

Advisory Committee on the Quality of Water Supplies

Minutes of the 3rd Meeting

Date: 15 January 2001 (Monday)

Time: 2:30 p.m.

Venue: 4/F Committee Room, 3 Edinburgh Place, Central
Hong Kong

Present: Mr. Kenneth FANG Hung (Chairman)
Mr. Hugh Phillipson (Vice-Chairman)
Dr. Richard CHEUNG Yun Hing
Mr. Hugh WU Sai Him
Mr. WONG Kwok Keung
Prof. David Dudgeon
Prof. LAM Kin Che
Dr. HO Kin Chung
Ms. Lister CHEUNG Lai Ping
Mr. Wilson PANG Wai Shing
Dr. TSE Lai Yin
Mr. WONG Bay
Ms. Rhonda LO Yuet Yee
Dr. Michael CHIU
Mr. Stephen LAU Chi Ming (Secretary)

In attendance: Mr. KO Chan Gock
Mr. KU Chi Chung
Mr. CHAN Kwong Wei
Mr. CHEUNG Tze Leung
Mr. TAM Yat Hung

Absent with
apologies: Dr. SO Kai Ming
Mr. Ronnie WONG Man Chiu
Ms. Nancy POON Siu Ping

1. The Chairman welcomed Ms. Rhonda LO Yuet Yee from Food and Environmental Hygiene Department and Mr. Wilson PANG Wai Shing from Works Bureau for attending the meeting of this Committee for the first time. He then extended his welcome to all other Members for joining the third meeting.
2. The Chairman extended a welcome to Mr. KO Chan Gock, Mr. KU Chi Chung, Mr. CHAN Kwong Wei, Mr. CHEUNG Tze Leung and Mr. TAM Yat Hung from the Water Supplies Department (WSD).
3. The Chairman advised that a short media briefing session would be held at the conclusion of the meeting and welcomed Members to join the briefing.
4. **Confirmation of minutes of the second meeting held on 19 July 2000**

The minutes were confirmed with the following amendment:-

Item 5.2.2 – line 3: The word “some” should read “not all”.

5. Matters arising

5.1 *Publication of Water Quality Data*

The Chairman advised that the water quality data had been published on the Internet on 9 August 2000. The pamphlet on drinking water quality had also been finalised taking into account Members' comments and was distributed to the public starting from 25 October 2000. WSD was requested to update the data on the Internet and in the pamphlet annually.

5.2 *Site Visits*

- 5.2.1 The Chairman reported that 14 Members of the Advisory Committee and 5 WSD officers had joined the visit to the Dongjiang water supply system arranged by WSD in collaboration with the Guangdong side on 29-30 August 2000. Through the visit, the Advisory Committee was able to reflect the views and concerns of

the people of Hong Kong on the quality of Dongjiang water. The Guangdong authorities had the chance to explain to the Advisory Committee their commitment, efforts and work in protecting the Dongjiang water. They were also able to clarify certain misunderstandings of the people of Hong Kong.

5.2.2 The Chairman advised that a report had been prepared by WSD to record the details of the visit and feedback from the Members. The report had been distributed to all Members in November 2000 and to Mr. Peter WONG Hong Yuen, GBS, JP, Chairman of the Advisory Council on the Environment (ACE) for reference. A Member informed that members of the ACE had read the report and were excited and impressed by the work of the ACQWS. They were now looking for an opportunity to invite the Chairman to attend one of their meetings to introduce to them the work of the ACQWS. The Vice-Chairman suggested that, as an alternative, ACE members might be invited to attend some of the ACQWS meetings or the two committees could communicate through other informal channels.

5.2.3 Members accepted the proposal to distribute the report to 9 degree-awarding higher education institutions and to the four Guangdong officials who received our delegation during the visit in August 2000, viz. Mr. ZHU Zhaohua, Ms. LI Yihui, Mr. ZHANG Yuwen and Mr. ZHOU Zhijian.

5.2.4 Regarding visits in Hong Kong, the Chairman pointed out that Members were able to visit the Sha Tin Treatment Works right after the visit to Dongjiang on 30 August 2000. Some Members had also visited the Ngau Tam Mei Treatment Works during its opening ceremony on 2 December 2000. WSD undertook to arrange more visits to other waterworks installations. The Chairman requested Members to try their best in joining future visits.

WSD

6. ACQWS Paper No. 7 –Quality of Water in Buildings

6.1 The Chairman introduced that the purpose of this paper was to present the possible strategies for enhancing the entire water supply system such that Hong Kong citizens could have confidence in drinking high quality water directly from their taps and to invite Members' views on the possible strategies being studied. A handout

containing Appendix 1 to the Paper and a colour printout of the forthcoming slide presentation were tabled in the meeting.

