

Fire Services Department Year-end Review 2023 (with photo)

The following is the 2023 Year-end Review delivered by the Director of Fire Services, Mr Andy Yeung, today (February 1):

Preamble

Last year, although the epidemic subsided and society returned to normal, there remained many new challenges for the Fire Services Department (FSD). In February, FSD personnel were deployed for the first time as members of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) search and rescue team to join the earthquake relief efforts in Türkiye. Then in March, the FSD battled a No. 4 alarm fire at a construction site on Middle Road, Tsim Sha Tsui. In September, the FSD tackled multiple incidents resulting from Super Typhoon Saola and a once-in-a-century torrential downpour. Unfortunately, a fireman, Mr Yau Yiu-man, passed away on January 19 this year while on duty in Penny's Bay. All FSD members are deeply saddened by the passing of this dedicated colleague. Nevertheless, no matter how daunting the difficulties, the FSD went all out as always to fulfil its missions.

Throughout the year, the FSD pressed on with its work on all fronts in a result-driven manner, achieving the key performance indicators for 2023 set out in the Policy Address. The FSD made progress in various areas of work, including, among others, safeguarding national security, strengthening its ties with the Mainland and overseas, leveraging innovative technology, enhancing community emergency preparedness, and raising law-abiding awareness of young people.

1) Firefighting and rescue services

The FSD handled 36 103 fire calls last year, representing an increase of 3.8 per cent over 2022 (34 775 calls). Nine of those calls involved No. 3 alarm or above fires, four more than the previous year. Among them, there were 32 497 building fire calls, up 4.5 per cent over 2022 (31 111 calls). 93.8 per cent of the fire calls were responded to within the graded response time, which is 1.3 per cent higher than the FSD's performance pledge of 92.5 per cent. A notable incident was the No. 4 alarm fire that broke out at a construction site on Middle Road, Tsim Sha Tsui, in March. Following the incident, the FSD carried out inspections at all construction sites with buildings exceeding 30 metres in height across the territory. The FSD also stepped up publicity on the fire safety of construction sites, and implemented measures in collaboration with the industry to enhance safety of construction sites.

Regarding special services calls, there were a total of 40 763 calls last year, representing an increase of 15.4 per cent over 2022 (35 314 calls). One of the notable incidents occurred in September when Hong Kong was hit by the worst rainstorm in 500 years. During that time, the FSD received

nearly 800 special services calls, which was 2.5 times more than usual. To cope with the surge of calls for assistance, the department swiftly raised the response level to "Service Stand-to". In the aftermath of the rainstorm, the FSD took prompt actions to assist in the recovery efforts to restore the city to normal as soon as possible. The FSD deployed divers, fire appliances and tools to remove stagnant water and clear blocking objects from the MTR tunnels. The FSD also delivered supplies to residents who were stranded in Shek O due to a road closure, and set up a makeshift pontoon to enable more than 100 residents to board rescue boats for evacuation.

In the wake of a 7.8-magnitude earthquake that struck Türkiye in February last year, the Government deployed a 59-strong search and rescue team to the country to assist in the rescue efforts, and the team succeeded in rescuing four survivors. While the team members braved the harsh conditions, demonstrating professionalism and perseverance, their family members and the department's back-office staff also rendered unwavering support, contributing to the successful completion of this mission. Meanwhile, the team garnered invaluable experience in international rescue work through this operation.

Furthermore, the FSD established the Road and Railway Rescue Team in August 2023 in order to handle traffic accidents on roads and railways with more specialised expertise and higher efficiency.

2) Fire protection regulatory work

The FSD has sustained its efforts in lowering fire risk and improving fire safety through a multipronged approach.

Last year, the department conducted 456 168 inspections. As a result, a total of 9 075 Fire Hazard Abatement Notices were issued and 1 471 cases were brought to prosecution. The number of inspections targeting at the repair and maintenance of fire service installations and equipment (FSI) in buildings was 282 842, representing 62 per cent of the total.

