LCQ16: Conservation of waterworks installations of historic value

Following is a question by the Hon Vincent Cheng and a written reply by the Secretary for Development, Mr Michael Wong, in the Legislative Council today (January 20):

Question:

Earlier on, some members of the public protested against the demolition of a disused underground cistern at Bishop Hill in Sham Shui Po by the Water Supplies Department (WSD), causing wide public concern about this century-old cistern which is structurally intact and featured with Romanesque style architecture, and the WSD has now halted the demolition works. Regarding conservation of waterworks installations of historic value, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) given that four stone pillars and part of the upper structure of the cistern have been demolished, whether the authorities have examined the years of existence and origins of such demolished materials; if so, of the details, and whether the same or similar materials can be found for restoration purposes;

(2) whether the preliminary strengthening and tidying up works for the cistern have been completed; if not, when such works will be completed; whether not until the completion of such works will the authorities allow experts to enter the cistern to conduct inspection for assessing its historic value;

(3) given that the Antiquities Advisory Board will give a grading to the cistern in March this year, of the timetable for studying the conservation options and conducting the restoration works;

(4) how the authorities will conduct consultation on the conservation options for the cistern, including the parties to be consulted and the consultation timetable; what channels through which members of the public may express their views;

(5) if the authorities will conduct a study on whether or not other structures at Bishop Hill which are of historic value have to be conserved; if they will, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(6) as it has been reported that the authorities are conducting a study on the historic building and heritage value of four service reservoirs which were completed before World War II, whether the study has been completed; if so, of the outcome; whether any parts of the structures concerned have been demolished, thereby making it difficult for them to be restored; if so, of the details;

(7) as the Commissioner for Heritage has indicated that a review has been

conducted on the incident in which the staff of the Antiquities and Monuments Office mistook in 2017 this century-old cistern as an ordinary water tank and hence did not take follow up action, of the review outcome, including whether the mistake was attributable to insufficient manpower of conservation experts; if so, of the remedial measures; what measures are in place to regain public confidence in the conservation work of the Government; and

(8) whether the authorities will, by making reference to overseas practices (e.g. the Sydney authorities' conversion of a disused reservoir into Paddington Reservoir Gardens), restore the cistern into a park and undertake to expedite the restoration works, so as to make this public space available for use by members of the public as early as possible; if so, of the additional public facilities to be provided by the authorities in this public space?

Reply:

President,

My reply to the various parts of Hon Vincent Cheng's question is as follows:

(1) and (2) The Water Supplies Department (WSD) commenced the temporary strengthening and tidying up works for the waterworks installation at Bishop Hill at Sham Shui Po on January 5. The works include sorting and protecting the structural elements taken down earlier to facilitate future rehabilitation. The works also comprise local support for part of the concrete roof slabs which may have potential to loosen, brick arches and other elements with potential danger. This is to ensure structural integrity of the installation and to enhance site safety. In addition, in order to prevent flooding, the WSD will also install temporary drainage facilities. Furthermore, temporary cover on the opening of the roof slab will be provided to prevent the internal structures from exposure to sunlight and other weathering effects. The above temporary strengthening and tidying up works are expected to complete in about three months. According to records, the waterworks installation was built in 1904. To facilitate future rehabilitation and conservation works, the WSD will maintain close communication with the Antiquities and Monuments Office (AMO) while carrying out the above temporary strengthening and tidying up works to ensure the works could maintain the original appearance of the concerned structure as well as allow safe access to staff for carrying out inspection.

(3) and (4) The AMO has also commenced an in-depth research on the heritage value of the waterworks installation, including carrying out the study of this item with reference to the six prevailing assessment criteria (namely historical interest, architectural merit, group value, social value and local interest, authenticity and rarity). The AMO will conduct site inspections, photographic recording and an extensive sourcing and analysis of first-hand information, drawn from local and overseas archives as well as from the WSD. It will also comprehensively review secondary sources such as the relevant researches, journal articles and publications. Upon completion of the in-depth research, the AMO will submit the appraisal to the independent Historic

Buildings Assessment Panel (Assessment Panel) for examination and recommendation of a proposed grading for the waterworks installation against the aforesaid six assessment criteria. The AMO is striving submit the appraisal and the Assessment Panel's proposed grading to the Antiquities Advisory Board (AAB) for consideration and grading assessment in the first quarter of 2021. When the AAB endorses the proposed grading of the waterworks installation, the relevant information and proposed grading of this item will be uploaded to the website of the the AAB for a one-month public consultation. The AAB will take into account all information and views received during the public consultation before confirming the proposed grading. The Development Bureau will look into the options of conserving and revitalising the waterworks installation, after the WSD has completed the temporary strengthening works and the temporary tidying up works mentioned above, with a view to enabling the people of Hong Kong to enjoy this place.

(5) Besides the above-mentioned waterworks installation at Sham Shui Po, the AMO is examining the conservation of structures with historic values at and in the vicinity of Bishop Hill.

(6) The AMO continues to collaborate with the WSD on a study of underground waterworks installations. According to the currently available information, at least four existing underground installations were built before the War, such as Yau Ma Tei Service Reservoir, Albany Fresh Water Service Reservoir, Mount Gough Fresh Water Service Reservoir and Peak Fresh Water Service Reservoir.

According to the annual report of the Public Works Department in 1894, the construction of Yau Ma Tei Service Reservoir was already completed at that time. However, this service reservoir is believed to have been taken out of service before the War and the WSD does not have relevant as-built drawings and related operation records. This service reservoir still exists but its condition has yet to be ascertained.

Albany Fresh Water Service Reservoir, Mount Gough Fresh Water Service Reservoir and Peak Fresh Water Service Reservoir are still in normal operation, supplying fresh water to the Mid-Levels Central areas. The basic information of these three service reservoirs is tabled as follows:

Name of Service Reservoir	Plan Area (square metres)	Storage Capacity (cubic metres)	Year of Completion
Albany Fresh Water Service Reservoir	3,496 (76m x 46m)	21,250	1888/1889
Mount Gough Fresh Water Service Reservoir	200 (25m x 8m)	960	1903
Peak Fresh Water Service Reservoir	360 (24m x15m)	1,800	1897

The study of the above-mentioned four service reservoirs is in progress.

(7) The Government understands the public concerns on the incident. The Permanent Secretary for Development (Works) is leading a working group to review the handing of the case by relevant departments, and to put forward improvement measures to avoid recurrence of similar incidents.

(8) The Government is open in relation to the conservation options. Before the long term conservation plan is determined, the Government will explore the feasibility of restricted opening for public to visit the place, provided it is safe to do so.