

CONTROLLING OFFICER'S REPLY

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(Question Serial No. 1619)

Head: (82) Buildings Department
Subhead (No. & title): (-) Not Specified
Programme: (1) Buildings and Building Works
Controlling Officer: Director of Buildings (AU Choi-kai)
Director of Bureau: Secretary for Development

Question (Member Question No. 32):

Regarding the Joint Office for Investigation of Water Seepage Complaints (JO) established by the Department and the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, please advise this Committee:

- 1) of JO's statistics on the numbers of water seepage complaints received, cases handled, cases with the source of seepage identified and applications to the court for entry warrants each year from 2012 to 2014;
- 2) of the general follow-up work for cases where the source of seepage cannot be identified;
- 3) of the number of prosecutions instigated by JO against owners connected with the source of seepage under the relevant provisions of the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance and the number of convictions last year;
- 4) of the staff establishment and operational expenses of JO each year from 2012 to 2014; whether the Government will conduct a review on the effectiveness and mode of operation of JO and develop improvement measures accordingly; if yes, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;
- 5) given that the operation of JO will be made permanent as mentioned in the Programme, of the details of the operation, including the estimated manpower and expenditure required; and
- 6) of the percentage of the expenditure of JO spent on equipment for checking the source of seepage since its establishment; and the estimated expenditure in the past three years for procurement of new equipment to increase the chance of successfully identifying the source of seepage.

Asked by: Hon. WU Chi-wai

Reply:

Water seepage in private premises is primarily a matter of building management and maintenance for property owners. However, if the problem of water seepage causes public health nuisance, a risk to the structural safety of a building or wastage of water, the Government will consider intervening by exercising the relevant statutory powers. To facilitate action, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department and the Buildings Department (BD) have established the Joint Office (JO) since 2006 to co-ordinate investigation of reports on water seepage and taking of enforcement actions. Having regard to the continuous demand for JO's service, the operation of JO will be made permanent in 2014-15. Our reply to the question is set out below.

- (1) As JO does not keep statistics on the number of applications to the court for entry warrants, we are unable to provide the relevant statistics. However, the court granted 101 and 64 entry warrants in 2012 and 2013 respectively. The relevant statistics on the numbers of water seepage reports received, reports handled, cases with the source of water seepage identified by JO and cases in which the source of water seepage could not be identified and investigation terminated in 2012 and 2013 are tabulated below:

	2012	2013
Number of reports received ^{Note 1}	27 353	28 504
Number of reports handled	24 553	24 856
• Cases screened out ^{Note 2}	13 727	13 062
• Cases with investigations concluded	10 826	11 794
- Seepage ceased during investigation	4 810	4 766
- Source of water seepage identified	4 053	4 692
- Source of water seepage could not be identified and investigation terminated	1 963	2 336

Note 1: As there is a lapse of time between receipt of a report and completion of handling a report, the number of reports handled in a year does not necessarily correspond to the number of reports received in that year.

Note 2: There are cases which do not fall within the scope of follow-up action under the statutory authority of JO, including unjustified cases and cases withdrawn by informants, and hence investigation will not be conducted for such cases.

- (2) For a case where the source of water seepage cannot be ascertained, JO in accordance with its established procedures will cease to take further action and will keep the investigation information for further reference. However, the informant may contact JO should the seepage condition deteriorate.
- (3) In 2013, JO instigated 96 prosecutions against owners connected with source of water seepage under the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance. Among the

prosecution cases, there were 50 convictions and four cases were withdrawn. Hearing in respect of the other 42 cases is pending.

- (4) In 2012-13 and 2013-14, the operation of JO involved the provision of 64 professional and technical staff from BD and an expenditure of about \$23 million and \$24 million respectively for engaging outsourced consultants to assist in conducting professional investigation on water seepage cases.

JO has implemented various measures to monitor and enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of handling reports on water seepage, namely drawing up internal guidelines on investigation work, formulating milestones for progress monitoring at various stages of investigation, refining operational guidelines on exercising power of entry under the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance, and enhancing information management. Moreover, the Government has completed a review on the organisation and operation of JO. In addition to making JO permanent, the review concluded that JO should maintain the present organisation and operation in its future delivery of services, and further enhanced measures should be implemented to improve operation of JO. In this connection, JO has launched two performance pledges in connection with water seepage investigation and enforcement action against those cases with confirmed source of water seepage constituting health nuisance.

- (5) While the operation of JO will be made permanent in 2014-15, it will continue to deliver services with the present organisation and operation. The operation of JO in 2014-15 will involve 64 professional and technical staff from BD and an estimated expenditure of \$24.3 million for engaging outsourced consultants to assist in conducting professional investigation on water seepage cases. Of the current 64 non-civil service contract positions from BD in JO, 17 will be converted to civil service posts in 2014-15. BD will continue to keep in view the manpower requirement for JO.
- (6) JO does not keep figures about the expenditure on the procurement of the equipment for investigating the source of water seepage. The investigation for the source of water seepage involves the carrying out of a series of moisture level measurements and non-destructive tests such as colour water test at drainage outlets, ponding test for floor slabs and water spray test for walls. These methods are generally recognised to be direct and effective means for investigation of the source of water seepage. The equipment and materials involved mainly include moisture meter, ultraviolet torches, fluorescence-enhancing glasses and colour dyes. While there is no procurement plan for other apparatus and equipment in 2013-14, JO endeavours to keep abreast with the latest technological developments and is working with the Hong Kong Applied Science and Technology Research Institute to explore more effective investigation methods so as to enhance the capability of JO in handling reports on water seepage. JO is also making preparation for commissioning a consultancy study on the latest technological methods in identifying the sources of water seepage in buildings. JO is aware that there is a number of testing equipment available in the market, such as infrared camera and microwave tomography scanning device, which can ascertain the variation in the moisture content of seepage spot. JO has started applying the said equipment for infrared imaging and microwave 3-D moisture modeling on a trial basis to facilitate identification of seepage source in more complicated water seepage cases.