To combat illicit fuelling activities, the FSD conducted more than 1 200 inspections and 24 interdepartmental enforcement operations last year, seizing nearly 500 000 litres of fuel and instituted prosecutions on 211 charges.

Apart from stringent enforcement actions, the FSD also completed FSI acceptance inspections for a number of public housing projects to ensure their full compliance with fire safety requirements. Such projects include the new public housing development on Lai Cho Road, Kwai Chung, as well as Kai Cheung Court and Kai Chuen Court in Diamond Hill.

Meanwhile, the newly amended Fire Service (Installations and Equipment) Regulations have come into effect, with a view to facilitating the voluntary use of portable firefighting equipment in domestic premises of the public's own volition. In this connection, the FSD utilises its mobile application to help the public identify the approved portable firefighting equipment. Moreover, the FSD has distributed over 3 300 sets of "three treasures for

fire protection", namely fire extinguishers, fire blankets and stand-alone fire detectors, to residents of old buildings, especially those of the "three-nil" buildings in Central and Western District, Yau Tsim Mong District, Sham Shui Po District and Kowloon City District, to help them enhance home fire safety.

On dangerous goods control, the 24-month transitional period of the newly amended Dangerous Goods Ordinance will expire on March 30 this year. The FSD has put in place an array of measures to help the industry and the public to comply with the new requirements. Up to the present, more than 96 per cent of dangerous goods licences have been converted to new licences and met the new standards of control. The new regulatory system, which is aligned with international standards, can further enhance safety in the manufacture, conveyance, storage and use of dangerous goods.

Furthermore, to facilitate the launch of last year's Night Vibes Hong Kong and the recent Day x Night Vibes @ 18 Districts, the FSD has formulated corresponding fire safety requirements. The department has also expedited the licence process by adopting a flexible and pragmatic approach, which has substantially reduced the processing time from the original 34 working days to five working days. This ensures that citizens and tourists can experience the vibrant life of Hong Kong in a safe environment.

Regarding the implementation of the Registered Fire Engineer Scheme, the FSD is in the process of drawing up the relevant subsidiary legislation, code of practice, code of ethics, etc, by reference to other countries' experiences. It is expected that the draft subsidiary legislation can be introduced in the current term of the Legislative Council.

3) Ambulance service

As society was back to normal, the number of ambulance calls rose significantly to 816 329 last year, representing an increase of 10.3 per cent over 2022 (740 129 calls). Of them, 775 625 were emergency calls, representing an increase of 10.3 per cent over 2022 (703 113 calls). Last year, 94.3 per cent of the emergency calls were responded to within the target response time of 12 minutes, which was 1.8 per cent higher than the FSD's performance pledge of 92.5 per cent.

While striving to provide efficient and quality emergency ambulance service, the FSD also offers support to citizens in saving themselves or even others before the arrival of fire and ambulance personnel at the scenes. Apart from providing post-dispatch advice, the FSD has been making vigorous efforts to implement community education and publicity programmes on cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and the use of automated external defibrillators (AEDs), and providing various forms of support to enable members of the public to seize the window of opportunity to save the lives of cardiac arrest patients.

In June 2023, the FSD worked with various sectors of the community to form the Resuscitation Alliance (RA). Currently, around 70 000 citizens with CPR and AED training are RA members. In addition, there are about 2 600

publicly accessible AEDs across the territory at present. The FSD will seek to collaborate with more organisations on incorporating more information about their AEDs into the "Centralized AED Registry for Emergency" online information platform. The FSD believes that with the concerted efforts of different sectors of the community, a community-based safety net can be built more effectively.

4) Safeguarding national security

The FSD has on its shoulders the great responsibility of safeguarding national security. Last year, the FSD set up the National Affairs and National Security Education Steering Committee for strengthening the education of its members on national affairs and national security. The aim is to increase their understanding of the country, foster a stronger sense of national identity in them, and make them aware of their responsibility to respect national laws and safeguard national security. The FSD also arranged for more than 200 recruits undergoing foundation training at the Fire and Ambulance Services Academy (FASA) to attend national studies courses in Guangzhou with a view to increasing their knowledge about the country's developments and cultivating their love for the motherland.

