

CHAPTER 7

Food and Environmental Hygiene Department

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

**Audit Commission
Hong Kong
26 October 2012**

This audit review was carried out under a set of guidelines tabled in the Provisional Legislative Council by the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee on 11 February 1998. The guidelines were agreed between the Public Accounts Committee and the Director of Audit and accepted by the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

Report No. 59 of the Director of Audit contains 10 Chapters which are available on our website at <http://www.aud.gov.hk>

Audit Commission
26th floor, Immigration Tower
7 Gloucester Road
Wan Chai
Hong Kong

Tel : (852) 2829 4210
Fax : (852) 2824 2087
E-mail : enquiry@aud.gov.hk

MANAGEMENT OF PUBLIC ENQUIRIES AND COMPLAINTS BY THE FOOD AND ENVIRONMENTAL HYGIENE DEPARTMENT

Contents

	Paragraph
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	
PART 1: INTRODUCTION	1.1 – 1.5
Audit review	1.6
Acknowledgement	1.7
PART 2: RECEIVING AND RECORDING ENQUIRIES AND COMPLAINTS	2.1
Accessibility and transparency of the complaint handling system	2.2 – 2.9
Audit recommendations	2.10
Response from the Administration	2.11
Receiving public enquiries and complaints	2.12 – 2.14
Audit recommendations	2.15
Response from the Administration	2.16

	Paragraph
Recording public enquiries and complaints	2.17 – 2.24
Audit recommendations	2.25
Response from the Administration	2.26 – 2.27
PART 3: INVESTIGATIONS AND FOLLOW-UP ACTIONS	3.1
Assignment of cases for investigation	3.2 – 3.6
Audit recommendation	3.7
Response from the Administration	3.8
Timeliness of responses to service requests and complaints	3.9 – 3.14
Audit recommendations	3.15
Response from the Administration	3.16
Handling of repeated service requests and complaints	3.17 – 3.20
Audit recommendations	3.21
Response from the Administration	3.22
PART 4: MANAGEMENT OF LONG-OUTSTANDING CASES	4.1
Monitoring of long-outstanding cases	4.2 – 4.11
Audit recommendations	4.12
Response from the Administration	4.13
Handling of water-seepage cases	4.14 – 4.19
Audit recommendations	4.20
Response from the Administration	4.21

	Paragraph
PART 5: LEARNING FROM ENQUIRIES AND COMPLAINTS	5.1
Mechanism for analysing enquiry and complaint data	5.2 – 5.7
Audit recommendations	5.8
Response from the Administration	5.9
Senior management involvement	5.10 – 5.12
Audit recommendations	5.13
Response from the Administration	5.14
Sharing experience among staff	5.15 – 5.19
Audit recommendations	5.20
Response from the Administration	5.21
Obtaining feedback from enquirers and complainants	5.22 – 5.23
Audit recommendations	5.24
Response from the Administration	5.25
PART 6: OTHER ADMINISTRATIVE ISSUES	6.1
Liaison with the 1823 Call Centre	6.2 – 6.11
Audit recommendations	6.12
Response from the Administration	6.13 – 6.14
Business process re-engineering study	6.15 – 6.20
Audit recommendations	6.21
Response from the Administration	6.22 – 6.23

	Paragraph
Assessing overall effectiveness of the complaint handling system	6.24 – 6.26
Audit recommendations	6.27
Response from the Administration	6.28

Appendices	Page
A : Examples of essential features of a good complaint handling system	61
B : Complaints Management Section: Organisation chart (31 March 2012)	62
C : Service requests and complaints recorded by District Offices (2011-12)	63
D : Useful management information which could be compiled from the Complaints Management Information System database	64 – 65
E : Acronyms and abbreviations	66

MANAGEMENT OF PUBLIC ENQUIRIES AND COMPLAINTS BY THE FOOD AND ENVIRONMENTAL HYGIENE DEPARTMENT

Executive Summary

1. Enquiries and complaints from the public reflect their needs and concerns. Public enquiries and complaints also serve as an important source of feedback on the effectiveness and impact of government policies. The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) receives a greater number of complaints from the public. In 2011-12, the FEHD received some 187,000 cases of service request and complaint from the public. These service requests and complaints are primarily made through telephone calls, letters and e-mails, with most telephone calls received by the 1823 Call Centre (which handles the FEHD's departmental enquiry hotline) or the FEHD's 19 District Environmental Hygiene Offices (District Offices). The Audit Commission (Audit) has recently conducted a review to examine the FEHD's management of public enquiries and complaints.

Receiving and recording enquiries and complaints

2. The FEHD uses a computerised Complaints Management Information System (CMIS) to record service requests and complaints. Audit noted that the proportions of service request/complaint cases which were recorded in the CMIS as public complaints differed considerably among the FEHD's District Offices, ranging from 0.1% to 13%. The large variations might indicate inconsistent practices among District Offices in classifying cases into service requests and complaints, or failure in recording some cases. Audit also found many hawker-related cases not recorded in the CMIS.

Investigations and follow-up actions

3. *Timeliness of responses.* On its website, the FEHD has pledged to reply to all enquiries and complaints within 10 days, and to give an interim reply if a substantive reply is not possible within this period. In 20 (67%) of the 30 service

Executive Summary

requests/complaints examined by Audit, the FEHD's pledge was not met. Audit noted that FEHD circulars stipulated an internal time frame which allowed more time for FEHD staff to give a reply.

4. ***Handling of repeated service requests and complaints.*** Repeated service requests/complaints may indicate systemic issues that need to be addressed at a higher and more strategic level. Audit noted that staff of some District Offices generally inclined not to classify frequent service requests and complaints as repeated cases for recording in the CMIS. In the circumstances, such repeated cases were not escalated to the senior management for attention in a systematic manner.

Management of long-outstanding cases

5. ***Monitoring of long-outstanding cases.*** The CMIS generates a monthly report of outstanding service request/complaint cases for monitoring and follow-up purposes. Audit selected 30 long-outstanding cases from the monthly report of 31 March 2012 for examination, and noted that 21 (70%) cases had long been completed but were still shown as "outstanding" in the report, indicating that the CMIS records had not been timely updated. Of these 30 cases, 16 (53%) cases, mainly relating to water-seepage cases, were completed more than six months after the target completion date. Audit also noted that the FEHD's Complaints Management Section, which assumes overall responsibility for managing public complaints, did not take measures to ensure that operational units had followed up every monthly report of outstanding cases.

6. ***Handling of water-seepage cases.*** Audit examined 10 more recent water-seepage cases. In 8 cases, there were long periods of inaction during the course of the FEHD's investigation, ranging from 14 to 57 months, with an average of 44 months.

Learning from enquiries and complaints

7. Complaint handling helps improve a department's services by using the insights obtained from complaint data. However, the FEHD's analysis of the CMIS database has been limited. Despite being a rich source of enquiry and complaint

Executive Summary

data, the CMIS does not have facilities (e.g. reporting tools) for users to perform data analysis.

Other administrative issues

8. *Business process re-engineering (BPR) study.* In February 2012, the FEHD completed a BPR study on its enquiry and complaint handling processes. The study recommended that a new CMIS should be developed to replace the existing CMIS which could no longer fully meet the user requirements. The design of the new CMIS also aims to facilitate the use of business intelligence tools for data mining and report generation. However, the new CMIS would not be fully implemented until around September 2014.

9. *Assessing overall effectiveness of the complaint handling system.* Despite the FEHD's effort in handling public enquiries and complaints, a considerable number of people still made enquiries and complaints about the FEHD to third parties (e.g. the media and the Ombudsman). While the number of such cases may be small in comparison to the large number of service requests/complaints received by the FEHD every year, it nonetheless shows that the FEHD needs to keep up its vigilance and responsiveness in handling and resolving service requests and complaints.

Audit recommendations

10. **Audit recommendations are made in the respective sections of this Audit Report. Only the key ones are highlighted in this Executive Summary. Audit has recommended that the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene should:**

Receiving and recording enquiries and complaints

- (a) **standardise the FEHD's practices in classifying service requests and complaints;**
- (b) **remind FEHD staff to record in the CMIS all service requests and complaints about the FEHD;**

Executive Summary

Investigations and follow-up actions

- (c) **revise the FEHD's internal and pledged time frames for replying to service requests and complaints, with a view to aligning them with each other;**
- (d) **review the adequacy of the FEHD's mechanism in identifying repeated cases of service request/complaint and systemic issues, and in escalating them to management for attention;**

Management of long-outstanding cases

- (e) **review the data accuracy of the CMIS;**
- (f) **closely monitor long-outstanding cases of service request and complaint;**
- (g) **review the role and establishment of the Complaints Management Section in overseeing the FEHD's public enquiries and complaints;**
- (h) **look into the reasons for any long periods of inaction during investigations of water-seepage cases;**
- (i) **take effective measures to improve the efficiency of the FEHD's investigation of water-seepage cases;**

Learning from enquiries and complaints

- (j) **better realise the potential of the CMIS database in generating management information on public enquiries and complaints, e.g. making better use of data mining techniques for compiling relevant analyses;**

Other administrative issues

- (k) **pending full implementation of the new CMIS, explore effective interim measures to alleviate the inadequacies of the existing CMIS; and**

Executive Summary

- (1) **critically assess the overall effectiveness of the FEHD's complaint handling system, taking account of the findings of the BPR study and this Audit Report.**

Response from the Administration

11. The Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene agrees with the audit recommendations.

PART 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 This PART describes the background to the audit of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD)'s management of public enquiries and complaints, and outlines the audit objectives and scope.

Background

1.2 Enquiries and complaints from the public reflect their needs and concerns. Public enquiries and complaints also serve as an important source of feedback on the effectiveness and impact of government policies. In his 2008-09 Policy Address, the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region made a commitment to improving the Government's complaint handling mechanisms (Note 1). In 2009, the Government issued General Circular No. 6/2009 on "Complaints Handling Mechanism" providing guidelines and procedures for reference by departments on receipt of complaints from the public. In the same year, the Efficiency Unit (EU — Note 2) compiled good practice guides on handling public enquiries and complaints (the EU guides — Note 3). Examples of essential features of a good complaint handling system are at Appendix A.

Note 1: *In his 2008-09 Policy Address, the Chief Executive stated that "While we have kept on improving the quality of public services, there have been occasions when we might not have met people's expectations. We must remain humble at all times and be open to suggestions for improvement. To ensure that public services move with the times and respond quickly to citizens' needs, I have asked Heads of Departments to review the implementation of their performance pledges and to improve their complaint handling mechanisms in the coming year."*

Note 2: *The EU reports directly to the Chief Secretary for Administration. It provides government bureaux and departments with management consultancy services.*

Note 3: *In January 2009, the EU published a public sector reform report entitled "Complaints Handling", providing guidelines and best practices in complaint handling. In August 2009, the EU published a guide entitled "Serving the Community by Improving Customer Service — A Guide to Complaints Handling and Public Enquiries", providing practical advice to staff at all levels of the Government on how to handle complaints and enquiries effectively.*

Introduction

1.3 According to the General Circular and the EU guides, public complaints are an expression of the public's dissatisfaction with government policy or services (Note 4), while public enquiries concern the public's demands, such as requests for information (information requests) or the provision of services (service requests). The FEHD has a system (complaint handling system) for handling the public's service requests and complaints, as follows:

- (a) ***Guidelines and procedures.*** Taking account of the General Circular and the EU guides, the FEHD has issued its own circulars on handling service requests and complaints;
- (b) ***Offices for handling service requests and complaints.*** A Complaints Management Section was set up in 2000 at the FEHD Headquarters to assume overall responsibility for managing public complaints. The Section also helps monitor the handling of the public's service requests. An organisation chart of the Complaints Management Section is at Appendix B. Investigation and follow-up of individual cases of service request or complaint from the public are mainly conducted by 89 complaint handling offices at the FEHD's operational units, which include the FEHD's District Environmental Hygiene Offices (District Offices — Note 5). Of the FEHD's service requests and complaints received from the public in 2011-12, about 90% were related to and followed up by the District Offices; and
- (c) ***Information system.*** Since November 2000, a computerised Complaints Management Information System (CMIS) has been used to capture and manage information relating to service requests and complaints from the public. This system is currently being revamped and a new CMIS is under development (see paras. 6.15 to 6.17).

