

Report No. 47 of the Director of Audit – Chapter 10

PROVISION OF PERSONAL DOCUMENTATION SERVICES AND AUTOMATED IMMIGRATION CLEARANCE

Summary

1. The Immigration Department (ImmD) is responsible for providing birth, death and marriage registrations, issuing Hong Kong identity cards, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) passports, other travel documents and various personal documentation to Hong Kong residents. The ImmD provides personal documentation services for the public through its Headquarters and branch offices (i.e. the births, deaths and marriage registries, the immigration branch offices and the Registration of Persons (ROP) offices) in the territory.

Management of branch offices

2. In 2003, the ImmD reorganised its branch offices on the basis of five regions and closed 11 branch offices. The remaining 20 offices were provided with additional resources to ensure that they could absorb the additional workload. The Audit Commission (Audit) has the following observations:

- (a) **Utilisation rates of the births and deaths registries.** In 2005, the average utilisation rate of the births registries was only 65%, and that of the deaths registries was 152%. The births registries were underutilised. The workload of all the deaths registries exceeded their handling capacities;
- (b) **Utilisation rates of the marriage registries.** In 2005, the utilisation rates of the marriage registries ranged from 61% for the City Hall Marriage Registry to 99% for the Tuen Mun Marriage Registry. To meet the increasing demand for more flexible marriage solemnisation services and make use of the private sector for providing such services, the first batch of civil celebrants was appointed in April 2006 under the Civil Celebrants of Marriages Scheme;
- (c) **Utilisation rates of the immigration branch offices and the ROP offices.** In 2005, the utilisation rates of the immigration branch offices ranged from 71% for the Hong Kong Office to 100% for the Sha Tin Office. The utilisation rates of the ROP offices ranged from 74% for the Kwun Tong Office to 87% for both the Hong Kong Office and the Kowloon Office. To provide better services, on

24 April 2006, the ROP Kowloon Office started to accept applications for HKSAR documents of identity for visa purposes, a service formerly provided only by the immigration branch offices;

- (d) ***Merging of the Sha Tin Office and the Fo Tan Office.*** According to the October 2002 reorganisation plan of the ImmD, the Sha Tin Office would, in the long run, be merged with the Fo Tan Office to form a joint immigration and ROP office in the East New Territories region. In February 2004, the ImmD made a revised proposal that the Sha Tin Office, instead of the Fo Tan Office, would be expanded as the location of the former was more convenient to the public. In the accommodation reviews of 2005-06 and 2006-07, the ImmD did not mention the merging of the two offices; and
- (e) ***Recovery of costs of services provided.*** Although extra manpower resources are required to process applications for early issue of HKSAR travel documents, no additional fees are levied. According to the ImmD's initial assessment in 2004, it was feasible to impose application fees for some visa control related applications and a new fee for the reconsideration of rejected visa applications. Up to September 2006, there was no progress on the review of imposing fees on some services provided free of charge.

3. *Audit has recommended that the Director of Immigration should: (a) review the maximum handling capacities of the births, deaths and marriage registries, the immigration branch offices and the ROP offices; (b) assess the impact of the Civil Celebrants of Marriages Scheme on the utilisation of marriage registries and the provision of marriage registration services; (c) continue to explore the feasibility of expanding the types of services provided by the immigration branch offices and the ROP offices; (d) expedite the merging of the Sha Tin Office and the Fo Tan Office; (e) ascertain the extra costs of processing the early issue of HKSAR travel documents and the costs of providing some services free of charge; and (f) explore the feasibility of imposing fees for the services with a view to achieving full cost recovery in the long run.*

Service delivery channels

4. Since 2000, appointment bookings for some of the personal documentation services have been made available under the Electronic Service Delivery (ESD) Scheme and the telephone appointment booking systems of the ImmD. The audit review of these service delivery channels has focused on the following areas:

