Examination of Estimates of Expenditure 2025-26 Reply Serial No.

EEB(F)075

CONTROLLING OFFICER'S REPLY

(Question Serial No. 3203)

Head: (49) Food and Environmental Hygiene Department

Subhead (No. & title): (000) Operational expenses

Programme: (2) Environmental Hygiene and Related Services

Controlling Officer: Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene (Donald NG)

Director of Bureau: Secretary for Environment and Ecology

Question:

Regarding the Joint Office for Investigation of Water Seepage Complaints (JO) set up by the Buildings Department (BD) and the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD), please advise this Committee of the following:

(a) What are the (1) staffing establishment, (2) grades, ranks and posts of (i) BD and (ii) FEHD in JO in the past 3 years and the estimated figures in 2025-26?

(b) What are the expenditure of JO in the past 3 years and the estimated expenditure in 2025-26? Please provide a breakdown by (i) salary expenditure, (ii) equipment expenditure, (iii) operational expenditure and (iv) consultancy fees.

(c) What are the respective numbers of JO on (i) reports received, (ii) cases handled, (iii) cases in which consultants have been engaged to carry out investigation, (iv) cases with the source of water seepage successfully identified and investigation completed, (v) cases with the source of water seepage not identified but investigation terminated, (vi) cases with investigation not completed within 90 working days in the past 3 years?

(d) What are the respective handling costs of JO for cases mentioned in items (c)(iii)-(vi) above in the past 3 years? Will JO review the case handling workflow to avoid wastage of resources?

(e) It is learnt that JO has 3 sets of General Procedures for Investigating Water Seepage for the 18 districts in the territory. Among them, Wong Tai Sin District, North District, Yuen Long District and Islands District are Districts on Trial, where Stage II initial investigation conducted by JO staff and Stage III professional investigation conducted by consultants will be carried out at the same time on a trial basis. For Yau Tsim Mong District, Kwun Tong District, Tsuen Wan District and Sha Tin District, infrared thermography and microwave tomography have not been introduced in Stage III professional investigation. Will the Government consider unifying the procedures by extending the use of infrared thermography and microwave tomography to the entire territory and carrying out Stage II and Stage III investigation at the same time, so as to enhance the effectiveness of investigation? If yes, what is the timetable? If no, what are the reasons?

(f) Some members of the public said that there was no further investigation in their cases despite obvious leakage and dripping since the moisture content was below 35%. Will

the JO review the relevant criteria so as to deal with these cases in a flexible manner? If yes, what is the timetable for such work? If no, what are the reasons?

Asked by: Hon CHAN Wing-yan, Joephy (LegCo internal reference no.: 40)

Reply:

(a)&(b) The staffing establishment and expenditure of the Joint Office (JO), which is set up by the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) and the Buildings Department (BD) for the investigation of water seepage cases in buildings, in the past 3 years and the estimated figures in 2025-26 are as follows:

	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26
FEHD				
Number of investigation and coordinating staff Note 1	252	252	252	252
Staff costs and departmental expenses Note 2 ($ million)	192.1	200.2	205.8 (Revised estimate)	209.8 (Estimate)
BD				
Number of professional and technical staff	82	102	102	102
Staff costs and departmental expenses Note 2 ($ million)	66.8	78.1	87.2 (Revised estimate)	90.4 (Estimate)
Expenditure for engaging outsourced consultants ($ million)	38.4	45.0	49.0 (Revised estimate)	45.0 (Estimate)

Note 1: Including Senior Superintendents, Superintendents, Chief Health Inspectors, Senior Health Inspectors and Health Inspectors, as well as Environmental Nuisance Investigators and Administrative Assistants who are Non-Civil Service Contract staff.

Note 2: JO does not maintain a breakdown of the salary expenditure of relevant staff, equipment expenditure and operational expenditure.

(c) Statistics on water seepage cases in buildings received and handled by JO in each of the past 3 years are as follows:

	Number of cases	2022	2023	2024
(i)	Cases received	39 555	45 033	47 299
(ii)	Total number of cases handled Note 1	38 275	43 367	46 907
(iii)	Cases in which consultants have been engaged to carry out investigation (i.e. Stage III professional investigation) Note 1, 2	11 787	12 643	13 850
(iv)	Cases with source of water seepage identified Note 1	5 186	5 669	5 080
(v)	Cases with source of water seepage not identified and water seepage continued Note 1	4 384	5 495	4 874

Note 1: The number of cases does not necessarily correspond to the number of cases received in the same year. Some of them are received before that year.

Note 2: In some of the handled cases mentioned in (ii), the source of water seepage may have been identified in Stage II initial investigation or the seepage ceased during investigation. Therefore, not all handled cases would proceed to Stage III professional investigation.

(vi) Since January 2022, JO has published on its thematic webpage on water seepage (www.waterseepage.gov.hk) the actual performance in carrying out investigations to reports on water seepage in buildings each year, i.e. the percentage of cases with investigations completed and informant notified of the results within 90 days. In 2022 and 2023, the relevant percentages were 68.5 and 65.4 respectively, and the percentages of cases with investigations not completed and informant not notified of the results within 90 working days were 31.5 and 34.6 respectively. The actual performance of JO each year is usually announced in the third quarter of the following year. At present, the actual performance in 2024 is pending calculation.

(d)&(e) JO does not maintain a breakdown of the handling costs for cases mentioned in items (c)(iii)-(vi) above. However, it will continue to optimise the workflow for handling water seepage cases to expedite investigation and enhance the efficiency and effectiveness in handling reports on water seepage in buildings. In particular, the current procedure involves conducting Stage I investigation and Stage II initial investigation first, and only proceeding to Stage III professional investigation if the source of water seepage cannot be identified. JO has implemented a pilot to carry out in parallel Stage II and Stage III investigations in 6 pilot districts, namely Wong Tai Sin, North District, Yuen Long, Islands, Tai Po and Kwai Tsing. Under this arrangement, Stage III investigation can be carried out earlier without having to wait for the results of Stage II investigation, which aims to reduce the investigation time required for applicable cases. JO will review the effectiveness of the new investigation mode in the pilot districts so as to continuously optimise the relevant workflow.

Also, JO has applied new testing technologies, such as infrared thermography and microwave tomography, in professional investigation in selected pilot districts where applicable. With the experience gained and data obtained in the pilot application, the use of these technologies was extended to a total of 16 districts as at December 2024. Nevertheless, under special circumstances, such as small seepage area, spalling of ceiling concrete affected by water seepage or blockage by tile finishes or other facilities (including suspended ceiling or pipes, etc.) on the ceiling, where the new technologies cannot be applied effectively, the outsourced consultants have to continue to employ the conventional testing methods. JO will continue to use the new testing technologies effectively to identify the source of water seepage. Depending on the availability of relevant service providers in the market, JO will gradually extend the use of these technologies to the remaining districts.

(f) Under normal circumstances, the humidity level on the surface of concrete or plaster is subject to the ambient relative humidity. The ambient relative humidity of a room with water supply facilities will usually be higher, thus affecting the basic moisture content (MC) level of concrete or plaster surface in the room. According to past experience, the chance of successfully identifying the source of water seepage is slim if the MC level of a concrete or plaster surface is not substantially higher than the basic level. Hence, JO has set the MC level at 35% or above as the threshold for initiating investigation for the effective use of resources. For cases with obvious leakage and dripping, the MC level should have reached 35% or above and JO will follow up.

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