

Examination of Estimates of Expenditure 2009-10
**CONTROLLING OFFICER'S REPLY TO
INITIAL WRITTEN QUESTION**

Reply Serial No.

DEVB(PL)093

Question Serial No.

0591

Head : 82 Buildings Department Subhead (No. & title) :

Programme : Buildings and Building Works

Controlling Officer : Director of Buildings

Director of Bureau : Secretary for Development

Question :

Since the establishment of the Joint Office to handle water seepage problems in mid-2006, the operation has continued for over two years. How many cases of public complaints about water seepage problems in existing buildings have been handled? How effective was its performance? How many cases of complaints have been handled by each district? Please list out the number of complaint cases requiring the following time span to identify the causes of water seepage and completely solve the water seepage problems :

- 1 month or below;
- over 1 month to 3 months;
- over 3 months to 6 months;
- over 6 months to 1 year; and
- over 1 year respectively.

When will the Administration complete the report of the review?

Asked by : Hon. TO Kun-sun, James

Reply :

The statistics of the number of cases of complaints received and the Joint Office (JO)'s performance for the period from July 2006 to December 2008 are as follows –

No. of complaints received	Hong Kong	12 468
	Kowloon	19 394
	New Territories	15 894
	Total	47 756
No. of screened-in cases with investigations concluded		19 170 ^{Note}
No. of screened-in cases with seepage source identified (success rate)		9 222 (48.11%)

^{Note} As at the end of December 2008, there were 16 406 cases screened out; and 12 180 cases still being screened or with investigations on-going.

The JO does not maintain any statistics to show how the screened-in cases can be further broken down. The Office has prescribed standards and requirements on investigation of sources of water seepage. Some water seepage complaints received do not involve public health nuisance, building safety risks or wastage of water, hence do not fall within the scope of the authority of the JO. There are also cases where the complaints are proven to be false reports, seepage has stopped or complainants have withdrawn their complaints such that the JO would not continue with the investigation. The above cases will be screened out by the Office.

Identification of the possible source(s) of water seepage is not a straightforward matter and is often complicated by the fact that there may be more than one possible source of water seepage in any single case. A series of non-destructive tests have to be performed to establish the source of seepage and this will take much time and patience of all parties, not only the JO but also the owners/occupiers concerned. Cooperation of the concerned owners/occupiers is critical to JO staff's entry into premises to conduct multiple tests to identify the source of water seepage. With the full cooperation of concerned parties, an investigation can normally be concluded within around 130 days (90 working days). However, in many cases, repeated arrangements have to be made with complainants on timing for site inspections and the consent of respondents has to be sought in allowing multiple inspections inside the premises. It therefore took an average of 168 days from receiving complaints to successfully identifying sources of water seepage. The JO will enhance publicity to appeal for the cooperation of more owners/occupiers such that the Office can shorten the time required to conclude its investigations. After the source of water seepage is identified, the departments under the JO, including the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, Buildings Department and Water Supplies Department, will take enforcement actions in accordance with their respective statutory powers.

The JO has completed an interim review of the first 18 months of its operation in the three-year pilot scheme. Based on the results of the interim review concerning the modus operandi of the Office and the recommendations in the Ombudsman's direct investigation report released in early 2008, the JO has implemented various improvement measures, including issuing clearer internal guidelines for investigation, establishing milestones to monitor the progress of various stages of investigation, issuing clearer internal circulars for deciding whether to exercise power of entry under the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance, enhancing information processing and communications within the various units of the JO, etc. The JO has also issued clearer guidelines and performance milestones to the consultants it hired and standardised the format of documents. It will also formulate criteria and guidelines for the Office to take over from consultants the investigation of cases with serious delay. These measures will further enhance the efficiency of the JO. The Administration will also review the long-term role and organisation of the JO and explore the most appropriate arrangement to handle water seepage issues.

Signature _____
Name in block letters AU Choi-kai
Post Title Director of Buildings
Date 17 March 2009