent years, the percentage of applications for public niches using FEHD's online platform or forms has been on a steady rise, but more than 20% of applications were still made by email or paper forms as of 2025. The figure suggests that while many applicants probably meet the criteria for "automatic approval" mentioned above, they might not aware that applications submitted via online platform or forms do not require supporting documents, or the service of "2 in 1 Integrated Cremation and Ash Handling Application" can be used in conjunction with online platform or forms. Nor do they realise that online applications will be processed by "automatic approval", and that they can subsequently pay the fees online to complete the procedures, thereby saving a lot of time. Accordingly, FEHD should step up explaining to the public and the funeral industry about the benefits of making applications via online platform and forms, in parallel with intensified promotion of "2 in 1 Integrated Cremation and Ash Handling Application", which has not yet recorded any usage since its launch, to increase the usage rate of these electronic services. As for the remaining manual procedures of data entry and verification, FEHD should streamline the administrative workflow, such as exploring the feasibility of using artificial intelligence and pushing

ahead the use of text recognition technology, with a view to enhancing the efficiency of application processing. In this regard, FEHD indicated that it is introducing optical character recognition technology to scan and convert paper applications into text, thereby reducing the time spent on manual data entry. The technology is expected to enter into trial as early as the fourth quarter of 2026.

9. Although the frequency of allocation exercises has changed, FEHD continues to allocate niches by drawing of lots and computer random balloting. The balloting process is videotaped and uploaded to FEHD's website; seats are also available at the office premises where it is held for the public to observe the process. The Office recommends that FEHD consider keeping records and statistics on the number of attendees on each occasion in future, and use these data as one of the factors to review whether such arrangements should be retained. Moreover, FEHD should explore streamlining the drawing of lots and computer random balloting, and reducing unnecessary administrative arrangements by replacing the current practice of on-site observation, videotaping and uploading with a simplified workflow. FEHD can also exchange experience with other government departments and make reference to their practice of drawing lots (such as the Education Bureau's allocation of Secondary 1 school places) to streamline its own balloting process without prejudice to fairness and integrity.

Inter-departmental Collaboration

10. Regarding inter-departmental collaboration, the Office notes that under the coordination of the Digital Policy Office, FEHD is currently working with the Department of Health, the Immigration Department and the Hospital Authority to develop a one-stop e-service platform covering death registrations, applications for cremation permits and related services. The initiative involves the digitisation of service procedures and data sharing among departments, etc. In fact, FEHD's "After-death Arrangements" thematic website launched in response to recommendations made in our direct investigation operation report on "Government's Provision of Public Services Relating to the After-death Arrangements" has consolidated key information from various departments in the form of a simple and easy-to-understand roadmap, guiding bereaved families through the funeral planning process. It is a significant step forward from the perspective of facilitating public access to information.

11. The Office understands that after-death arrangements fall within the jurisdiction of different departments and cannot be handled by a single department alone.

However, under the principles of people-oriented and “One Government” mindset, public services are expected to remain efficient and convenient even where inter-departmental collaboration is involved. The Office anticipates that the one-stop function on the platform can achieve a synergy effect in combination with the information on the thematic website. With high hopes for this initiative, the Office encourages FEHD to deepen cooperation with other relevant departments and press ahead at full steam with the development of the e-service platform.

12. The Office recommends that FEHD continue to closely align with the progress of the one-stop e-service platform’s development. Furthermore, the Office notes that the exchange of data among departments is essential to the e-service platform. On this basis, FEHD should explore further streamlining the procedures for public niche applications and cross-departmental verification of eligibility, with a view to expediting and improving the efficiency of application processing. Following the launch of the e-service platform, FEHD should step up publicity together with the “After-death Arrangements” thematic website to achieve a synergy effect and higher usage rates.

Dissemination of Information on Public Niches

13. FEHD disseminates information about public niches by various means, of which its website and the “After-death Arrangements” thematic website are the major channels.

14. The Office notes that the structure and content of FEHD’s webpage on “Niches” are rather disorganised with an assorted list of hyperlink titles, from which the public have to carefully find out the right title and click on the link to view the information needed, which is not very user-friendly. Moreover, the titles of some hyperlinks are similar, making it difficult to tell whether the content contained therein suits the need. Some hyperlinks also provide obsolete data and information. The Office considers that FEHD’s website design should target at facilitating the public’s search for helpful information. Based on this principle, the Department should properly edit and consolidate the information on the relevant webpage, removing redundant content and retaining only the essentials to facilitate public access of information.

15. Furthermore, the Office notes that FEHD’s website and the “After-death Arrangements” thematic website it manages both provide information relating to public niches. While some of the information overlaps, the content and wording are not entirely consistent, and FEHD’s website provides relatively more information. The

Office believes that the differences between these two websites stem from the fact that FEHD originally designed them with different objectives. The Office recommends that FEHD consider aligning the content of the two websites in accordance with its original design objectives. Overlapping content should be organised or consolidated to maintain consistency and improve clarity of the information contained therein.

Future Planning of Public Niches

16. With regard to the comprehensive allocation exercise of public niches once a year, FEHD's data show that the available quota of niches each year between 2021 and 2025 exceeded the number of applications received. In other words, there were enough niches for allocation to all applicants. As for Tsang Tsui Columbarium where niches were allocated monthly, over 70,000 niches were still available for allocation as of December 2025. These data are in line with FEHD's remarks that the current supply of niches is adequate.

17. In addition to the existing supply of public niches, FEHD has also initiated new public columbarium projects on Lantau Island, in Kwai Chung and Fanling to align with projected demographic changes in Hong Kong. The Office recommends that FEHD closely monitor the progress of these projects. Subject to the approval of financial provisions, it should plan well ahead of time and explore ways to speed up the completion of projects where feasible, thereby maintaining a stable supply of niches.