Note 4: *The General Circular and the EU guides define public complaints as "an expression of dissatisfaction by the public with bureaux/departmental policy or services, the way in which a policy is implemented or service is delivered, including staff attitude, irrespective of the complaint channel used". The definition excludes certain types of "complaints", e.g. statutory appeals, complaints from staff, and complaints subject to statutory procedures.*

Note 5: *As at June 2012, the FEHD had 19 District Offices, locating in different districts of the territory. Each Office had operational units/sections responsible for areas such as public markets, hawkers matters, cleansing and environmental hygiene. In addition to its other duties, each District Office is also designated as a complaint handling office.*

The FEHD engages the 1823 Call Centre (Note 6) operated by the EU to act as the first point of contact of its departmental enquiry hotline (departmental hotline). Besides, the complaint handling offices receive information requests directly from the public, or from the 1823 Call Centre by referral. These offices also help answer such information requests.

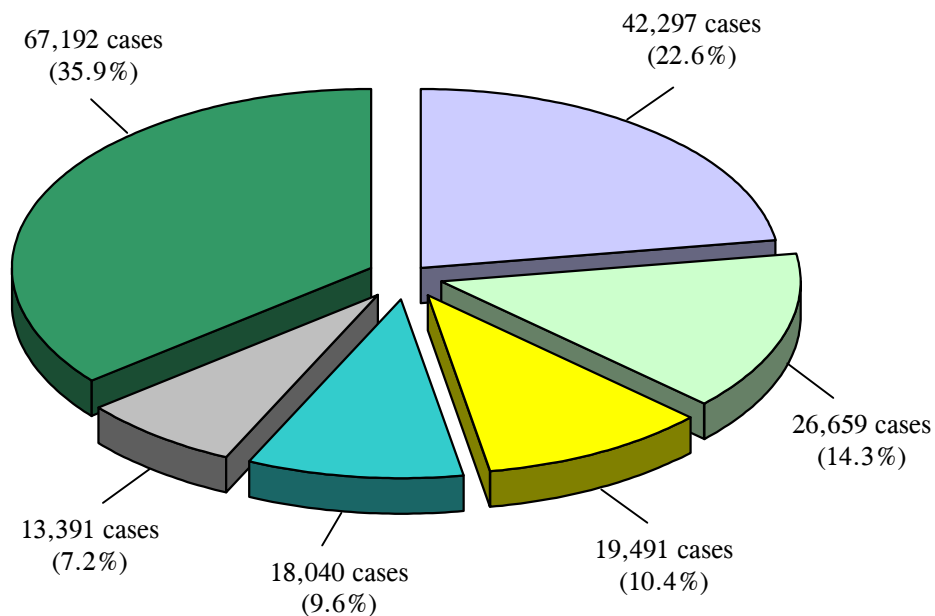
1.4 Every year, the FEHD receives a large number of service requests and complaints from the public. Figure 1 shows the nature of the 187,070 cases of service request and complaint received by the FEHD in 2011-12. The FEHD classified these cases into 181,627 service requests and 5,443 complaints (Note 7). Of these service requests and complaints, 132,074 (71%) were referrals from the 1823 Call Centre through its Hotline or other channels (e.g. enquiry e-mail — see para. 6.2).

Note 6: *The 1823 Call Centre operates a 1823 Hotline and provides a round-the-clock single point of contact for the public to make enquiries and complaints. It receives complaints about any area of government services and answers public enquiries for 21 client departments (including the FEHD). For enquiries regarding other departments, the 1823 Call Centre provides relevant contact information to the enquirers.*

Note 7: *Cases are classified into service requests and complaints by FEHD staff at different complaint handling offices. See paragraphs 2.21 and 2.22 for audit observations on the need to appropriately classify cases.*

Figure 1

**Service requests and complaints received by the FEHD
(187,070 cases in 2011-12)**



- Legend:
- Refuse and unhygienic condition
 - Water seepage in buildings
 - Obstructions caused by shops and licensed premises (e.g. restaurants)
 - Nuisances caused by air-conditioners
 - Illegal hawking and obstructions caused by hawkers
 - Others (e.g. food matters, rodents, dead animal bodies, and blocked gullies on streets)

Source: FEHD records

1.5 According to the 1823 Call Centre's survey, the FEHD was one of the government departments which received a greater number of complaints through the 1823 Hotline (Note 8). Some members of the public also lodged with the Audit Commission (Audit) and the Ombudsman (Note 9) complaints about the FEHD. In 2009-10 and 2011-12, the FEHD was the department being complained about the most at the Ombudsman (Note 10).

Audit review

1.6 Audit has recently conducted a review to examine the FEHD's management of public enquiries and complaints (Note 11). The audit focused on the following areas:

- (a) receiving and recording enquiries and complaints (PART 2);
- (b) investigations and follow-up actions (PART 3);

Note 8: *In December 2010, the EU published the results of a customer satisfaction survey of the 1823 Call Centre. The results indicated that the top five departments receiving a greater number of complaints through the 1823 Hotline were:*

- (a) FEHD;*
- (b) Highways Department;*
- (c) Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department;*
- (d) Transport Department; and*
- (e) Buildings Department.*

Note 9: *The Ombudsman was appointed by the Chief Executive pursuant to the Ombudsman Ordinance (Cap. 397). The Ombudsman can investigate complaints against government departments/agencies and major public organisations for alleged maladministration. The Ombudsman also published a handbook on effective complaint handling in 1998, which provided guidance to organisations setting up or reviewing their internal complaint handling system.*

Note 10: *In 2010-11, the FEHD ranked second (after the Lands Department) in the number of complaints received and concluded by the Ombudsman.*

Note 11: *Public complaints do not include complaints from staff which are not covered in this review.*

Introduction

- (c) management of long-outstanding cases (PART 4);
- (d) learning from enquiries and complaints (PART 5); and
- (e) other administrative issues (PART 6).

Audit has found that there are areas where improvements can be made and has made a number of recommendations to address the issues.

Acknowledgement

1.7 Audit would like to acknowledge with gratitude the assistance and full cooperation of the staff of the FEHD during the course of the audit review.

PART 2: RECEIVING AND RECORDING ENQUIRIES AND COMPLAINTS

2.1 This PART examines the receiving and recording of public enquiries and complaints by the FEHD. Audit has found room for improvement in the following areas:

- (a) accessibility and transparency of the complaint handling system (paras. 2.2 to 2.11);
- (b) receiving public enquiries and complaints (paras. 2.12 to 2.16); and
- (c) recording public enquiries and complaints (paras. 2.17 to 2.27).

Accessibility and transparency of the complaint handling system

2.2 A complaint is an opportunity to improve and a lesson for reference. Government departments should welcome complaints. To facilitate people making complaints, good practices suggest that a complaint handling system needs to be easy to access and transparent (see items (b) and (f) of Appendix A). Disclosing adequate information about a complaint handling system could also enhance the public's confidence and trust in the system, which is a prerequisite for an effective complaint handling system (see item (j) of Appendix A).

2.3 The FEHD publicises information about its complaint handling system through the Internet (e.g. the FEHD website). The FEHD also publishes relevant information in publicity materials (e.g. pamphlets and posters) and displays the information in public places. Photographs 1 to 4 show examples of the information displayed.

Receiving and recording enquiries and complaints

Photographs 1 to 4

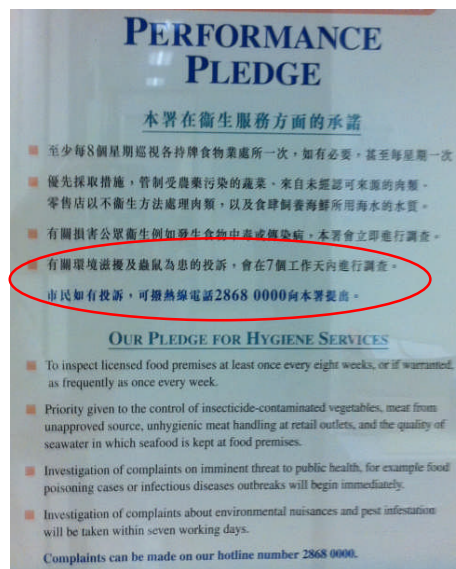
Display of information on making enquiries and complaints about the FEHD (Examples)

Photograph 1



Information displayed in a poster at an FEHD office

Photograph 2



Information displayed in the performance pledge at an FEHD office

Photograph 3



Information displayed at a public toilet

Photograph 4



Information displayed on a rubbish bin

Source: FEHD records

Publicising the complaint handling system

2.4 In its good practice guides, the EU promulgates a template for government departments to publicise their complaint handling mechanisms. The template sets out details such as what members of the public expect from a department's handling of their complaints, the departmental performance pledges, and policy on personal data privacy and electronic recording of complaints.

2.5 Audit noted that most of the information suggested in the template (e.g. complainants' rights and obligations, and personal data privacy policy) had not been publicised by the FEHD. In particular, the FEHD did not publicise that complainants had the right to request a review of how the investigation of their complaints was handled, nor did it publicise the channels for making the request. In fact, the FEHD had a mechanism in place for complainants to request a review of complaint investigation and to appeal against the investigation outcomes. Publicising the availability of and the channels for the review and appeal mechanism would help enhance complainants' trust in the FEHD's complaint handling system. This is also conducive to improving the system's transparency.

2.6 Audit also noted that the FEHD publicised information about its complaint handling system mainly through the Internet. Only limited information (e.g. on the channels for making complaints) was provided in publicity materials or displayed in public places. It was not entirely satisfactory as some people might not have ready access to the Internet.

Recording channel information in the CMIS

2.7 The FEHD uses the CMIS to capture and manage information relating to service requests and complaints from the public (see para. 1.3(c)). Since January 2011, the FEHD has also required its staff to input into the CMIS the channels through which individual service requests and complaints were received. However, in many cases, FEHD staff did not record the channel information in the CMIS (see Table 1).