- 6.2 After presentation of the paper by WSD, Members generally agreed that there was a need to properly maintain the plumbing systems in buildings. Members also acknowledged the benefits of drinking water directly from the tap, viz. convenience, saving of energy for boiling water, minimising wastage of treated water, savings in bottled-water expenditure and enhancement of the image of Hong Kong as a World Class City.

6.3 Demarcation of Maintenance Responsibility

- 6.3.1 The Chairman questioned whether WSD would be prepared to form an inspection team to check the conditions of water pipes and water tanks in buildings. WSD responded that building owners had the responsibility to maintain the plumbing that formed part of the building services belonging to them. This principle applied to both the private and public sectors. Switching the responsibility to WSD would put a huge burden on WSD that was limited by its resources. This would force taxpayers to pay for others' faults.
- 6.3.2 A Member commented that it was high time that the Government should do something concerning water quality in domestic units. He shared the view that there might be difficulties in packaging or promoting strategies and gaining acceptance from the public. He suggested that it was necessary to work out the cost implication for doing periodic assessment, analysis and reporting, and the health implication if nothing was done.
- 6.3.3 Another Member supplemented that to enjoy good quality water should be the basic human right for everybody in Hong Kong. She expressed great concern on the owners of some old buildings who might have problems in respect of finance and knowledge, and suggested that more thought should be given to help these people. Two other Members shared her view.
- 6.3.4 A Member added that the Housing Department (HD), as the owner of public rental housing blocks, had formulated strategies to renew plumbing inside the housing blocks (inside services) and also

underground water pipes within the housing estates. Since 1995, they had completed replacement of inside services in over 480 blocks and in the coming 8 years, would complete the same for a further 430 blocks or more. Replacement of underground water pipes had also commenced.

- 6.3.5 WSD responded that the Building Department (BD) had a loan scheme to help improving building services. WSD had been liasing with BD to extend the scheme to cover plumbing. They re-iterated that maintenance of building services including plumbing should rest with building owners. If the Government took up to maintain the plumbing free of charge for any one building, it would imply the Government would do the same free of charge for all buildings. Unfortunately, the current water rates were not set to do this.
- 6.3.6 WSD reiterated that upkeeping of building plumbing being just one aspect of building maintenance should be considered together with other aspects of buildings maintenance, including provisions of fire services, improvement of electrical wiring, handling of garbage. The BD had been focusing on building maintenance as a whole to improve the general conditions of old buildings and had been embarking on a coordinated building maintenance approach to put government departments together to handle these aspects in one go with a view to minimising disturbance to the public. However, it was understood that money was always a problem because getting consents from all owners was difficult. Those needed help could apply for a loan from the Government and should pay back afterwards. Failure to pay back the Government would be recorded in the memorial of those buildings.
- 6.3.7 A Member asked if WSD could provide direct drinking water supply on the street to help those, whose water supplies were not up to standard. Another Member responded that this might not be necessary because WSD had reported that the major water quality problem was discoloration and this alone seemed unlikely to cause any health hazard.
- 6.3.8 A Member cited an example of dwellers living in shabby rooftop structures. She observed that there was sometimes planting on the adjacent roof tanks causing contamination to their water supply.

People in these buildings would appear to be helpless in obtaining good quality water that was a basic human right in Hong Kong as a cosmopolitan city. WSD clarified that rooftop structures were illegal and BD was embarking on removal of rooftop structures whereas planting on roof tank was also illegal. They reiterated that WSD should not be engaged in social welfare and those illegal happenings should be dealt with by the appropriate departments.

6.4 Education

- 6.4.1 A Member expressed that from the paper, he understood that discoloration was the major problem. Although it had no serious health implication, it might be necessary to advise the public how to get rid of discoloured water, to direct them to qualified or accredited laboratories to carry out analysis and to provide information on how to get clean water from the water tanks. He further suggested that WSD could make reference to the work done by the Environmental Protection Department on indoor air quality including the implementation of a voluntary certification programme and the opening of a new centre to display all means and ways of achieving good indoor air quality. Another Member concurred with his view that advice should be given to the public on how to get rid of discoloured water. The Chairman suggested WSD to issue some guidelines on the maintenance of water tanks to the building management and to organise campaigns to raise public awareness on the problem.
- 6.4.2 A Member agreed that public education should be the main objective. HD presently disseminated messages and sold ideas to their tenants via the regular meetings of Estate Management Advisory Committee set up in each public housing estate. He expressed that this was applicable to the private sector. He suggested that the Government should encourage the formation of owners' corporation to engage building management companies and to attend properly to building maintenance. These would provide the channels through which the Government could raise the awareness of the private sector to do more in building maintenance.
- 6.4.3 The Vice-Chairman acknowledged the importance of education and advised Members that WSD had already been conducting many seminars for the building management to give them advice and

guidance and such efforts would be continued. He observed that the building management offices were aware of the requirements. However, the underlying problem was money. Many building owners were reluctant to spend money to upgrade their plumbing systems. Perhaps WSD could do more, e.g. amending the legislation, to press them to invest more in this connection.

