

Extendable allocation arrangement for public niches

Frequently Asked Questions

The Government has received a lot of views (with some arising from misunderstandings) from members of the Legislative Council (LegCo), members of District Councils (DCs) and the general public on its proposal of extendable public niches. To enable the public to have a better understanding of and allay their concerns about the matter, we tabulate our responses to some frequently asked questions in the table below.

	Question	Response
1.	<p>It is the Government's responsibility to build public columbaria to meet the long-term community need. Why does it introduce the extendable arrangement instead of pressing ahead with the early completion of the existing public columbarium projects or finding new sites for more such projects? Moreover, the extendable arrangement, if implemented now, will not have any impact in 20 years or even in a hundred years. Is it not something that causes troubles to the Government itself, or even the general public, for no useful purpose? Is it not an excuse for the Government to shirk its responsibility in finding new sites for developing public columbaria?</p>	<p>The Government is committed to taking forward the district-based columbarium development scheme under which 24 sites are identified in 18 districts to increase the supply of public niches. <u>We must emphasise that the implementation of the extendable arrangement for niches will not affect our work in pressing ahead with the public columbarium development projects. We will continue to leave no stone unturned to pursue them.</u></p> <p>The whole community, however, must face the reality. Even if the district-based columbarium development scheme can be fully implemented despite all difficulties, the supply of public niches only comes to a total of about 900 000. Based on the latest population projections, the number of deaths per year will rise steadily in the next two decades (2018-2037) from 45 000 to 70 000 with the accumulated number of cremations amounting to about 1.1 million. In other words, the public niches available under the existing district-based columbarium development scheme are not able to meet the needs in the long run.</p> <p>In the following decade (2038-2047), the number of deaths is estimated to be 840 000, which will require more land for columbaria. To illustrate the land requirements for columbarium development in a more concrete way, we try to compare it with the land for constructing primary schools. It is estimated that the</p>

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	<p>land required will be similar to 88 primary school sites, which means each of the 18 districts has to use an average area of about 5 primary schools to build columbaria. The same or even greater requirements recur every decade, making it more and more difficult to find suitable land.</p> <p><u>As shown in the attached chart, it is unrealistic to presume that the supply of niches with permanent interment will meet the growing demands brought by the increase in the number of deaths.</u></p> <p>Using a site for columbarium development and the interment of the ashes of the deceased means that the current and the next generations cannot use it for other purposes (e.g. healthcare, education or other community facilities). While we should cherish the memories of our ancestors, we must think about the future of the next generation and make a choice for them.</p> <p>Like what our ancestors have done for us, what we do today is not for ourselves but for the generations to come. Taking the right course now, our efforts will get results in twenty years and beyond. If the 900 000 public niches under the district-based columbarium development scheme are all built and put into recycled use gradually, long-term benefits will be enjoyed by generations after generations of the Hong Kong people. At present, for niches with permanent interment in columbaria with a history of 40 years or more, less than half of them are attended to by families of the deceased. This shows what can be expected to achieve from the proposed arrangement of extendable use of niches.</p> <p>If we sit still and do nothing today, there may not be any adverse effect in one or two decades, nor will the incumbent Government come under any pressure. However, it will be irresponsible for the Government not to plan ahead and handle an important social issue that is as foreseeable and unavoidable as deaths. Let's think about this: if the Government in the 1960s had not</p>

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		<p>been so determined to promote cremation and require exhumation for re-burial after six years of burial, what would it be today?</p> <p>In fact, the proposed arrangement of extendable niches is not without precedent. There are forerunners in the community with forward-looking views. The Hong Kong Chinese Christian Churches Union and other regions (e.g. Macau and some provinces in mainland China) have implemented similar arrangement.</p>
2.	<p>Will the extendable arrangement push up the prices of private niches?</p>	<p>We must point out that <u>after the commencement of the Private Columbaria Ordinance, the niches for sale will have a time limit of interment.</u> For example, if a columbarium is located on leased land, the licensee is not entitled to set the duration of any niches available for sale beyond the period of the lease. In future, the validity period of all licences of private columbaria will not exceed 10 years. These restrictions are the basis for future sale of new niches. Private columbarium operators have a duty to explain it clearly to consumers.</p> <p>The prices of private niches are affected by supply and demand. Public niches can be put into better use by recycling through the extendable use system. Since the same number of public niches can meet more demand in this way, the demand for private columbaria may drop as a result. Therefore, we believe the proposal will not push up the prices.</p>
3.	<p>Why doesn't the Government conduct a public consultation? Is it worried about public opposition? Why does it put the demand for land for public columbaria against that for other public policy areas (e.g. housing, healthcare etc.) Isn't it a socially divisive</p>	<p>There have been forward-looking views in the community which suggest that the Government should consider introducing a time limit on new public niches to be allocated. The Audit Commission also clearly recommended in 2015 that the Government should consider the feasibility of this arrangement to improve the sustainability of niche supply. In addition to consulting the LegCo Panel on 13 February and 10 April 2018, we are conducting consultations with the 18 DCs or their related committees.</p>