Receiving and recording enquiries and complaints

Table 1

**Channels through which service requests and complaints
were received from the public
(2011-12)**

Channel	Service requests and complaints received	
	(No. of cases)	(%)
1823 Hotline	113,647	60.7
FEHD telephone lines (e.g. at District Offices)	30,556	16.3
FEHD fax lines	7,848	4.2
By post	5,241	2.8
FEHD e-mail	3,286	1.8
In person	1,121	0.6
Others (e.g. electronic enquiry forms on the FEHD website)	1,058	0.6
No channel information recorded in the CMIS	24,313	13.0
Total	187,070	100.0

Source: FEHD records

2.8 Audit noted that details of the service request/complaint channels were not a mandatory field in the CMIS. Staff could therefore elect not to input such details despite the FEHD's requirement. In 2011-12, the number of cases without channel details (24,313 cases) was significant.

Receiving and recording enquiries and complaints

2.9 In this connection, Audit noted that many people had approached third parties (e.g. the media and the Ombudsman) instead of the FEHD to make enquiries and complaints about the Department. The FEHD needs to ensure that its channels for enquiries (e.g. service requests) and complaints are appealing to the public. However, the FEHD does not have the practice of generating, on a regular basis, management information (e.g. analyses of the number of cases received by different channels) from the CMIS to help monitor the accessibility of the enquiry and complaint channels. This information, together with other details about the preference and concerns of enquirers and complainants, could highlight areas for attention to better promote the use of certain channels. For example, the FEHD may consider providing self-addressed envelopes for the public to send enquiries and complaints by post, and improving the user-friendliness of the FEHD arrangements for receiving enquiries and complaints outside office hours (see paras. 2.13 to 2.15).

Audit recommendations

2.10 **Audit has *recommended* that the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene should:**

- (a) **having regard to the EU template (see para. 2.4), consider publicising more information about the FEHD's complaint handling mechanisms;**
- (b) **apart from publicising through the Internet, ensure that adequate information about the FEHD's complaint handling system is also available through non-computer means (e.g. posters and pamphlets);**
- (c) **consider making it mandatory for staff to input details of the enquiry/complaint channels into the CMIS;**
- (d) **compile on a regular basis, management information from the CMIS to help monitor the accessibility of the various channels of public enquiries and complaints; and**
- (e) **taking account of management information generated by the CMIS, monitor the accessibility of the FEHD's complaint handling system and take necessary remedial measures.**

Response from the Administration

2.11 The Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene agrees with the audit recommendations. He has said that the FEHD will:

- (a) publicise more information about its complaint handling mechanism in the FEHD's website and other publicity materials (e.g. pamphlets and posters), where appropriate, and promulgate the information in District Offices and other FEHD venues; and
- (b) make the "channel" field in the CMIS a mandatory field for staff to input details of the complaint channels, compile management information from the CMIS to help monitor the accessibility of the FEHD's complaint handling system regularly and take necessary improvement measures.

Receiving public enquiries and complaints

2.12 Most public enquiries and complaints about the FEHD are made by telephone, mainly through the 1823 Hotline and FEHD telephone lines (e.g. the FEHD's departmental hotline and telephone lines of individual complaint handling offices — see para. 1.3(b)). The 1823 Call Centre provides trilingual service (Cantonese, Putonghua and English) in handling public telephone calls. The FEHD also has staff who speak Putonghua (besides Cantonese and English). For enquiries and complaints made in other languages, the FEHD has made arrangements for a non-governmental organisation to provide interpretation and translation services where necessary. The FEHD's complaint handling system can generally support telephone calls from the public in different languages.

2.13 The majority of the public enquiries and complaints received related to the FEHD's District Offices (see para. 1.3(b)). The District Offices have their own telephone lines for receiving public enquiries and complaints. While the 1823 Hotline and the FEHD's departmental hotline are attended to by operators round-the-clock (Note 12), the District Office telephone lines are not. Since May 2011, the FEHD has standardised the practices of District Offices in receiving telephone enquiries and complaints from the public outside office hours. Under the standard practice, the telephone voicemail system of each District Office will pick up incoming telephone calls outside office hours. The system will request the enquirers and complainants to leave a voice message, and provide the FEHD's departmental hotline number for them to call if they so wish.

Telephone calls received outside office hours

2.14 The telephone voicemail systems of the District Offices do not give callers the option of having their telephone calls automatically transferred to the FEHD's departmental hotline or the 1823 Hotline. Audit noted that the implementation of the standard practice in May 2011 was triggered by the need to address the concerns expressed by a member of the public who was dissatisfied that his call made outside office hours was answered by the telephone voicemail system of the District Office instead of by an FEHD staff. Audit considers that the standard practice adopted since May 2011 may need to be revisited to allow more options to the callers.

Note 12: *The FEHD has engaged the 1823 Call Centre to attend to the FEHD's departmental hotline (see para. 6.2).*

Audit recommendations

2.15 **Audit has *recommended* that the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene should consider enhancing the user-friendliness of the existing arrangements in handling telephone calls at District Offices outside office hours including, for example:**

- (a) **in District Offices where it is technically feasible, providing an option for callers to have their calls automatically transferred to the FEHD's departmental hotline; and**
- (b) **exploring the feasibility of upgrading the telephone systems in other District Offices to provide similar functions.**

Response from the Administration

2.16 The Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene agrees with the audit recommendations. He has said that:

- (a) in District Offices where it is technically feasible, the FEHD will provide an option for callers to have their calls outside office hours automatically transferred to the FEHD's departmental hotline; and
- (b) for other District Offices, the FEHD will explore the feasibility of upgrading the telephone systems to provide similar functions.

Recording public enquiries and complaints

2.17 Good practices suggest that complaints should be well documented (see item (e) of Appendix A). If proper records of all complaints are kept, government departments will be able to review and analyse the public's concerns about their services. The departments will also be able to make informed decisions to tackle the root causes of complaints with a view to making service improvements.

2.18 Taking account of the good practices, the FEHD has required that all the public's service requests and complaints, anonymous or named, written or verbal, should be accurately and consistently recorded in the CMIS (Note 13).

Large variations in the number of complaint cases among District Offices

2.19 The 19 District Offices of the FEHD are the major stakeholders of the public's service requests and complaints (see para. 1.3(b)). Each District Office, being also a complaint handling office, is required to record in the CMIS the public's service requests and complaints for which the Office is responsible. In June 2012, Audit analysed the cases recorded by individual District Offices in 2011-12. Audit noted that, at the time of analysis, the proportions of cases which were recorded as public complaints differed considerably among District Offices, ranging from 0.1% to 13% (see Appendix C).

2.20 As far as could be ascertained, the FEHD has not looked into the reasons for the significant variations in the proportions of complaint cases. In Audit's view, while there might be some real differences in the number of complaint cases received by District Offices, the large variations might indicate inconsistent practices among District Offices in classifying cases into service requests and complaints (see paras. 2.21 and 2.22), or failure in recording some cases (see paras. 2.23 and 2.24).

Note 13: *According to FEHD circulars, all complaint handling offices are required to input the service requests and complaints received into the CMIS as soon as possible. The offices should also update through the CMIS the progress of all the service requests and complaints as soon as possible (e.g. acknowledgements or interim replies sent).*

Receiving and recording enquiries and complaints

Classifying cases

2.21 For cases which are required to be recorded in the CMIS (i.e. service requests and complaints), District Offices had adopted different practices in classifying them. In June and July 2012, Audit visited District Offices A, D and S (Note 14). Audit noted that District Office S, which recorded the smallest proportion (0.1% or 6 cases) of complaint cases in 2011-12, adopted a narrow definition of public complaints (Note 15). District Office A, which recorded the highest proportion (13% or 1,945 cases) of complaint cases in 2011-12, adopted a wider definition (Note 16). Audit also noted that cases of similar nature had been classified differently by different District Offices. Case 1 shows an example.

Note 14: *District Office A had the highest proportion of public complaint cases among the 19 District Offices. District Office S had the lowest proportion. District Office D had a proportion which was near to the overall average (2.2%) for the 19 District Offices.*

Note 15: *According to District Office S, a service request/complaint would be recorded as a complaint case only if it was related to dissatisfaction with the performance of FEHD staff. All other service requests/complaints would be recorded as service request cases.*

Note 16: *According to District Office A, a service request/complaint would be recorded as a complaint case if it was related to dissatisfaction with any matters within the FEHD's scope of services. All other service requests/complaints would be recorded as service request cases.*

Case 1

Classification of water dripping from air-conditioners (District Offices A and D)

1. In April 2011, a member of the public telephoned District Office D. She told the District Office about the dripping of water from air-conditioners of two residential units in the district. According to its practice, District Office D classified the case as a service request from the public. The request was recorded in the CMIS for follow-up.

2. In the same month, another member of the public telephoned the 1823 Call Centre. He told the Call Centre about the dripping of water from an air-conditioner of a residential unit in a district. The case was referred to District Office A, the responsible District Office. According to its practice (see Note 16 to para. 2.21), District Office A classified the case as a public complaint. The complaint was recorded in the CMIS for follow-up.

Audit comments

3. The inconsistent classification practices in different District Offices are a cause for concern.

Source: FEHD records

2.22 In this connection, Audit noted that the 1823 Call Centre considered it more appropriate to classify cases relating to water dripping from air-conditioners as complaints. In January 2011, during its exchange of e-mails with the FEHD about the classification of cases, the 1823 Call Centre stated that “as the callers’ dissatisfaction with environmental nuisance/hygiene relating to water dripping/seepage or removal of dead animal body concerns the services of the FEHD, we consider that such cases should continue to be treated as complaints”. There is a need for the FEHD to clarify the matter, with a view to standardising its practice which should be consistent with that adopted across government departments.

Receiving and recording enquiries and complaints

Recording service requests and complaints received by hawker control teams

2.23 Each of the 19 District Offices has a hawker control team. Members of the public may approach (e.g. by telephone) the control teams to make service requests and complaints about hawker matters (e.g. unlicensed hawker activities). According to their practices, the control teams recorded the requests and complaints in a manual register for follow-up and recording in the CMIS. During the visits to the three District Offices in June and July 2012, Audit examined the 369 entries in the manual registers of District Offices A, D and S for the month of April 2011, October 2011 and March 2012 respectively. Audit found that, in total, 174 (47%) entries had not been recorded in the CMIS.

2.24 In Audit's view, failing to record complaint cases in the CMIS could undermine its reliability and its monitoring function. This is also not conducive to the systematic analysis of the public's service requests and complaints, with a view to learning lessons therefrom.

Audit recommendations

2.25 **Audit has recommended that the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene should:**

- (a) **look into the reasons for any significant variations among the complaint handling offices in the number of service requests and complaints received from the public, with a view to identifying possible errors, omissions and inconsistent practices in recording service requests and complaints;**
- (b) **in consultation with the Head, Efficiency Unit, standardise the practices of different complaint handling offices of the FEHD in classifying the public's service requests and complaints;**
- (c) **take measures to ensure that the standard practice is effectively followed by FEHD staff; and**
- (d) **remind FEHD staff to record in the CMIS all service requests and complaints received from the public about the FEHD.**

Response from the Administration

2.26 The Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene generally agrees with the audit recommendations. He has said that:

- (a) the FEHD will review the criteria and practice for classifying cases into service requests and complaints in consultation with the EU and to ensure that a consistent standard is adopted; and
- (b) the FEHD will remind staff to properly record in the CMIS all complaints/service requests received from the public about the Department.