18. Although FEHD has been actively developing new public columbarium projects, there is no room for complacency because these projects require long-term planning and take considerable time to complete. Consequently, the Office recommends that FEHD continue to keep tabs on the demographic trends and projections in Hong Kong. If adjustments to existing planning of niches are deemed necessary, FEHD should take corresponding measures at an early stage.

19. In the long run, prolonged increase in the supply of niches is not sustainable. The Government should, therefore, further strengthen the promotion of green burials as a sustainable burial option. The Office notes that FEHD currently encourages the public to opt for green burials by providing a free ferry service for scattering ashes at sea, the gardens of remembrance where bereaved families can scatter ashes and hold memorial ceremonies, and personalised facilities and services imbued with a sense of dignity. FEHD also promotes green burials through community guided tours, interactive exhibitions and youth programmes. In recent years, the percentage of

adoption of green burials among the cremated has recorded a steady rise, reaching an all-time high at 20.2% in 2025. The Office is also pleased to note that FEHD has stayed abreast of the methods used in other regions to dispose of ashes and their effectiveness. FEHD's efforts and achievements are commendable.

20. The Office recommends that FEHD build on its existing green burial services, and further explore other facilities and ancillary arrangements (such as drawing on overseas experience) to step up encouraging the public to use such services; the Department should also continue to strengthen publicity and education, such as considering collaboration with academic institutions to develop educational materials, and instil the concept of green burials in students and youngsters through life education activities, with a view to making green burials more widely acceptable in the long run.

Recommendations

26. In the light of the above, The Ombudsman makes recommendations (including one already implemented by FEHD as mentioned in **paragraph 3**) in five key areas: allocation arrangements for public niches, application and allocation procedures, inter-departmental collaboration, information dissemination and future planning of niches. Details are as follows:

Allocation Arrangements for Public Niches

- (1) consider conducting allocation exercises of niches on a quarterly or monthly basis rather than once a year (note: FEHD has implemented this recommendation);
- (2) continue to closely monitor the operating situation of the new allocation arrangements; where necessary, consider redeploying internal resources and adjusting the available quota of niches to ensure effective use of resources and orderly supply of niches;
- (3) following recommendation (2), continue to ensure the smooth operation of the monthly arrangements for timely allocation of niches to members of the public with such a need;
- (4) continue to step up explaining the features of new arrangements and the

differences from former arrangements to the public and stay connected with the funeral industry, so that they are fully informed;

- (5) when introducing pilot schemes for other public services in future, properly decide on the way forward for the relevant services or make gradual adjustments by conducting timely reviews with comprehensive consideration from the perspective of the most effective use of public resources and fulfillment of public demands;

Application and Allocation Procedures for Public Niches

- (6) step up explaining to the public and the funeral industry the benefits of making applications via online platform and forms, in parallel with intensified promotion of “2 in 1 Integrated Cremation and Ash Handling Application”, to increase the usage rate of these electronic services;
- (7) regarding the manual processing of data entry and verification for applications made by paper forms and email, streamline administrative workflow, such as exploring the feasibility of using artificial intelligence and pushing ahead the use of text recognition technology, with a view to enhancing the efficiency of application processing;
- (8) consider keeping records and statistics on the number of attendees on each occasion of drawing lots and computer random balloting in future, and use these data as one of the factors to review whether such arrangements should be retained;
- (9) following recommendation (8), explore any scope to streamline the drawing of lots and computer random balloting, and to reduce unnecessary administrative arrangements by replacing the current practice of on-site observation, videotaping and uploading with a simplified workflow;
- (10) following recommendation (9), exchange experience with other government departments and make reference to their practice of drawing lots (such as the Education Bureau’s allocation of Secondary 1 school places) to streamline its own balloting process without prejudice to fairness and integrity;

Inter-departmental Collaboration

- (11) continue to closely align with the progress of the one-stop e-service platform's development;
- (12) as the exchange of data among departments is essential to the one-stop e-service platform, explore any scope to further streamline the procedures for public niche applications and cross-departmental verification of eligibility, with a view to expediting and improving the efficiency of application processing;
- (13) following the launch of the one-stop e-service platform, step up publicity together with the "After-death Arrangements" thematic website to achieve a synergy effect and higher usage rates;

Dissemination of Information on Public Niches

- (14) to facilitate the public's search for information they need, properly edit and consolidate the information on the webpage relating to "Niches", removing redundant content and retaining only the essentials;
- (15) consider aligning the content of FEHD's website and the "After-death Arrangement" thematic website based on its original objectives in designing them; overlapping content should be organised or consolidated to maintain consistency and improve clarity of the information disseminated;

Future Planning of Public Niches

- (16) closely monitor the progress of public columbarium projects on Lantau Island, in Kwai Chung and Fanling; subject to the approval of financial provisions, plan well ahead of time and explore ways to speed up the completion of projects where feasible, thereby maintaining a stable supply of niches;
- (17) continue to keep tabs on the demographic trends and projections in Hong Kong, take corresponding measures at an early stage if adjustments to existing planning of niches are deemed necessary;

- (18) build on its existing green burial services, and further explore other facilities and ancillary arrangements (such as drawing on overseas experience) to step up encouraging the public to use such services; and
- (19) continue to strengthen publicity and education on green burials, such as considering collaboration with academic institutions to develop educational materials, and instil the concept of green burials in students and youngsters through life education activities, with a view to making green burials more widely acceptable in the long run.

Office of The Ombudsman

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