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argument to deploy?	<p>We have learnt from past experience that columbaria are not welcome facilities to most communities. Without the support of DCs, there is little chance to put columbarium projects on the LegCo agenda for funding approval. Therefore, consultation with DCs doesn't mean that we do not respect public opinions. We just want to focus on the most decisive factor in the increase of niche supply, i.e. whether support can be obtained from the local communities for the construction of columbaria in their respective districts. Moreover, we believe no one will question the public mandate of DCs, which are returned by elections.</p> <p>Given the scarcity of land resources, if we do not consider the extendable arrangement for the use of niches now, there will be no end to the demand for finding more land for construction of new columbaria, and this problem will continue to plague future generations. It is estimated that the number of deaths will increase continually from over 70 000 in 2037 to a peak of more than 100 000 in 2057. If the policy on permanent interment of the ashes of the deceased remains unchanged, it means a new columbarium larger than the existing Wo Hop Shek Columbarium (66 000 niches) needs to be completed each year and the size has to be bigger and bigger. A more pertinent question is: in which districts should such columbaria be constructed? Therefore, mentioning the demand for land for other public policy areas is not to instigate confrontations or divisions but to point out that we have to make choices when it comes to the use of land resources.</p> <p>We understand that the LegCo Panel has invited the public and 18 DCs to give their views in writing on the proposed extendable arrangement for niches. Given that it is difficult to find land, we urge DC members who have reservations about the proposal to, first of all, assess carefully the difficulties in finding land for construction of new columbaria in their respective districts and possible strong objections from local residents. We must obtain the support of DCs before</p>