2.27 The Head, Efficiency Unit has said that the EU stands ready to provide advice or assistance required by the FEHD.

PART 3: INVESTIGATIONS AND FOLLOW-UP ACTIONS

3.1 This PART examines the following issues relating to the FEHD's investigations and follow-up actions on public enquiries and complaints:

- (a) assignment of cases for investigation (see paras. 3.2 to 3.8);
- (b) timeliness of responses to service requests and complaints (see paras. 3.9 to 3.16); and
- (c) handling of repeated service requests and complaints (see paras. 3.17 to 3.22).

Assignment of cases for investigation

3.2 For each service request/complaint received from the public, the complaint handling office assigns one staff member (the case officer) to look into the case (Note 17). For public complaints about FEHD staff in relation to their execution of duties or delivery of services (staff-related complaints), the FEHD requires that:

- (a) the officer being complained about should not be assigned as the case officer; and
- (b) the case officer should normally be at the same rank or equivalent or of a rank higher than the officer being complained about.

Note 17: *The assignment is generally based on the geographical location of the subject matter of the case.*

3.3 Staff-related complaints received from the public are all forwarded to the Complaints Management Section in the first place (Note 18). The Section will decide on the suitable parties (e.g. the Section itself, FEHD headquarters, or operational units) to deal with the staff-related complaints.

Assigning complaint cases

3.4 Audit examined 30 cases of service request/complaint which the FEHD received from the public in 2011-12 (Note 19). In one case, the subordinate of the officer being complained about was designated as the case officer. Case 2 shows details of the complaint.

Note 18: *Apart from staff-related complaints received from the public, complaints received from FEHD staff are also forwarded to the Complaints Management Section. Such complaints from staff are outside the scope of this audit.*

Note 19: *The 30 cases comprised 15 service requests and 15 complaints. The cases were selected from District Offices A, D and S during the audit visits in June and July 2012 (see para. 2.21).*

Investigations and follow-up actions

Case 2

A staff-related complaint in April 2011 (District Office A)

1. In September 2010, a member of the public requested the FEHD to look into the operation of unlicensed food premises on Street A, located within District Office A's responsible areas. In response, the District Office took prosecution action against the food premises. The case was closed in October 2010.
2. In April 2011, the above-mentioned person further complained that the officer-in-charge of District Office A had failed to perform his duties in relation to the management of unlicensed food premises on Street A.
3. As the complaint was staff-related, it was forwarded to the Complaints Management Section for action.
4. The Complaints Management Section considered that the complaint was about unlicensed food premises on Street A, and referred it to the officer-in-charge of District Office A.
5. The officer-in-charge of District Office A assigned a Senior Health Inspector as the case officer. In April 2011, the case officer took prosecution action against the unlicensed food premises concerned. The case was closed in the same month.

Audit comments

6. In addition to unlicensed food premises, the complaint was also lodged against the officer-in-charge of District Office A. The case officer, being a subordinate of the officer being complained about, was not in a position to look into the staff-related element of this complaint. The complainant's concerns about the alleged sub-standard performance of the officer-in-charge of District Office A had not been effectively addressed.

Source: FEHD records

3.5 Audit noted that the above case was not an isolated incident. During the audit visits to District Offices A, D and S in June and July 2012, Audit was told that situations similar to Case 2 did occur occasionally. Upon enquiry in August 2012, the FEHD informed Audit that some complainants were used to lodging repeated complaints on operational issues, and making remarks about supervisory incompetence against the head of the District Office. The FEHD considered that the crux of the complaints was about operational issues. Such complaints were normally referred to the District Offices concerned for follow-up action.

3.6 Audit considers that the aforementioned practice might not be in line with the spirit of the FEHD's requirement (see para. 3.2). There was a risk that the complainants' allegations might not be properly dealt with. This would not only undermine the effectiveness of complaint handling but also affect public confidence in the complaint handling process. In this connection, both effectiveness and confidence are the essential features of a good complaint handling system (see item (j) of Appendix A).

Audit recommendation

3.7 **Audit has recommended that the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene should, with a view to improving the effectiveness of the FEHD's complaint handling system, remind FEHD staff to assign appropriate officers to look into the staff-related elements of complaints, having due regard to the need for an independent officer normally at the same or higher rank than the officer being complained about.**

Response from the Administration

3.8 The Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene generally agrees with the audit recommendation. He has said that the FEHD will remind staff to comply with its guidelines on handling staff-related complaints.

Timeliness of responses to service requests and complaints

3.9 Timeliness of response is an essential feature of a good complaint handling system. Good practices suggest that clear time frame for the complaint handling process should be set. If more time is needed, complainants should be informed of the delay and the reasons for it (see item (d) of Appendix A).

3.10 On its website, the FEHD has pledged to reply to all enquiries (e.g. service requests) and complaints within 10 days, and to give an interim reply if a substantive reply is not possible within this period (Note 20).

FEHD's performance pledge

3.11 In 20 (67%) of the 30 service request/complaint cases examined by Audit (see para. 3.4), the FEHD had not given interim/substantive replies to the enquirers/complainants within the 10-day period as pledged (see Table 2).

Note 20: *As at June 2012, the FEHD stated on its website that “We will reply to all enquiries and complaints, oral or written, within 10 days of receipt of such communications. If a substantive reply is not possible within this period, an interim reply will be given”.*

Table 2

**Compliance with the pledged time frame in giving replies
(Audit sample of 30 cases)**

Pledged time frame followed/not followed	Number of cases		
	Service request case	Complaint case	Total
Followed	5 (33%)	5 (33%)	10 (33%)
Not followed	10 (67%) (Note 1)	10 (67%) (Note 2)	20 (67%)
Total	15 (100%)	15 (100%)	30 (100%)

Source: Audit analysis of FEHD records

Note 1: The average delay was 16 days.

Note 2: The average delay was 59 days.

3.12 Audit noted that the FEHD had only issued an acknowledgement of receipt of the service request/complaint in 12 cases. In this connection, an interim reply (indicating, among others, the progress of the case and the reasons why more time is needed to give a substantive reply — see item (d) of Appendix A), instead of a simple acknowledgement of receipt, should be given in line with the FEHD’s pledge.

The internal time frame and pledged time frame

3.13 Audit noted that FEHD circulars stipulated a time frame (internal time frame) which was different from what was pledged on the FEHD website. The internal time frame allowed more time (e.g. 30 days — Note 21) for FEHD staff to

Note 21: *For example, for service requests and complaints received from the public which were not related to water seepage in buildings, FEHD staff should aim to resolve the case and give a substantive reply within 30 days after receipt. FEHD staff only needed to give an interim reply if the substantive reply could not be given.*

Investigations and follow-up actions

give a reply. Of the 30 cases examined by Audit, 24 (80%) had followed the internal time frame in giving replies (see Table 3).

Table 3

**Compliance with the internal time frame in giving replies
(Audit sample of 30 cases)**

Internal time frame followed/not followed	Number of cases		
	Service request case	Complaint case	Total
Followed	13 (87%)	11 (73%)	24 (80%)
Not followed	2 (13%)	4 (27%)	6 (20%)
Total	15 (100%)	15 (100%)	30 (100%)

Source: Audit analysis of FEHD records

3.14 Apparently, the high compliance rate of 80% in Table 3, as compared with 33% in Table 2, was due to the use of an internal time frame which is less stringent than that pledged on the FEHD website. There is a need for the FEHD to align its internal and pledged time frames, in order to avoid inconsistencies and provide better guidelines to all staff concerned.

Audit recommendations

3.15 Audit has *recommended* that the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene should:

- (a) revise the FEHD's internal and pledged time frames for replying to service requests and complaints, with a view to aligning them with each other; and
- (b) remind FEHD staff to strictly follow the revised time frames for replying to service requests and complaints.

Response from the Administration

3.16 The Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene agrees with the audit recommendations. He has said that the FEHD will align the internal and pledged time frames for replying to service requests and complaints, and will remind staff of the need to strictly comply with the stipulated time frames.

Handling of repeated service requests and complaints

3.17 Members of the public may make repeated service requests and complaints to the FEHD about the same subject. This happens, for example, when the enquirer/complainant is dissatisfied with the ways the FEHD has handled his previous requests/complaints, or when the problems remain unresolved.

3.18 According to FEHD circulars, such a case of repeated service requests/complaints would require actions such as reviewing the case by an independent officer, and escalating the case to senior management for a decision on whether further correspondence with the enquirer/complainant should be discontinued. In this regard, repeated complaints made by the same person on the same subject should be treated as one complaint, unless there is a material change in the substance or circumstances of the case.

Identifying repeated cases for appropriate actions

3.19 During the audit visits to District Offices A, D and S in June and July 2012, Audit was informed by FEHD staff that they generally inclined not to classify frequent service requests and complaints as repeated cases for recording in the CMIS (Note 22). Case 3 illustrates the practices in District Office A. In Case 3, while many service requests/complaints were received from a member of the public about the same subject matter, most of them were classified as new cases.

Note 22: *When referring service requests and complaints to the FEHD, the 1823 Call Centre assigned a unique reference number (Integrated Call Centre Number) to each referral case. Cases bearing the same Integrated Call Centre Number denote repeated cases received by the 1823 Call Centre. According to FEHD staff in District Offices A, D and S, they would record such cases as repeated cases in the CMIS. Other than such cases, it was generally not their practice to classify service requests and complaints as repeated cases in the CMIS.*

Case 3

**Handling service requests and complaints about the same subject matter
(District Office A)**

1. In April 2009, a member of the public requested the FEHD to look into illegal encroachment on the pavements outside Restaurant A, which was located within District Office A's responsible areas. The Restaurant put tables on the pavements causing obstructions and nuisances. As at June 2012, the complainant had made a total of 21 service requests/complaints about the situation, including the latest complaint made in May 2012.

2. While the service requests/complaints were all about the same subject matter, District Office A classified most of them as new cases. District Office A recorded all the cases, new or repeated, in the CMIS, as follows:

Classification	Number of cases
New cases	17 (81%)
Repeated cases	4 (19%)
Total	21 (100%)

3. District Office A assigned staff in the Health Inspector grade as case officers for the service requests/complaints. In each case, the case officer took actions (e.g. inspections and prosecution actions) on Restaurant A, and considered action for the case completed.

Audit comments

4. For many service requests/complaints received subsequent to the initial service request of April 2009, District Office A classified them as new cases. Given that the same complainant had made complaints on the same subject matter, such classification was not entirely appropriate.

5. For those service requests/complaints which District Office A had classified as repeated cases, Audit noted that neither the required actions (e.g. escalating the case for decision by senior management — see para. 3.18) had been triggered, nor had the reasons for not taking such actions been recorded.

Source: FEHD records

Investigations and follow-up actions

3.20 It is unsatisfactory that cases of repeated service requests and complaints were not classified as such, and that the cases were not escalated to the senior management for attention in a systematic manner. Repeated service requests/complaints may call for management attention (e.g. taking more stringent regulatory actions).

