

*Management of public enquiries and complaints by
the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department*

A. Introduction

The Audit Commission ("Audit") conducted a review to examine the management of public enquiries and complaints by the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department ("FEHD").

2. The Committee did not hold any public hearing on this subject. Instead, it asked for written responses to its enquiries.

B. Receiving and recording enquiries and complaints and management of long-outstanding cases

3. According to paragraph 2.18 of the Director of Audit's Report ("Audit Report"), the FEHD had required that all the public's service requests and complaints, anonymous or named, written or verbal, should be accurately and consistently recorded in the Complaints Management Information System ("CMIS"). To better understand how the FEHD operated the CMIS, the Committee enquired about the following:

- whether progress had been made by the FEHD in reviewing the criteria and practice for classifying cases into service requests and complaints, and if so, what progress had been made;
- whether the pledged time frame for replying to service requests and complaints would be revised and whether the revised pledged time frame would be tightened or relaxed;
- what effective measure(s), apart from reminding staff, would be implemented by the FEHD to ensure data accuracy of the computerized CMIS; and
- what measure(s) had been or would be taken by the FEHD to ensure that monthly reports of outstanding cases were followed up by operational units before the full implementation of the new CMIS in September 2014.

*Management of public enquiries and complaints by
the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department*

4. The **Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene** replied in his letter of 27 December 2012 (in *Appendix 38*) that:

- taking into account the Director of Audit's observations and after consultation with the Efficiency Unit, the FEHD had decided to adopt the same practice as the Efficiency Unit and other government departments that it would no longer differentiate cases into complaints and service requests. All complaints and service requests would be classified as complaints and dealt with according to the FEHD Administrative Circular on Handling of Complaints ("the Administrative Circular");
- according to the time frames set out in General Circular No. 6/2009, bureaux/departments should acknowledge receipt of a complaint within 10 calendar days and strive to provide a substantive reply within 30 calendar days after receipt of a complaint. For complicated cases requiring longer processing time, the complainant should be kept informed of the progress of the case. The FEHD had now aligned its internal and pledged time frames set out in General Circular No. 6/2009 as follows:
 - (a) an interim reply would be given within 10 calendar days upon receipt of the complaint. In case a substantive reply could not be made within 30 calendar days upon receipt of the complaint, the complainant would be updated on the progress; and
 - (b) the revised pledged time frames had been implemented since 12 November 2012 and promulgated in the department's website and publicity materials displayed in FEHD offices with interface with the public;
- apart from reminding staff that details of all complaints should be accurately and promptly recorded in the CMIS upon receipt of the complaint, and that the date of the replies given to complainants should be input into the CMIS immediately to reflect the latest position of the cases in the system, as set out in the Administrative Circular:
 - (a) supervisors were also required by the circular to conduct sample checks to ensure that complaint cases were handled appropriately and properly recorded in the CMIS;

*Management of public enquiries and complaints by
the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department*

- (b) an email alert had been newly implemented in the existing CMIS to remind Case Officers and their supervisors of the dates to issue interim reply or substantive reply on outstanding cases; and
 - (c) a weekly summary report would be sent to each supervisor of Case Officers, drawing his attention to the outstanding cases of respective Case Officers under his command. In so doing, supervisors could easily spot outstanding items and anomalies, if any, and take follow-up actions; and
- the FEHD had been providing its directorate officers and heads of districts/sections with monthly reports on overdue cases for monitoring of the case progress. In order to ensure that monthly reports of overdue cases were followed up properly by operational units, the FEHD:
- (a) had put long overdue cases and repeated complaints as standing agenda items for discussion at management meetings at the headquarters and district level; and
 - (b) had reminded its heads of districts/sections at regular intervals:
 - (i) to oversee the progress of cases undertaken by their staff; (ii) make good use of the monthly ageing analysis of overdue cases for monitoring purpose; (iii) look into the reasons for any long periods of inaction during investigation of the cases; and (iv) provide guidance/assistance to their subordinates as necessary with a view to concluding the cases as soon as possible. These requirements had also been incorporated in the Administrative Circular of the FEHD.