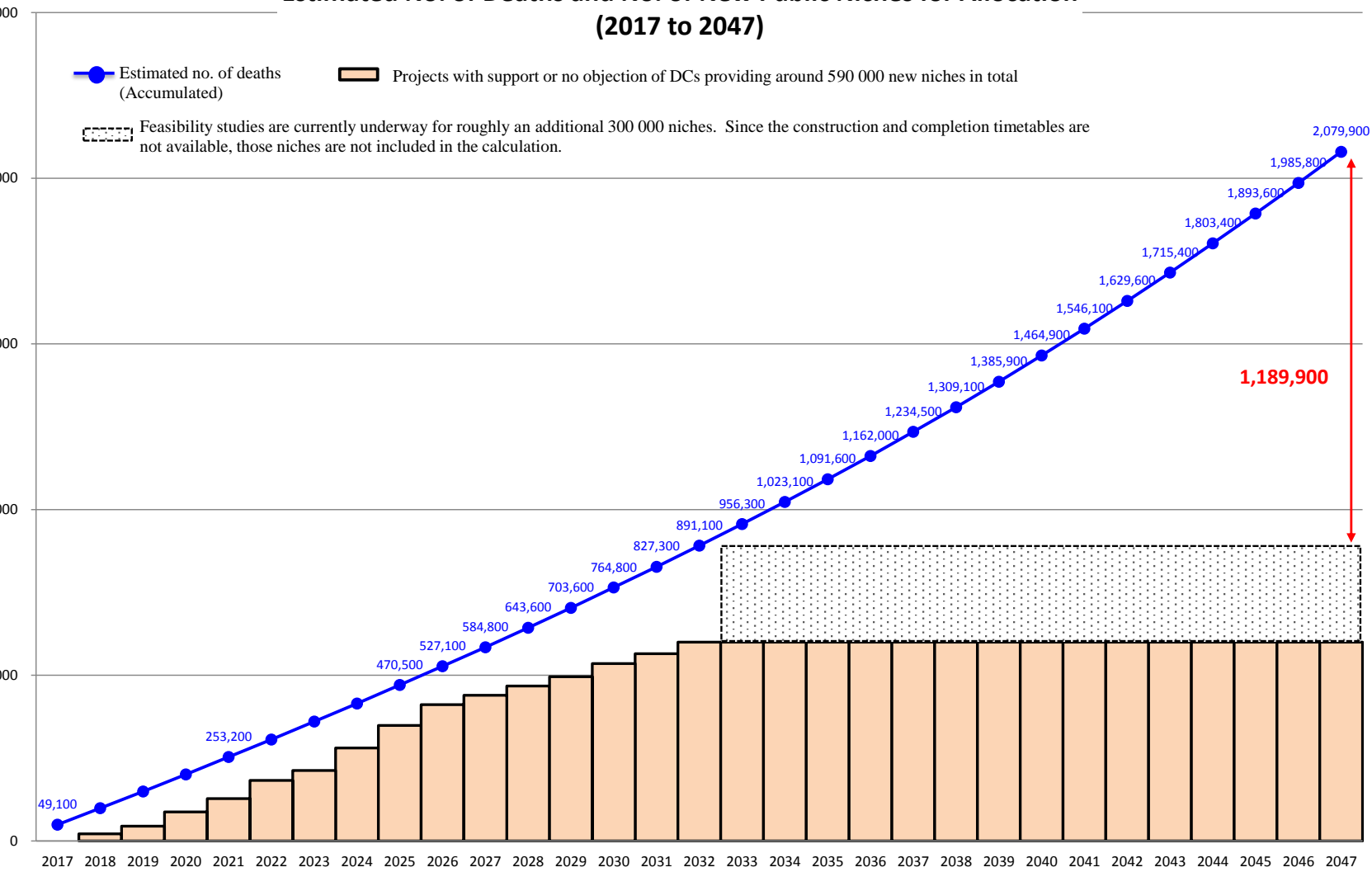
	Question	Response
		implementing any new columbarium projects. We must also expedite the process of finding land to meet the public demand for the facilities.
4.	Will the ashes currently deposited in public columbaria be removed?	The Government's current proposal <u>only involves the niches to be allocated starting from the end of 2018,</u> and the niches being used at present will not be affected.
5.	Some elderly people without families in the society are worried that no one will take care of their after-death arrangements when they pass away. Will certain organisations be allowed to help them apply for niches and extension of the interment period?	The original concept of providing public niches by allocation is to cater for the needs of people to pay respect to their deceased family members. But we also fully understand the feelings of some elderly people who do not have families. In light of the views of Members, the Government is considering in a comprehensive manner how to set up a workable mechanism to meet <u>the needs of elderly people without families.</u> We will, where practicable, flexibly process the applications for extension through certain organisations while preventing abuse at the same time.
6.	After expiry of the 20-year initial interment period, there might have been changes in the contact details of a niche allocatee or the allocatee might have passed away. By then, will the ashes deposited in the niche be disposed of due to lost contact?	<p>Firstly, if there are any changes in the contact details of niche allocatees, it is incumbent upon them to inform FEHD of the updates. FEHD will simplify the updating procedure as far as possible. Besides, FEHD would <u>send reminders by SMS and email every 5 years to remind the related persons of making any updates.</u></p> <p>Secondly, FEHD proposes to <u>allow a niche allocatee to nominate a number of representatives who may apply for extension</u> (with order of priority indicated). If there are any changes to the nominated representative(s) in the future, the allocatee and/or nominated representative(s) may inform FEHD accordingly.</p>
7.	After how long will unattended niches be vacated?	Counting from the first attempt to remind the related persons (one year before the expiry of the interment period) to apply for extension, the whole process of

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		vacating an unattended niche takes at least two year and a half to complete (including one year and a half after the expiry of the interment period, i.e. covering the Ching Ming and Chung Yeung Festivals), during which FEHD will try to contact the related persons. The ongoing process will be aborted once a related person contacts FEHD and confirms an extension by payment of the prevailing prescribed fees.
8.	If the related persons are absent from Hong Kong at the expiry of the interment period and miss the opportunity to apply for extension, can they locate the place where the ashes of their ancestors are scattered?	<u>The means and location of final disposal of the removed ashes will be properly documented by FEHD.</u> In addition, FEHD will create dedicated memorial webpages for the deceased at the Internet Memorial Service to keep their information (including their photos, dates of birth and death, etc.). If necessary and situation allows, the descendants or loved ones can apply to FEHD for setting up plaques for the deceased.

Estimated No. of Deaths and No. of New Public Niches for Allocation (2017 to 2047)

Estimated no. of deaths and no. of new public niches for allocation

- Estimated no. of deaths (Accumulated)
- Projects with support or no objection of DCs providing around 590 000 new niches in total
- ▨ Feasibility studies are currently underway for roughly an additional 300 000 niches. Since the construction and completion timetables are not available, those niches are not included in the calculation.



1,189,900

Year