Audit recommendations

3.21 **Audit has *recommended* that the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene should:**

- (a) **review the adequacy of the FEHD's mechanism in:**
 - (i) **identifying repeated cases of service request/complaint for monitoring purpose;**
 - (ii) **identifying systemic issues from the repeated cases, which may need to be addressed at a higher and more strategic level; and**
 - (iii) **escalating the identified repeated cases and systemic issues to management for attention, advice and direction; and**
- (b) **take measures to ensure that the mechanism is followed by all FEHD staff.**

Response from the Administration

3.22 The Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene agrees with the audit recommendations. He has said that since August 2012, the 1823 Call Centre has provided monthly reports of repeated complaints to enable departments to identify systemic issues from repeated cases and to take appropriate action. He has also said that, in order to address identified repeated cases and systemic issues at a senior management level, the FEHD will put repeated complaints and long-overdue cases as standing agenda items for discussion at management meetings at the headquarters and district level.

PART 4: MANAGEMENT OF LONG-OUTSTANDING CASES

4.1 This PART examines the FEHD's management of cases of public enquiries and complaints that remain unresolved for a long time. Audit has found room for improvement in the following areas:

- (a) monitoring of long-outstanding cases (paras. 4.2 to 4.13); and
- (b) handling of water-seepage cases (paras. 4.14 to 4.21).

Monitoring of long-outstanding cases

4.2 The FEHD requires its staff to deal with public enquiries and complaints promptly. According to its circulars, for service requests and complaints received from the public about water-seepage in buildings (water-seepage cases), the FEHD aims to have these cases resolved within 90 days after receipt. For other service requests and complaints (non-water-seepage cases), the FEHD aims to have them resolved in 30 days (see also Note 21 to para. 3.13). The FEHD's complaint handling offices maintain case files and record progress of the cases (e.g. date of receipt of the service request/complaint and date of closing the case) in the CMIS.

4.3 Since January 2012, the Complaints Management Section of the FEHD has generated from the CMIS a monthly report showing cases, received through the 1823 Call Centre or otherwise, which were yet to be completed (Note 23). Operational units of the FEHD are expected to follow up the outstanding cases for which they are responsible. The monthly report highlighted 2,965 cases which, as at 31 March 2012, had been outstanding for more than six months since their target

Note 23: *Since June 2011, the FEHD has generated monthly reports of outstanding cases. The reports include case details and the respective responsible officers to facilitate operational units to trace, update and resolve the cases. Since January 2012, cases referred from the 1823 Call Centre have also been shown in the report.*

Management of long-outstanding cases

completion dates (long-outstanding cases — Note 24). Table 4 shows details of these long-outstanding cases.

Table 4
Long-outstanding cases
(Monthly report of 31 March 2012)

Number of months elapsed since the target completion date (Note)	Number of outstanding cases		
	Water-seepage case	Non-water-seepage case	Total
Over 6 months to 12 months	1,575	7	1,582
Over 12 months to 18 months	535	2	537
Over 18 months	845	1	846
Total	2,955	10	2,965

Source: FEHD monthly report of outstanding cases

Note: The target completion date for water-seepage cases was 90 days (or three months) after receipt of the service request/complaint, and that for non-water-seepage cases was 30 days (or one month) after receipt (see para. 4.2).

Note 24: *According to the monthly report, there were another 4,491 cases which, as at 31 March 2012, had been outstanding for six months or less since their target completion dates.*

Inaccuracy of the monthly report of outstanding cases

4.4 Audit selected 30 long-outstanding cases from the monthly report of 31 March 2012 for examination (Note 25). Audit noted that 21 (70%) of these cases should not have been shown as “outstanding” in the monthly report. FEHD records indicated that necessary actions for these 21 cases had long been completed before 31 March 2012. In one case, the actions had been completed as early as 2006. However, the CMIS records had not been updated until June 2012 during the course of the audit.

4.5 Given that the monthly report provides useful management information for monitoring the FEHD’s progress in handling outstanding cases, it is important that the information kept in the CMIS should always be kept up-to-date.

Data inaccuracy of the CMIS

4.6 In 21 (70%) of the 30 cases examined, the dates of receiving the service requests/complaints as recorded in the CMIS did not tally with those in the case files. The discrepancies ranged from 1 to 13 days. One case file was missing (Note 26). There is a need to improve the data accuracy of the CMIS, so as to better facilitate the monitoring of outstanding cases by the FEHD.

Long-outstanding cases

4.7 Audit analysed the time taken by the FEHD to complete the 30 selected cases (Note 27). Table 5 shows that 16 cases (53%) were completed more than six months after the target completion date, 14 of which were water-seepage cases.

Note 25: *The 30 cases comprised 10 non-water-seepage cases which had been outstanding for more than six months, and 20 water-seepage cases which had been outstanding for the longest time as at 31 March 2012.*

Note 26: *According to the CMIS, the case was completed in February 2012.*

Note 27: *Of the 30 cases examined by Audit, 21 cases were in fact completed as at 31 March 2012 (see para. 4.4). The remaining 9 cases also had actions completed during April and May 2012.*

Management of long-outstanding cases

Table 5

**Time taken to complete service requests and enquiries received from the public
(Audit sample of 30 cases)**

Number of months elapsed since the target completion date	Number of cases		
	Water-seepage	Non-water-seepage	Total
6 months or below	2	2	4
Over 6 months to 12 months	2	1	3
Over 12 months to 18 months	1	0	1
Over 18 months	11	1	12
	(Note 1)	(Note 2)	
Total	16	4	20
Cases completed before the target completion date	4	6	10
Overall	20	10	30

Source: Audit analysis of FEHD records

Note 1: The longest time taken was 64 months after the target completion date of February 2007.

Note 2: The longest time taken was 24 months after the target completion date of February 2010.

4.8 The FEHD may sometimes need more time to resolve the more complicated cases. However, the long time taken in resolving some cases, particularly water-seepage cases, is a cause for concern (see paras. 4.18 and 4.19 for further observations on water-seepage cases). There is a need for the FEHD to closely monitor the situation and identify any inadequacies in handling service requests and complaints.

The role of the Complaints Management Section

4.9 As mentioned in paragraph 1.3(b), the Complaints Management Section of the FEHD assumes overall responsibility for managing the Department's public complaints.

4.10 Audit noted that the Complaints Management Section, with an establishment of nine staff (see Appendix B), only provided monthly reports for reference by individual operational units. The FEHD operational units were allowed to follow up the monthly reports in whatever ways as they saw fit. The Complaints Management Section did not take measures to ensure that the operational units had followed up every monthly report of outstanding cases. This is not satisfactory in the light of the following:

- (a) the monthly report of 31 March 2012 contained errors which did not appear to have been detected by operational units (see para. 4.4); and
- (b) in some cases, the operational units took much longer than the target completion time to resolve the cases (see para. 4.7).

4.11 Apart from managing the public's service requests and complaints, the Complaints Management Section is also responsible for managing complaints from staff. Over the years, the public's service requests and complaints about the FEHD had increased significantly. For example, service requests and complaints received from the public increased by 20%, from 153,000 cases in 2007 to 183,000 cases in 2011. However, the FEHD had not reviewed the staffing of the Complaints Management Section, taking account of such factors as the increase in workload during the period and the related resource implications.

Audit recommendations

4.12 **Audit has recommended that the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene should:**

- (a) **review the data accuracy of the CMIS, with a view to improving the reliability of the management information it generates, including:**

Management of long-outstanding cases

- (i) **amending the incorrect data in the CMIS; and**
- (ii) **taking measures to guard against errors and omissions in recording data;**
- (b) **remind FEHD operational units to properly maintain all case files for service requests and complaints;**
- (c) **closely monitor long-outstanding cases of service request and complaint;**
- (d) **look into the reasons for the long time taken to complete some of the cases, so as to identify room for improving the FEHD's practices in handling service requests and complaints; and**
- (e) **review the role and establishment of the Complaints Management Section in overseeing the FEHD's public enquiries and complaints to ensure that outstanding cases of service request and complaint are followed through promptly and effectively.**

Response from the Administration

4.13 The Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene agrees with the audit recommendations. He has said that:

- (a) the FEHD is fully aware of the need to improve data accuracy of the CMIS and has been taking action to urge staff to update case progress in the CMIS promptly to reflect the latest position;
- (b) the FEHD has also issued reminders to staff about the need to expedite action on overdue cases and to promptly update the latest position of the cases in the CMIS. The monthly reports of outstanding cases are copied to directorate officers of the Environmental Hygiene Branch of the Department for discussion at their regular meetings with section/district heads;
- (c) with the above concerted efforts, the number of overdue cases has considerably reduced; and

Management of long-outstanding cases

- (d) the FEHD will also:
 - (i) remind staff of the need to ensure that accurate data is input into the CMIS and that the records of the CMIS are updated promptly to reflect the latest position of the cases;
 - (ii) remind staff of the importance of keeping case files in safe custody;
 - (iii) include repeated complaints and long-overdue cases as standing agenda items for discussion at management meetings at headquarters and district level; and
 - (iv) review the role and establishment of the Complaints Management Section after the implementation of the new CMIS.

Handling of water-seepage cases

4.14 Of the service requests and complaints which were long-outstanding, the majority were water-seepage cases (see Table 4 in para. 4.3).

Joint office for handling water seepage

4.15 Water seepage in residential buildings concerns private building management and maintenance. The FEHD only needs to intervene when the seepage causes a public health nuisance (Note 28). Other government departments (e.g. Buildings Department — BD, and Water Supplies Department) may also need to intervene if, for example, the seepage involves building safety risks and water wastage. In mid-2006, the Joint Office of the BD and the FEHD (Joint Office) was set up to provide a one-stop service for handling water-seepage cases.

4.16 The Joint Office investigates water-seepage cases in three stages, namely:

- (a) ***Stage I: Confirmation of water-seepage nuisance.*** FEHD staff visit the premises affected by water seepage. If water-seepage nuisance is found, investigation will move on to Stage II;
- (b) ***Stage II: Initial investigation.*** FEHD staff visit the premises suspected to have caused the seepage. Basic tests (e.g. colour water test) will be carried out to identify the source of seepage. The case will move on to Stage III if the source of seepage cannot be identified; and
- (c) ***Stage III: Professional investigation.*** More in-depth tests will be conducted by the BD to identify the source of seepage. Private consultants may also be engaged to conduct investigation.

Note 28: *According to the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance (Cap. 132), the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene, as the Authority under the relevant provision of the Ordinance, may serve a nuisance notice “on the person by reason of whose act, default or sufferance the nuisance arose or continues, or if that person cannot be found, on the occupier or owner of the premises or vessel on which the nuisance exists, requiring him to abate the nuisance within the period specified in the notice, and to do such things as may be necessary for that purpose, and the notice may, if the Authority thinks fit, specify any works to be executed for the purpose aforesaid”.*

Guidelines for investigations

4.17 The FEHD has drawn up guidelines for carrying out Stage I and Stage II investigations. The guidelines stipulate, among other things, the target completion days for major activities, as follows:

- (a) Stage I investigation to be completed within 6 working days after receipt of the water-seepage case;
- (b) Stage II investigation to be completed within 26 working days after receipt of the case; and
- (c) where necessary, the case is to be referred to the BD for Stage III investigation within 38 working days after receipt of the case.

Long periods of inaction in some cases

4.18 Of the 14 long overdue water-seepage cases referred to in Table 5 of paragraph 4.7, 10 were more recent cases (completed during the period 2010-11 to 2012-13). Audit examined these 10 cases to see if there were lessons to learn. Audit noted that in 8 (80%) of the 10 cases, there appeared to be some inaction during the course of investigation by the FEHD. The periods of inaction in individual cases ranged from 14 to 57 months, with an average of 44 months. Case 4 shows an example.