The National Security Education cum Resource Centre set up at the FASA is now open to the public. The centre introduces the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, the Basic Law and the Hong Kong National Security Law, as well as the department's efforts in safeguarding national security. It is expected that the centre can attract about 20 000 visitors in the first half of the year. Moreover, the FSD has collaborated with the Hong Kong Polytechnic University as well as organisations and schools in Wong Tai Sin District to train students in Chinese-style foot drill and flag raising, and help them prepare for the flag raising ceremony on National Day.

On promoting community emergency preparedness, the FSD has established a close relationship with the 18 District Fire Safety Committees through the FSD Community Collaboration Network. This helps the department mobilise and engage more members of the local community in the implementation of its policies and measures, and in the promotion of fire safety and emergency preparedness in the local community. In the future, the FSD will continue to strengthen collaboration with its community partners in optimising fire safety measures for the local community.

5) Links with the Mainland and overseas

The FSD renewed its efforts in expanding exchange and collaboration with the Mainland and overseas in 2023.

On the Mainland front, the FSD has carried out technical exchanges with its fire service counterparts on the Mainland, and arranged visits to cities in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA) from time to time. In addition to co-organising emergency rescue exercises and seminars, the three places of Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao jointly established the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area Fire and Rescue Knowledge Management Platform, which serves as a means to share operational experiences,

firefighting and rescue strategies, and information such as that about the latest fire and ambulance courses, thus strengthening interconnectivity and mutual communication within the area. Earlier on, the FSD held the Hong Kong Emergency Medical Services Competition cum Symposium 2024 successfully with the participation of professionals from Macao and other cities in the GBA, as well as Singapore. During the event, there were in-depth exchanges and sharing among all parties on pre-hospital ambulance service.

On the overseas front, the FSD has been actively seeking collaboration with countries and regions along the Belt and Road. Last year, the FSD signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Singapore Civil Defence Force with a view to deepening co-operation and exchange in the field of fire and rescue services and other related matters.

The FSD will continue to explore opportunities for exchange and collaboration with its Mainland and overseas counterparts to elevate its professional standard and international standing.

6) Youth development

The FSD is committed to taking forward youth development work. Currently, the Fire & Ambulance Services Teen Connect (FAST Connect) has nearly 450 members. In 2023, apart from providing basic training in firefighting, fire safety and rescue, the FSD also arranged visits to cities on the Mainland including Beijing, Nansha, Foshan and Guangzhou for members of FAST Connect. These visits offered an eye-opening experience, allowing them to gain an understanding of the latest technological developments in the country as well as Chinese history and culture.

To allow more young people to join FAST Connect, the FSD is expanding the programme from the existing school-based mode to the district level through the 18 District Fire Safety Committees. Last year saw the establishment of FAST Connect in Yau Tsim Mong District, Sha Tin District, Southern District, Wong Tai Sin District and Tsuen Wan District. It is expected that the youth group can further expand to cover all 18 districts of Hong Kong by the end of this school year, with its membership increasing to 800.

7) Bringing convenience to the public through innovative technology

The FSD has continued to introduce new technologies to enhance the efficiency of rescue operations. Last year, the FSD brought in electric Rapid Response Motorcycles with advanced features and a robotic dog. They can bolster the efficiency in delivering ambulance service and the department's capability in handling chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear incidents. Additionally, the FSD is developing an indoor locating equipment in collaboration with a Mainland supplier. The equipment can help the fire personnel track persons awaiting rescue at fire scenes, so that the search time can be reduced and the safety of frontline personnel can be enhanced.

The department also introduced the Mobile Phone Locator, which can be mounted on unmanned aircraft systems for use in mountain search and rescue.

With this device, a connection can be established to the target person's mobile phone even in the absence of mobile communications network coverage, and the search area can then be narrowed down using algorithms. In October 2023, the FSD successfully located a person who went missing for days with the use of unmanned aircraft systems, artificial intelligence analysis and other technologies. Additionally, the FSD is about to launch a mobile application for mountain search and rescue operations, which encompasses mapping, real-time positioning, database establishment and other new functions, to further enhance the efficiency of mountain search and rescue operations.

