

**CONTROLLING OFFICER'S REPLY**

**DEVB(PL)096**

**(Question Serial No. 1562)**

Head: (82) Buildings Department

Subhead (No. & title): (-) Not Specified

Programme: (1) Buildings and Building Works

Controlling Officer: Director of Buildings (YU Tak-cheung)

Director of Bureau: Secretary for Development

Question:

Provision for 2020-21 is \$165.8 million (9.7%) higher than the revised estimate for 2019-20, mainly due to the increased provision for enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of the Joint Office (JO) with the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) in handling public reports about water seepage problem.

Would the Government inform this Committee of the following:

- 1) The staff establishment and expenditure of the Buildings Department and FEHD respectively, and the posts and duties of the increased manpower in the past five years;
- 2) The average handling time of cases investigated by JO in the past five years;
- 3) The success rate in identifying sources of water seepage has long been unsatisfactory. JO once replied that the cost of new technologies is high, yet will it be a bigger waste of money and time and therefore cost-ineffectiveness if conventional technologies fail to identify sources of water seepage? Will the Department purchase additional testing equipment and pledge a full application of new technologies to handle water seepage?
- 4) Over 10 000 water seepage cases are screened out a year. What are the reasons for screening out these cases?
- 5) Some members of the public reflected that it is unreasonable to use "35% moisture content" as the threshold for carrying out investigations, as moisture content at the level of 10% to 20% already affects the walls of the units. Will the Government review this standard?

- 6) Some members of the public reflected that the existing procedure for handling complaints is unclear and that co-ordination between departments is unsatisfactory. Will the Government consider establishing a better mechanism for building owners to lodge complaints or conduct litigation?

Asked by: Hon LAM Cheuk-ting (LegCo internal reference no.: 19)

Reply:

- 1) The staff establishment and expenditure of the Joint Office (JO) set up by the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) and the Buildings Department (BD) in the past five years are tabulated below –

<b>FEHD</b>	<b>2015-16</b>	<b>2016-17</b>	<b>2017-18</b>	<b>2018-19</b>	<b>2019-20</b>
Number of investigation and co-ordinating staff	219	220	224	227	236
Staff cost and departmental expenses (\$ million)	80.7	86.3	99.7	109.2	134.8 (estimated)

<b>BD</b>	<b>2015-16</b>	<b>2016-17</b>	<b>2017-18</b>	<b>2018-19</b>	<b>2019-20</b>
Number of professional and technical staff	64	64	64	76	82
Staff cost and departmental expenses (\$ million)	31	32	34.3	42.6	53.7 (estimated)
Expenditure for engaging outsourced consultants (\$ million)	30	31	36.6	36.7	26.0 (estimated)

Generally speaking, the FEHD staff are responsible for carrying out initial investigation of the source of seepage as well as undertaking enforcement action against nuisance arising from seepage, such as issuing nuisance notices and instigating prosecutions in accordance with the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance (Cap. 132) where necessary. The BD staff are responsible for carrying out professional investigation with the assistance of outsourced consultants in cases where the source of seepage cannot be identified in the initial investigation.

The increased manpower of FEHD comprised Senior Superintendent, Superintendent, Chief Health Inspector, Senior Health Inspector and Health Inspector. Senior Superintendent is responsible for formulating practices relating to JO operation, while Superintendent, Chief Health Inspector and Senior Health Inspector are responsible for management and supervision of JO. Health Inspector is responsible for carrying out initial investigation of the source of seepage as well as undertaking enforcement action and instigating prosecutions in accordance with the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance.

The increased manpower of BD comprised Senior Building Surveyor, Senior Structural Engineer, Building Surveyor, Structural Engineer, Senior Survey Officer (Building), Senior Technical Officer (Structural), Survey Officer (Building) and Technical Officer (Structural) for monitoring the work of consultants and coordinating professional investigations of water seepage cases.

- 2) The time spent on investigating a water seepage case depends on a number of factors, including the nature and complexity of the case and whether the relevant owners or occupants are cooperative as JO staff have to enter the premises concerned for carrying out non-destructive tests to identify the source of seepage. Generally speaking, JO could complete the investigation and inform the informant of the result within 90 working days with the co-operation of the concerned owners/occupants. If the investigation could not be completed within 90 working days, JO will notify the informant of the progress of the investigation.
- 3) Since the second half of June 2018, JO has applied new testing technologies, such as infrared thermography and microwave tomography, in three pilot districts (i.e. Wanchai, Central and Western and Kowloon City), where applicable. With experience gained and data obtained through pilot application of the new testing technologies, JO has since September 2019 extended the new testing technologies to another five pilot districts (i.e. Sham Shui Po, Kwai Tsing, Tuen Mun, Tai Po and North District). JO is refining the technical guidelines and procedures relating to the use of the new testing technologies and is planning to gradually extend the use of new testing technologies in other pilot districts. In this connection, there will be an increase in expenditure of \$26.3 million for employing contract staff and engaging outsourced consultants to assist in the investigation of water seepage reports including the use of new testing technologies with a view to enhancing the success rate in identifying the source of seepage.
- 4) The main reasons for screened out cases include cases with low moisture content (MC) level, cases voluntarily withdrawn by informants etc.

- 5) Under normal circumstances, the surface of concrete or plaster contains moisture due to the ambient relative humidity. The ambient relative humidity of rooms with water borne facilities will usually be higher thus affecting the basic MC level of concrete or plaster surface in such rooms. Making reference to experience, the source of water seepage cannot be identified if the MC level of a concrete or plaster surface is not substantially higher than that basic level. In this connection, JO has set the MC level at 35% or above as the threshold for initiating investigation for the effective use of the resources.
- 6) To further improve the handling of water seepage reports, a task force comprising representatives from Food and Health Bureau, Development Bureau, FEHD, BD and Water Supplies Department was formed in early 2018 to review the operation of JO. While the review is underway, to strengthen communication between JO staff of FEHD and BD thereby enhancing work efficiency, JO plans to set up four regional joint offices (RJOs) in Hong Kong, Kowloon, New Territories East and New Territories West. The Hong Kong RJO, located in Wong Chuk Hang, came into operation in early January 2020. The remaining three RJOs are expected to be set up progressively in the 2020-21 financial year.