Case 4

Periods of inaction during the course of investigation by the FEHD

1. In June 2007, a member of the public telephoned the 1823 Call Centre, requesting that the water-seepage problem in her premises should be looked into. The FEHD gave an initial reply to the enquirer acknowledging receipt of the case.
2. From July 2007 to June 2010 (36 months), no development in the case was documented on record, nor did the case file show any follow-up actions taken by the FEHD.
3. The case appeared to have been left unattended for 36 months until July 2010 when the enquirer telephoned the FEHD again. She asked about the progress of her case. The FEHD gave another reply to her acknowledging receipt of her enquiry.
4. In August 2010, the FEHD inspected the premises and took moisture measurement. Results were indicative of water seepage in the premises.
5. In September and October 2010, the FEHD followed up the case and identified the likely causes of water seepage. The FEHD requested the occupier of the premises which had probably caused the seepage to fix the problem. The situation improved substantially. The enquirer told the FEHD that she would keep in view the situation and notify the FEHD of further development.
6. In late April 2012, upon Audit's request, the FEHD located the case file for audit examination. The FEHD attempted to contact the enquirer but found that she had already moved. The FEHD considered that actions on the case had been completed, and subsequently closed the case in May 2012.

Source: FEHD records

4.19 It is not satisfactory that a water-seepage case has been left unattended for a long time. For example, an inaction period of 36 months in Case 4 was unacceptable given that the target time frame for completing both Stage I and Stage II investigations was 26 working days. The FEHD needs to closely monitor the progress of its investigations, and look into the reasons for long periods of inaction.

Audit recommendations

4.20 **Audit has *recommended* that the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene should:**

- (a) **look into the reasons for any long periods of inaction of the FEHD during investigations of water-seepage cases; and**
- (b) **take effective measures to improve the efficiency of the FEHD's investigation of water-seepage cases.**

Response from the Administration

4.21 The Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene agrees with the audit recommendations. He has said that:

- (a) the FEHD had looked into the reasons for long periods of inaction for some cases and found that they were mainly due to shortage of staff and frequent turnover of Environmental Nuisance Investigators who are non-civil service contract staff; and
- (b) to enhance efficiency in the investigation process, the FEHD has carried out a number of improvement measures, including the provision of additional staff to cope with the increased workload, provision of Senior Health Inspector posts to strengthen supervision of the Joint Office, and creation of Health Inspector posts to replace some of the Environmental Nuisance Investigators so as to reduce staff turnover and enhance workforce stability and continuity in the Joint Office's work. The FEHD will continue to closely monitor the staffing situation in handling water-seepage cases.

PART 5: LEARNING FROM ENQUIRIES AND COMPLAINTS

5.1 This PART examines how the FEHD learns lessons from public enquiries and complaints. The following issues are discussed:

- (a) mechanism for analysing enquiry and complaint data (paras. 5.2 to 5.9);
- (b) senior management involvement (paras. 5.10 to 5.14);
- (c) sharing experience among staff (paras. 5.15 to 5.21); and
- (d) obtaining feedback from enquirers and complainants (paras. 5.22 to 5.25).

Mechanism for analysing enquiry and complaint data

5.2 Complaint handling by government departments is not just about dealing with individual service requests and complaints. It is also about improving a department's services by using the insights obtained from complaint data. Through a good complaint handling system, service requests and complaints could facilitate reviews on strategy, service delivery and policy. The reviews would bring about service improvements (see item (j) of Appendix A).

Data mining techniques

5.3 Data mining is the process of analysing data from different perspectives, summarising data into useful information and converting the information into knowledge (e.g. about historical patterns and future trends). Data mining can help unveil valuable insights from complaint data.

5.4 To maximise user access and analysis, a central repository of data is needed for data mining. In this regard, the FEHD has maintained in the CMIS a database of service requests and complaints it received from the public. Data for about 180,000 service requests and complaints a year were input into the CMIS.

Analyses of CMIS data

5.5 For management information purposes, the FEHD has conducted on a regular basis two types of analyses of CMIS data, as follows:

- (a) *Monthly report of outstanding cases.* It showed the cases which had remained outstanding after the target completion date (Note 29 — see also para. 4.3); and
- (b) *Half-yearly report of outstanding cases.* It showed the month-end number of outstanding cases by types over a six-month period, indicating their general trend.

The potential of CMIS in data analysis

5.6 The FEHD has a large database in the CMIS. However, the FEHD's analysis of the CMIS database has been limited. Audit estimates that, as at March 2012, the CMIS database had about 1.8 million records of service requests and complaints. Such a large database provides good opportunities for the FEHD to further apply data mining techniques for compiling useful management information on public enquiries and complaints. Appendix D shows examples of other useful management information which the FEHD can generate from the CMIS database. Such information (e.g. inactive cases and black spots) could help bring about improvements in FEHD services.

5.7 Audit also notes that, despite being a rich source of enquiry and complaint data, the existing CMIS (Note 30) does not have facilities (e.g. reporting tools) for users to perform their own analysis of data (Note 31).

Note 29: *In the report, case details (number of cases and case file references) were analysed by outstanding periods, District Offices, types of cases, etc.*

Note 30: *In July 2011, the FEHD commenced a business process re-engineering study to review its enquiry and complaint handling processes. The study recommended that a new computer system for complaint handling should be developed to replace the existing CMIS (see paras. 6.15 to 6.17).*

Note 31: *To compile ad hoc management reports, operational units of the FEHD need to seek the assistance of information technology staff to extract relevant data from the CMIS.*

Audit recommendations

5.8 Audit has *recommended* that the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene should better realise the potential of the CMIS database in generating management information on public enquiries and complaints, through such measures as:

- (a) developing more useful reporting tools for the CMIS to facilitate operational unit staff in applying data mining techniques to analyse enquiry and complaint data; and
- (b) making better use of data mining techniques for compiling, on a regular basis, relevant analyses of enquiry and complaint data.

Response from the Administration

5.9 The Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene agrees with the audit recommendations. He has said that the FEHD had initiated a business process re-engineering (BPR) study, which recommended that a new CMIS equipped with various reporting tools for data mining and analysis should be developed (see paras. 6.15 to 6.17). The audit recommendations will be taken into account in developing the new CMIS. In the interim, the FEHD will continue to take measures for better management information on service requests and complaints, for example:

- (a) in 2011, the FEHD conducted analysis of its complaint cases completed by the Ombudsman in 2009-10 and 2010-11 to identify irregularities and drew up improvement measures with a view to enabling staff to handle complaints more effectively. The findings were subsequently issued to all district/section heads, who were asked to implement improvement measures and ensure compliance by their staff. The relevant information has also been posted onto the FEHD's Environmental Hygiene Branch Bulletin Board for easy reference. The analytical work will continue to be conducted on an annual basis; and
- (b) upon the FEHD's request, the 1823 Call Centre has started (since April 2012) to enhance its monthly reports by including the number of major categories of complaints that were referred to each district and to provide the FEHD with location analysis, i.e. sorting of complaints by area and street for major categories of complaints in their monthly reports. District/section heads will continue to make good use of the above reports so as to identify the locations which are more prone to complaints for necessary follow-up or proactive measures.

Senior management involvement

5.10 The FEHD's Deputy Director (Environmental Hygiene) oversees the operations of the 19 District Offices to which the majority of the FEHD's public enquiries and complaints are related. Every two months, the Deputy Director holds meetings with District Office staff to consider, among other matters, issues about the handling of public enquiries and complaints.

5.11 To support senior management in gaining insights into public enquiries and complaints, District Office staff should keep themselves abreast of the issues in their districts. During the visits to District Offices A, D and S in June and July 2012 (see para. 2.21), Audit noted that there was room for improving their practices in this regard, as follows:

- (a) *Frequency of District Office meetings.* District Offices held periodical meetings for their staff to discuss various operational matters (including public enquiry and complaint matters). Audit reviewed the schedule of meetings held by the three District Offices in 2011-12. Audit found that in the District Offices, there were occasions on which the interval between meetings was longer than two months. There was a need for these District Offices to hold more frequent meetings, so as to enable their staff to better update themselves on the topic before attending their Deputy Director's bi-monthly meetings (see para. 5.10); and
- (b) *Matters discussed at District Office meetings.* Audit reviewed the three District Offices' minutes of the meetings held in 2011-12. Audit found that, in general, there was no thorough deliberation of matters on the management of public enquiries and complaints, including systemic issues identified therefrom. It would be useful for the meetings to deliberate on management reports using data mining techniques (see para. 5.6) to identify systemic issues arising from public enquiries and complaints for discussion with the Deputy Director in the bi-monthly meetings.

5.12 Moreover, Audit notes that the FEHD has not established any designated working group/task force to look into systemic issues arising from public enquiries and complaints for drawing lessons. While the Complaints Management Section assumes overall responsibility for managing public complaints for the FEHD, the Section does not participate in the Deputy Director's bi-monthly meetings with the District Offices. Audit considers that for a department which receives from the

Learning from enquiries and complaints

public some 180,000 service requests and complaints a year, there is merit in engaging a designated working group/task force to help senior management gain insights into the matters.

Audit recommendations

5.13 Audit has *recommended* that the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene should:

- (a) remind District Offices to hold regular meetings for their staff to deliberate matters relating to public enquiries and complaints, taking account of the needs for:**
 - (i) shortening the intervals between meetings so as to better align their timing with that of the FEHD senior management meetings (e.g. the bi-monthly meetings chaired by the Deputy Director); and**
 - (ii) including the thorough deliberation of public enquiry and complaint matters as a standing agenda item for the meetings, with a view to identifying systemic issues for discussion with the senior management; and**
- (b) consider enhancing the role of the Complaints Management Section as a working group/task force to deliberate public enquiry and complaint matters.**

Response from the Administration

5.14 The Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene agrees with the audit recommendations. He has said that both regular and ad hoc meetings are held at headquarters and district level to resolve issues identified in a timely manner. Moreover, the FEHD will:

- (a) include repeated complaints and long-overdue cases as standing agenda items for discussion at management meetings at headquarters and district level; and**
- (b) review the role and establishment of the Complaints Management Section after the implementation of the new CMIS.**

Sharing experience among staff

5.15 Apart from helping its senior management learn from public enquiries and complaints, the FEHD also facilitates experience sharing among staff in handling the enquiries and complaints. Every year, the FEHD organises training courses for its staff relating to enquiry and complaint handling. The FEHD also provides relevant self-learning materials to its staff.

5.16 In 2011, the FEHD organised 36 training courses relating to enquiry and complaint handling (Note 32), including 26 for new recruits and 10 (refresher courses) for existing staff. The courses took different forms (e.g. talks, seminars and workshops), covering different topics such as handling confrontation and experience sharing by frontline staff. The course duration varied. At the end of each course, the FEHD conducted a course evaluation. Most participants considered that the training courses were very effective in achieving the training objectives (Note 33).