- (a) ***Appointment bookings for services at the marriage registries.*** A marrying couple can make an appointment booking under the ESD Scheme or the telephone appointment booking system for giving of marriage notice within 14 days prior to a three-month period from the date of marriage. After this period, the unused quota is released for walk-in applicants. In 2005, the utilisation rate of appointment bookings was 31%. According to the Marriage Ordinance (Cap. 181), a marriage notice can be given at any time not more than 3 months or not less than 15 days before the date of marriage;

- (b) ***Appointment bookings for services at the ROP offices.*** In 2005, the turn-up rate for appointments made under the ESD Scheme and the telephone appointment booking system for services at the ROP offices was 53%. The ImmD conducted surveys on the low turn-up rates and found that a number of appointment bookings were made by employment agencies, and some applicants did not keep or cancel their appointments;
- (c) ***Use of services other than the appointment bookings under the ESD Scheme.*** In 2005-06, the utilisation rates of the use of other services (apart from appointment bookings) under the ESD Scheme were low. There were only 16 out of 53,350 cases for notification of pre-mature termination of contracts of imported workers, and 67,632 (4%) out of 1,860,420 cases for requesting application forms made through the ESD Scheme;
- (d) ***Request for application forms.*** From May 2005 to March 2006, the ImmD received 39,767 requests for application forms under the ESD Scheme. The charge by the vendor is \$5.5 for each transaction, excluding the postage paid by the ImmD. As at 31 May 2006, 30 out of 33 types of application forms obtainable under the ESD Scheme could be downloaded from the ImmD website; and
- (e) ***Repeated transactions of making appointments for giving of marriage notices.*** From February 2005 to February 2006, 15,580 (41%) out of 38,000 transactions of making appointments for giving of marriage notices were repeated transactions. These transactions were made by 1,412 pairs of applicants.

5. *Audit has recommended that the Director of Immigration should: (a) for making an appointment booking for giving of marriage notice, consider extending the appointment booking period in order to make available to the public the full period allowed by the Marriage Ordinance prior to the date of marriage; (b) explore the feasibility of enhancing the ESD Scheme and the telephone appointment booking system so that applicants are reminded (e.g. one day before) to keep or cancel their appointments; (c) review and identify ways for enhancing the use of other services under the ESD Scheme in order to provide a better service for the public; (d) explore the feasibility of providing all types of application forms on the ImmD website and encourage the public to download them; and (e) in conjunction with the Government Chief Information Officer, closely monitor the frequency of repeated transactions and consider informing the public the cost of the transactions.*

Automated immigration clearance at control points

6. In January 2003, the Finance Committee approved \$353 million to install e-channels for the Automated Passenger Clearance (APC) System and the Automated Vehicle Clearance (AVC) System to cope with the perennial growth in passenger and vehicular traffic at immigration control points. The audit review has focused on the following areas:

- (a) **Performance targets for immigration clearance.** The performance targets for immigration clearance at control points had not been revised since 1999. The ImmD achieved a higher level of performance than its targets for the years from 2001 to 2005. With the introduction of e-channels, the ImmD was able to increase the throughput of the control points and reduce the waiting time of passengers for immigration clearance; and
- (b) **New control points.** The ImmD adopted different bases in planning the mix of APC e-channels and traditional immigration counters at the four new control points at the Lok Ma Chau Spur Line, Shenzhen Western Corridor, Sky Plaza at the Hong Kong International Airport and Tuen Mun Ferry Terminal.

7. *Audit has recommended that the Director of Immigration should: (a) review and revise the performance targets for immigration clearance to better indicate the extent of achieving the ImmD's operational objectives; (b) consider setting different performance targets for APC e-channels, AVC e-channels and traditional immigration counters so as to monitor their usage more effectively; and (c) consider adopting a consistent basis for determining the e-channel requirement for the new control points in the future.*

Response from the Administration

- 8. The Administration agrees with all the audit recommendations.

November 2006