- 6.4.4 A Member concurred that the building management should take the initiative to test water quality in buildings and agreed that the existing ordinance should be amended to give more authority to WSD.

6.5 **Legislation to require Building Management to carry out Periodic Checking and submit Inspection Report**

- 6.5.1 In response to enquiries on Singapore's practice, WSD informed Members that the building management was required to engage water analysts to take samples regularly in a prescribed way from the tap and from the water tank, and to submit periodic checking reports to ensure proper water quality.

- 6.5.2 WSD undertook to gather more information on the practices adopted by Singapore and other Asian Cities for Members' reference and for formulating the detailed specification of the submissions such as frequency and parameters for testing. WSD

- 6.5.3 Regarding the 5-year strategy programme, a Member suggested to adopt a 3-stage approach. The first stage should allow a year for building management to report voluntarily on water sampling and testing, and for the establishment of the new system that involved various parties. The second stage should allow another year for them to target at the cleanliness of water tank. As the costs were to be borne by the building management, it would be more affordable to individual consumers. The third stage to span the remaining three years should be allowed for them to rectify plumbing up to the tapping point. This 3-stage approach would be more comprehensive and more easily accepted by the public. He reminded that the purpose of amending the legislation was not to penalise the offenders but to ensure a safe drinking water supply. The Vice-Chairman promised that WSD would carefully consider the WSD

Member's proposal.

- 6.5.4 A Member opined that similar to fire services, periodic maintenance checking of inside services would be done by registered contractors. He then queried that since WSD had not yet completed the replacement of old trunk/distribution mains, water quality might still be a problem even if the inside services were not unlined GI pipes. WSD responded that the trunk/distribution mains were under high pressure and contaminants would not be able to enter the water mains. WSD assured that quality of water in the trunk/distribution mains was good.
- 6.5.5 A Member expressed great concern on the proposal to include chemical and bacteriological analyses as statutory requirements. There might not be enough accredited laboratories to do the required tests and the tests might be very expensive. He suggested that WSD should look for the minimum requirements. Members agreed.

6.6 Water Quality Testing

- 6.6.1 A Member admired that the Mainland East Laboratory in Sha Tin Treatment Works of WSD was the best in Hong Kong. He suggested WSD to consider helping the public to carry out water tests or surveys in buildings, on a user-pay principle, subject to the availability of resources of WSD. The Vice-Chairman agreed to consider the Member's suggestion and pointed out that accredited commercial laboratories that could do the tests were always another option. WSD
- 6.6.2 A Member raised the point that although some schools had taps for direct drinking, parents usually told their children not to do so. She wondered if WSD could educate them to drink tap water directly and at same time educate the teachers how to test and monitor water quality in their school laboratories so that they could assure their students that tap water was safe. The next step would be to teach the students to monitor water quality at school and also at home.
- 6.6.3 A Member shared his experience from a research project done in the last summer. He found out that students could differentiate the quality of water samples from fountains, canteen and bottled water

by their tastes. He commented that it would be constructive if the facilities management could do some simple water quality tests such as using some test strips to test the iron concentration. If problem arose in a fountain, the facilities management could react promptly to warn the students and to rectify the situation before the students were discouraged from using the fountain.

6.6.4 WSD expressed the view that he would not recommend the consumers to do the tests because they were not properly equipped or trained. Handling bacteriological samples and disposal of inoculated culture media were also of serious concern. With the exception of some simple tests, tests for all other parameters needed elaborate training and facilities.

6.6.5 A Member added that since we were advising people to drink tap water directly, she could not see any harm to students when they tried out the tests. Not allowing them to do the tests might imply that there could be quality problems. Another Member responded that the health and safety regulations placed restrictions on the use of bacteriological plating in schools.

6.6.6 WSD emphasised again that he objected to the proposal purely from a safety point of view. The Vice-Chairman supplemented that contamination to the sample containers used by the students might produce incorrect results. Anyway, it was a good idea to involve students in water quality testing, in particular for simple tests. The Chairman suggested that when more information became available, Members could discuss further on that issue. WSD

7. Homepage of the Advisory Committee

WSD proposed to develop a homepage of the Advisory Committee that would form part of the homepage of WSD. A content list of the proposed homepage was distributed with the agenda on 3 January 2001. Members agreed that the minutes of meeting to be published on the Internet should not bear any names of Members and that a note should be given in the homepage to direct inquiries to the Secretariat concerning matters of the Advisory Committee. WSD undertook to distribute the draft before the next meeting for Members' comments. WSD

8. There being no other business, the meeting was adjourned at 4:20 p.m.