Participation in refresher courses

5.17 According to the FEHD, target participants of refresher courses included staff in five grades (Note 34) whose duties involved direct handling of public enquiries and complaints. Participation in refresher courses is voluntary (Note 35). Audit noted that, despite the training courses' good ratings (see para. 5.16), participation in the refresher courses in 2011 was less than enthusiastic. For the 10 refresher courses arranged in 2011, a total of 630 training places were available. Take-up rates of the training places for individual courses ranged from 48% to 94%.

Note 32: *The training courses covered enquiry and complaint handling as well as other topics.*

Note 33: *In 2011, over 90% of the participants ranked the training sessions at the top two ratings along a five-point scale.*

Note 34: *The five grades were Environmental Nuisance Investigator, Foreman, Hawker Control Officer, Health Inspector and Market Assistant.*

Note 35: *Unlike refresher courses, participation in training courses for FEHD new recruits is compulsory.*

Learning from enquiries and complaints

5.18 Upon enquiry, Audit was informed in July 2012 that the FEHD could arrange additional sessions for a refresher course should it be over-enrolled. However, given the low participation rate, this was usually not necessary. In the event, a total of 474 staff participated in the refresher courses, including 384 staff in the five relevant grades (see Note 34 to para. 5.17).

5.19 The refresher courses provide good opportunities for FEHD staff to share their experiences and best practices in handling public enquiries and complaints. In this connection, Audit noted that the five relevant grades had about 4,000 staff as at December 2011. It is not satisfactory that only 384 (about 10%) of them received refresher training in the year. Given the good ratings of the refresher courses, there is merit for more staff in the relevant grades to undergo refresher training in order to help improve the FEHD's handling of public enquiries and complaints.

Audit recommendations

5.20 **Audit has *recommended* that the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene should:**

- (a) **ascertain the reasons for FEHD staff's low participation in refresher courses; and**
- (b) **taking account of the reasons, take measures to further promote FEHD staff's participation in refresher courses.**

Response from the Administration

5.21 The Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene generally agrees with the audit recommendations. He has said that the FEHD will take measures to promote staff awareness and participation in refresher courses and encourage the seniors/supervisors to nominate and release staff to attend refresher/relevant courses as far as possible. Moreover, the FEHD will consider providing other learning modes such as self-learning packages and on-line courses to staff.

Obtaining feedback from enquirers and complainants

5.22 A systematic collection of feedback from enquirers and complainants (e.g. by customer satisfaction surveys) is a way for government departments to learn from public enquiries and complaints. This also allows the departments to identify areas for improvement in their complaint handling system.

Customer feedback

5.23 In December 2010, the EU published the results of a customer satisfaction survey of the 1823 Hotline. The survey indicated that while, in general, the respondents had a favourable view with regard to the follow-up services of the 1823 Call Centre, the satisfaction level for the services was lower for complaints relating to some government departments, including the FEHD. Audit also noted that the FEHD had not conducted its own surveys to gauge customer satisfaction with its complaint handling system (including public enquiries and complaints received from channels other than the 1823 Hotline). There is a need for the FEHD to look into the matter and identify room for improving its complaint handling system.

Audit recommendations

5.24 **Audit has recommended that the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene should consider:**

- (a) **soliciting feedback from enquirers and complainants on the FEHD's handling of public enquiries and complaints (e.g. by conducting customer satisfaction surveys); and**
- (b) **drawing lessons from the feedback so as to enhance the FEHD's complaint handling system.**

Response from the Administration

5.25 The Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene generally agrees with the audit recommendations. He has said that various means will be considered to solicit feedback on the FEHD's complaint handling system with a view to improving the system and services.

PART 6: OTHER ADMINISTRATIVE ISSUES

6.1 This PART examines the following administrative issues relating to the FEHD's management of public enquiries and complaints:

- (a) liaison with the 1823 Call Centre (paras. 6.2 to 6.14);
- (b) business process re-engineering study (paras. 6.15 to 6.23); and
- (c) assessing overall effectiveness of the complaint handling system (paras. 6.24 to 6.28).

Liaison with the 1823 Call Centre

6.2 The FEHD is one of the 21 client departments (Note 36) of the 1823 Call Centre. Besides receiving public enquiries and complaints about the FEHD through the 1823 Hotline, the Call Centre also attends to the FEHD's departmental hotline and enquiry e-mail, and electronic complaint/enquiry forms completed by the public on the FEHD website.

6.3 Cases which cannot be dealt with by the Call Centre on the spot are referred to the FEHD for follow-up. Such cases are mainly the public's service requests and complaints. In 2011-12, of the FEHD's 187,070 cases of service request or complaint from the public, 132,074 (71%) were referred by the Call Centre. From time to time, the Call Centre receives messages from the public making suggestions and paying compliments to the FEHD. Such messages are also forwarded to the FEHD for reference.

Note 36: *Examples of other client departments are the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department, BD, Highways Department, and Transport Department.*

Improving interface with the 1823 Call Centre

6.4 While the 1823 Call Centre is a major channel for the FEHD to receive service requests and complaints from the public, the computer system of the 1823 Call Centre (the 1823 System) and the FEHD's CMIS are not integrated. When referring service requests and complaints to the FEHD, the 1823 System generates e-mails to provide the FEHD with the case details. This is less than satisfactory, particularly because:

- (a) ***Laborious transcription work involved.*** Upon receipt of the referral e-mails, FEHD staff need to transcribe manually the data of referred cases into the CMIS for recording and further actions. Transcribing the data for a large number of cases (e.g. 132,074 cases in 2011-12 — see para. 6.3) is not only laborious but also prone to errors and omissions; and
- (b) ***Reclassification work required.*** The 1823 Call Centre does not classify the referred cases into service requests and complaints. Both types of cases are categorised as “public complaints” in the 1823 System (see also para. 2.22). This is not in line with the FEHD's practice that the public's service requests and complaints are to be separately recorded. FEHD staff need extra efforts to reclassify a large number of “public complaint” cases in the referral e-mails.

6.5 To improve efficiency and to reduce the risk of transcription errors, there is a need to improve the interface between the 1823 System and the FEHD's CMIS.

Making better use of the 1823 System database

6.6 The CMIS is a system for recording only service requests and complaints received from the public. On the other hand, the 1823 Call Centre maintains comprehensive records of the information requests and messages received from the public about the FEHD (see Table 6). The records are kept for five years.

Table 6**Information requests and messages about the FEHD
received by the 1823 Call Centre
(2007 to 2011)**

Year	Information request (Number of cases)	Message	
		Suggestion (Number of cases)	Compliment (Number of cases)
2007	60,432	388	55
2008	46,416	454	63
2009	51,179	363	131
2010	45,282	287	152
2011	43,758	368	156
Total	247,067	1,860	557

Source: FEHD records

6.7 However, the FEHD did not have ready access to the database. The 1823 Call Centre only regularly generated statistics from the database for the FEHD's information. Some of the data were in summary form (e.g. number of requests for general information about the FEHD and number of enquiries about public market services), and did not have detailed breakdowns (e.g. details of the general information requested, and nature of the public market services enquired). Such statistics might not be able to provide a sound basis for further analysis.

6.8 Audit considers that the large database of the 1823 System is a useful resource. There is a need for the FEHD to make better use of the database, through data mining techniques (see paras. 5.3 and 5.4), to gain insight into the public's information requests (e.g. analysing details of individual requests, and ascertaining their trends and timing), and to help improve its services (e.g. analysing the public's suggestions and the services being complimented in a systematic manner for service enhancement). This can also help reduce public enquiries and complaints in the future.

Streamlining the follow-up of outstanding cases

6.9 The 1823 Call Centre generates from the 1823 System a monthly report of outstanding cases of public enquiries and complaints. The report shows the cases which have been referred to the FEHD and remain outstanding (Note 37). Since January 2012, the FEHD Complaints Management Section also generates a similar report. The report shows the cases which remain outstanding according to the CMIS records. Operational units of the FEHD are required to make use of both reports to follow up cases under their purview, and update the 1823 Call Centre on the case status.

6.10 Audit noted that staff of operational units had concerns about using two different reporting systems to help monitor outstanding cases. For example, during a visit to an operational unit in May 2012, Audit was told that the unit had to spend substantial time in following up the reports generated by two different systems every month.

6.11 Discrepancies between the two reports are mainly due to the following:

- (a) time has elapsed in transcribing data of referred cases into the CMIS (see para. 6.4(a)); and
- (b) errors and omissions may have occurred in transcribing the data (see paras. 6.4(a) and 6.5).

Audit noted from FEHD records that some other operational units also encountered similar problems. Audit considers that using reports generated from different systems to monitor outstanding cases may not be an effective and efficient practice. There is a need to streamline the existing practice.

Audit recommendations

6.12 **Audit has *recommended* that the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene should, in consultation with the Head, Efficiency Unit:**

Note 37: *In the report, the cases are further analysed into water-seepage cases, non-water-seepage cases and other enquiry cases.*

Other administrative issues

- (a) **enhance the interface between the CMIS and the 1823 System, with a view to improving the efficiency and accuracy in receiving referrals from the 1823 Call Centre, such as obviating the need for the FEHD to:**
 - (i) **manually transcribe the referral data (see para. 6.4(a)); and**
 - (ii) **reclassify the referral cases into service requests and complaints (see para. 6.4(b)); and**
- (b) **improve the accessibility of the 1823 System's database to the FEHD regarding information requests, suggestions and compliments from the public on FEHD matters (e.g. exporting the relevant raw data in a computer readable format for use by the FEHD).**

Response from the Administration

6.13 The Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene agrees with the audit recommendations. He has said that:

- (a) with the 1823 Call Centre being a major source of the FEHD's complaint cases, the FEHD will work closely with the EU for better integration between the systems of the Call Centre and the new CMIS; and
- (b) the FEHD will seek the 1823 Call Centre's assistance in providing more detailed reports based on information in the 1823 System's database.

6.14 The Head, Efficiency Unit has said that:

- (a) the EU stands ready to provide advice or assistance required by the FEHD; and
- (b) the EU is working to improve both the operating system of the 1823 Call Centre and the analytical information that is provided to departments, so as to better help them with their operations and management.

Business process re-engineering study

6.15 In July 2011, the Management Services Unit of the FEHD commenced a BPR study on the enquiry and complaint handling processes in the FEHD, with a view to:

- (a) improving the workflow;
- (b) enhancing the timeliness and effectiveness of complaint and enquiry handling; and
- (c) delivering efficient and effective services to the public.

The FEHD completed the BPR study in February 2012.

Developing a new CMIS

6.16 Among other issues, the BPR study noted that the CMIS, which had been in use for more than 11 years since November 2000, could no longer fully meet the user requirements. The study recommended that a new computer system for complaint handling (the new CMIS) should be developed to replace the existing CMIS. The BPR study estimated that the new CMIS would bring about an annual saving of some \$17 million (mainly savings from manpower and storage space) through improvement in efficiency and other work procedures. The new CMIS would also bring about other intangible benefits (e.g. improvement in the overall effectiveness of complaint handling).

6.17 According to the FEHD's timetable, the new CMIS would only be fully implemented in September 2014. The FEHD established a Project Steering Committee, chaired by an Assistant Director, to oversee the new CMIS project.