The FSD has also continued to optimise the use of information technology, such as using social platforms, to strengthen interaction with the public. Its Facebook account now has over 260 000 followers, while its WhatsApp, WeChat and Instagram accounts were launched last year for disseminating the department's latest information to the public. Moreover, the FSD has been making ongoing efforts to achieve the Government's objective of developing Hong Kong into a smart city. To press ahead with the digitalisation of government services, the FSD has commenced a series of work for the implementation of e-services in licence applications, e-payment and law enforcement in order to bring convenience to the public and enhance its law enforcement efficiency.

To further assist owners of old buildings in completing fire safety improvement works as soon as possible, the FSD, in collaboration with the Water Supplies Department, launched a new facilitation measure in July 2023. The new measure conditionally allows some buildings to adopt improvised Fire Hydrant/Hose Reel Systems and connects the fixed fire pumps to government water mains to assist owners in complying with fire safety measures. Moreover, the FSD established the Building Improvement Support Centre in December 2023. The centre provides one-stop support services to these owners to facilitate the enhancement of the overall fire safety standards of their buildings. In terms of the relevant legislation, the Government is currently amending the Fire Safety (Buildings) Ordinance to empower the enforcement authorities to carry out fire safety improvement works for owners who have failed to comply with the requirements of the Ordinance, and to recover relevant fees from them upon completion of the works. The Government will formulate a suitable proposed default works mechanism and plans to submit the legislative amendment proposal in the form of a bill to the Legislative Council for scrutiny in the current legislative year.

Meanwhile, the FSD has made active efforts to cater for the needs arising from new energy development. In addition to making firefighting and rescue plans for emergencies, the FSD will also provide fire safety recommendations.

8) Plans for the year ahead

In the new year, the FSD will not only actively take forward the various initiatives involving the department as set out in the Policy Address, but will also strive to realise the eight strategic priorities the FSD identified in 2023, namely: integration into national development; national security;

operational preparedness; innovation and technology; partnership and community collaboration; professional development; people development; and environmental sustainability.

The FSD has been making every effort to shape the fire services of Hong Kong into a quality brand. Its High Angle Rescue Certificate Course and Compartment Fire Specialists Certificate Course were accredited at Level 4 of the Qualifications Framework in June 2023. In addition, the accreditation work for the diving rescue and swift water rescue courses is under way. The FSD will continue to deepen exchange with its fire service counterparts in the GBA, and strengthen co-operation with them in different professional fields to leverage each other's strengths and lay a foundation for emergency response co-operation in the GBA.

The FSD will host the Fire Asia International Conference and organise a forum for its counterparts in Asia Pacific in collaboration with several professional bodies. Moreover, its technical rescue teams will visit the member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations for specialised technical exchange. The FSD is also seeking accreditation from the International Search and Rescue Advisory Group for the HKSAR search and rescue team as a medium International Search and Rescue Team. At the same time, the FSD is actively partaking in the implementation of the Greater Bay Area Emergency Response and Rescue Operational Plan, and will sign the relevant co-operation framework agreement within 2024.

As regards human resources, with a view to recruiting candidates from various fields, the department has established different recruitment campaigns, such as Universities-Connect (U-Connect), Mainland HK Students Connect (M-Connect), Athletes Connect (A-Connect), and Ethnic Minorities Connect (EM-Connect). The FSD expects to recruit 727 personnel for the fire and ambulance streams this year, i.e. 145 of the officer rank and 582 of the rank-and-file rank.

Conclusion

Over the past year, FSD members have surmounted various formidable challenges with courage, agility and solidarity. The FSD is truly grateful for the support it has received from different sectors of the community. Moving forward, FSD members will remain united and continue to strive for higher efficiency, quality and effectiveness in all areas of work in order to promote the safety and development of Hong Kong and the country.