C. Manpower to cope with the increased workload

5. According to paragraph 4.21 of the Audit Report, the FEHD had looked into the reasons for long periods of inaction for some water-seepage cases and found that they were mainly due to shortage of staff and frequent turnover of Environmental Nuisance Investigators ("ENIs") who were non-civil service contract staff. To enhance efficiency in the investigation process, the FEHD had carried out a number of improvement measures, including the provision of additional staff to cope with the increased workload. In this connection, the Committee asked whether the FEHD's increase in manpower to cope with the increased workload in carrying

*Management of public enquiries and complaints by
the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department*

out its investigation of water-seepage cases had improved efficiency and the related details.

6. In his letter dated 27 December 2012, the **Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene** replied that the FEHD's increase/reinforcement in manpower to cope with the increased workload in carrying out its investigation of water-seepage cases had improved efficiency. The increase/reinforcement in manpower since mid-2011 included:

- in mid 2011, FEHD deployed 81 Health Inspectors I/II ("HI I/II"), who were civil servants, to replace in two batches some non-civil service contract ENIs for investigation of water seepage cases with a view to reinforcing the knowledge base of the staff and providing better continuity in the Joint Office's work. After the replacement, there were 85 ENIs in the Joint Office;
- to further enhance efficiency of the work and to cope with the increased caseload, a total of 38 additional ENI positions were created in two batches in late 2011 for the Joint Office;
- to further enhance workforce stability, nine time-limited HI I/II posts had been created to replace the same number of ENIs since August 2012, and another eight time-limited HI I/II posts would be created for the same purpose in early 2013. These time-limited posts would last up to end March 2014; and
- to strengthen supervisory support for the Joint Office, six time-limited Senior Health Inspector ("SHI") posts were created in April 2011 for one year and had been extended for two more years up to end March 2014. In addition, three more time-limited SHI posts had been created in July 2012, making a total of nine time-limited SHI posts up to end March 2014.

7. The **Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene** also mentioned in his letter that the above increase/reinforcement in manpower had enabled the FEHD to make dedicated efforts to reduce overdue cases. There had been a significant decrease in the number of overdue water-seepage cases by 43% from June 2011 to November 2012. The FEHD would continue to closely monitor caseload and review manpower resources.

*Management of public enquiries and complaints by
the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department*

8. According to paragraph 5.25 of the Audit Report, the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene had said that various means would be considered to solicit feedback on the FEHD's complaint handling system with a view to improving the system and services. The Committee enquired what these various means were and whether the FEHD would conduct customer satisfaction surveys on its complaint handling system.

9. In his letter dated 27 December 2012, the **Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene** replied that:

- various means of collecting feedback from the enquirers and complainants had been considered. They included focus groups, face to face interviews, self-administered questionnaires (either on paper or via electronic means) and telephone surveys. Having assessed the pros and cons of these methods, the FEHD considered that telephone surveys should be the most suitable means to solicit customer feedback in terms of ease of access (phone numbers of the target respondents were mostly available), flexibility (interviewer could explore options with respondents), and cost (lower than face-to-face interviews though higher than self-administered surveys); and
- the FEHD planned to conduct customer satisfaction surveys to solicit feedback on its complaint handling system after the full implementation of the new CMIS.

10. According to paragraph 6.13(a) of the Audit Report, the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene agreed that, with the 1823 Call Centre being a major source of the FEHD's complaint cases, the FEHD would work closely with the Efficiency Unit for better integration between the systems of the Call Centre and the new CMIS. The Committee enquired whether progress had been made by the FEHD in this regard, and if so, what progress had been made.

11. The **Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene** stated in his letter that the FEHD had discussed with the 1823 Call Centre regarding the integration of the 1823 system with the new CMIS, including the transfer of case information between the two systems. The system contractor of the new CMIS had been working on the details of user requirements regarding the integration which would be sent to the

1823 Call Centre for follow-up. The FEHD would continue to liaise with the 1823 Call Centre regarding the integration.

D. Conclusions and recommendations

12. The Committee notes the above replies of the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene and wishes to be kept informed of the progress made in implementing the various improvement measures arising from the Audit recommendations.