Monitoring project implementation

6.18 Audit welcomes the FEHD's initiative in conducting the BPR study and developing the new CMIS. As at June 2012, the FEHD had completed the tendering exercise for the new CMIS project. According to the BPR study, the new CMIS will introduce a drastic change to the FEHD's complaint handling system. This, coupled with the long duration (more than two years) of the project and the

Other administrative issues

numerous project tasks/stages involved, would cast uncertainty on the project implementation. Audit considers that there is a need for the FEHD to continue monitoring closely the project implementation, and to ensure that the project can bring about its benefits as intended.

Interim improvement measures

6.19 The new CMIS will have such new functions as automatic capturing of details of public complaint cases from the 1823 System (see para. 6.4(a)). The design of the new CMIS also aims to facilitate the use of business intelligence tools, for example, for data mining and report generation (see paras. 5.6 and 5.7). However, the new CMIS would not be fully implemented until around September 2014. Meanwhile, the FEHD had agreed that some immediate actions could be taken to improve complaint management. The agreed interim improvement measures were set out in the BPR study report.

6.20 Audit noted that the agreed interim measures were not meant for bringing about improvements in such areas as interfacing with the 1823 Call Centre, making better use of the 1823 System database and streamlining the follow-up of outstanding cases (see paras. 6.4 to 6.11). Audit also noted that, as at June 2012, the FEHD had taken steps to enhance some functions of the CMIS (e.g. automatic generation of daily e-mails to alert users of the due dates for taking actions, such as acknowledging receipts of complaints). However, such enhancement may not be able to adequately deal with the aforementioned areas for improvement.

Audit recommendations

6.21 **Audit has recommended that the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene should:**

- (a) **continue to closely monitor the progress of the new CMIS project, with a view to launching the new system in a timely manner; and**
- (b) **pending full implementation of the new CMIS and taking account of the audit observations and recommendations in this Audit Report, explore effective interim measures to alleviate the inadequacies of the existing CMIS.**

Response from the Administration

6.22 The Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene agrees with the audit recommendations. He has said that he is fully aware of the need to monitor closely project implementation to ensure that the new CMIS can be launched as scheduled and can bring about its anticipated benefits. He has also said that:

- (a) in accordance with the project management guidelines of the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer, the FEHD has set up a two-tier monitoring system, i.e. the Project Steering Committee chaired by an Assistant Director and the Project Assurance Team, chaired by a Chief Executive Officer, to monitor the project; and
- (b) pending the full implementation of the new CMIS, the following enhancements have been made to the existing CMIS to provide better tools for case officers and their supervisors to monitor their cases more effectively:
 - (i) providing a new user interface in the CMIS for case officers to view cases pending the acknowledgement receipt or substantive reply;
 - (ii) sending e-mails to case officers (copied to their supervisors) to remind them of the dates to issue acknowledgement receipt and substantive reply; and
 - (iii) sending weekly summary reports to the supervisor of case officers to draw his/her attention to the outstanding cases of respective case officers under his/her command.

6.23 The Head, Efficiency Unit has said that:

- (a) the EU is pleased to see that the FEHD is developing a more effective CMIS; and
- (b) the EU stands ready to provide advice or assistance required by the FEHD.

Assessing overall effectiveness of the complaint handling system

6.24 Despite the FEHD's effort in handling public enquiries and complaints, a considerable number of people still made enquiries and complaints about the FEHD to third parties. From time to time, local newspapers report complaints lodged by the public against the FEHD (Note 38). Furthermore, in 2011-12, the Ombudsman received 1,258 enquiries and complaints about the FEHD. The FEHD was also the government department being complained about the most at the Ombudsman in the year.

6.25 As mentioned in the EU guides, people will complain to the one who can help them (Note 39). The fact that many people approached third parties instead of the FEHD to make enquiries and complaints about the Department (see para. 6.24) is a cause for concern. This is because, while the number of such cases may be small in comparison to the large number of service requests/complaints received by the FEHD every year (e.g. 187,070 in 2011-12), it nonetheless shows that the public might not have full confidence in the FEHD's complaint handling and resolution system. Besides, the adverse publicity of many people turning away from the FEHD's complaint handling system could further damage the public's confidence in the system. This would induce even more people to seek the help of third parties, whom they believe to be more effective than the FEHD, to deal with their enquiries and complaints.

6.26 An effective complaint handling system is important for the FEHD. According to FEHD records, the public's service requests and complaints about the Department had increased by about 20% (some 30,000 cases) from 2007 to 2011. Given the wide spectrum of the FEHD's services which very much concern the public's daily life as well as the ever-growing public expectations for quality

Note 38: *For example, from 2009 to 2011, a local newspaper announced that it received some 2,400 to 3,000 complaints each year about the FEHD. According to the newspaper, the FEHD was also the government department being complained about the most by the public.*

Note 39: *The EU guides stated that "We can develop efficient and effective complaints systems that the public trust and use. Alternatively, we can wait until the public complain direct to the media, politicians or oversight agencies. As a Yugoslavia proverb puts it, 'Complain to the one who can help you'".*

government services, it is inevitable that public enquiries and complaints about the FEHD will continue to increase. It is all the more important for the FEHD to further enhance its capability and effectiveness in managing public enquiries and complaints. The FEHD needs to critically assess the overall effectiveness of its complaint handling system, with a view to gaining public confidence which is a prerequisite for the system to operate effectively (see item (j) of Appendix A).

Audit recommendations

6.27 **Audit has recommended that the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene should critically assess the overall effectiveness of the FEHD's complaint handling system, taking account of:**

- (a) **the reasons why so many people approach third parties instead of the FEHD in making enquiries and complaints about the FEHD's services;**
- (b) **the findings of the BPR study (see para. 6.15); and**
- (c) **the audit observations and recommendations in this Audit Report.**

Response from the Administration

6.28 The Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene generally agrees with the audit recommendations. He has said that:

- (a) the FEHD provides a wide range of services closely related to the public's daily life through a large and diversified workforce (over 10,000 civil servants and 10,000 contractor staff). The FEHD fully recognises that complaints from the public are a valuable source of feedback and is committed to constantly reviewing and improving its services;
- (b) some complainants may choose to lodge their complaints to a third party or to multiple parties. The FEHD respects their choices and will deal with all complaints in the same manner regardless of which channel is selected by the complainant;

Other administrative issues

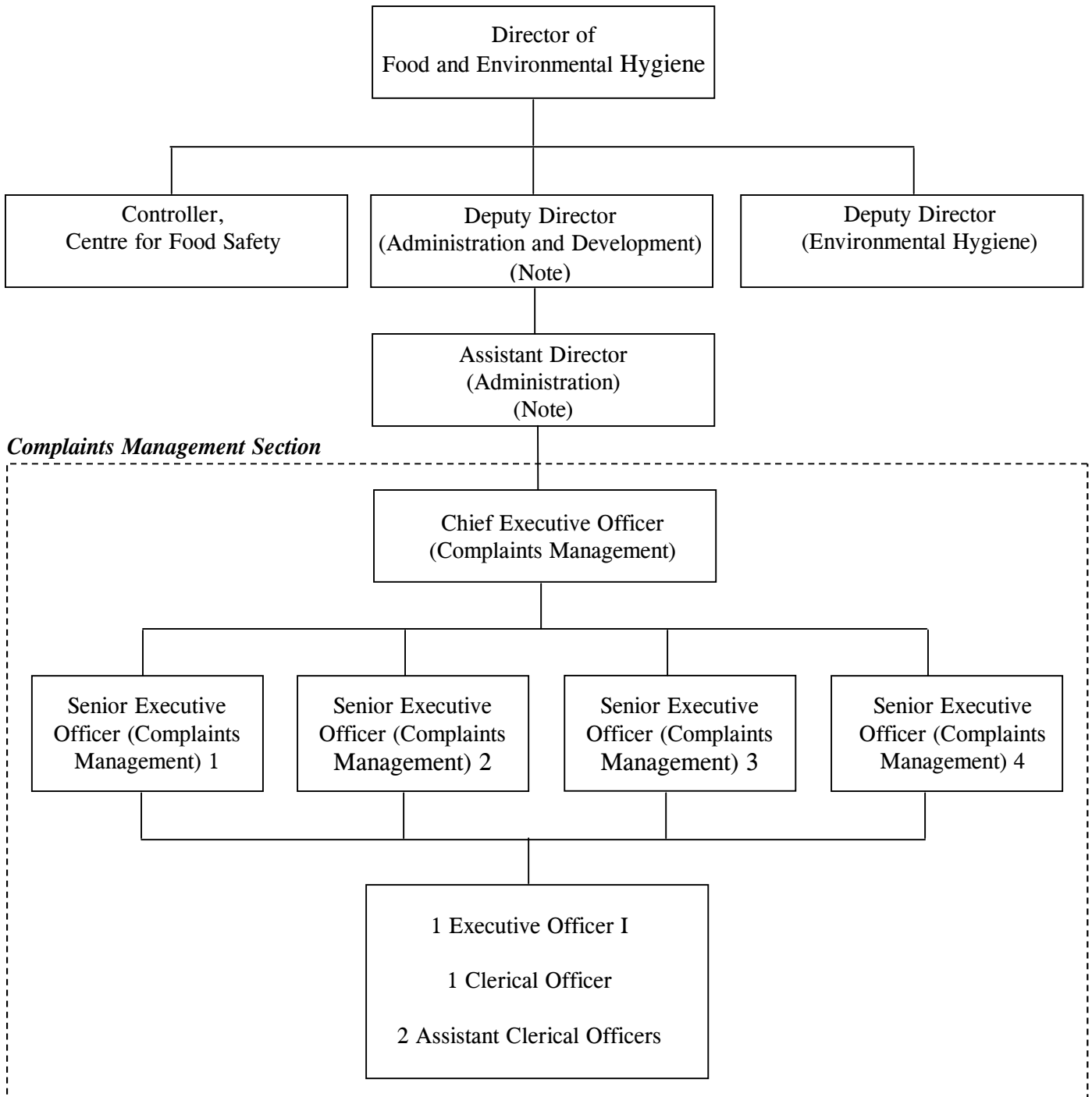
- (c) with the 1823 Call Centre being a major source of complaint cases, the FEHD will work closely with the EU for better integration between the CMIS and the 1823 System. The FEHD expects that the new CMIS will not only upgrade the information technology infrastructure but also fundamentally change the way the FEHD handles complaints in the future to facilitate more in-depth management analysis for service improvement; and
- (d) in the development of the new CMIS, the FEHD will explore the feasibility of building up its own analysis capabilities and business intelligence tools to help data analysis and generation of management information.

Examples of essential features of a good complaint handling system

- (a) ***Led from the top.*** Senior management should demonstrate their commitment to an effective complaint handling system. They should have an effective system to review the content of complaints received, rather than just the statistics. There should be clear guidelines setting out the department's complaint handling policies, procedures and performance standards;
- (b) ***Easy to access.*** Complaint channels should be clearly advertised to both the public and staff. Notices of complaint channels should be prominently displayed at all suitable locations. The public should be able to lodge complaints outside normal office hours;
- (c) ***Fair.*** All complaints should be judged objectively on the facts and merits of the case. All complaints should be given the opportunity for their case to be reviewed;
- (d) ***Timely.*** Clear time frames should be set and adhered to for each part of the complaint handling process. If more time is needed, complainants should be informed of the delay and the reasons for it;
- (e) ***Well documented.*** Every complaint should be recorded, and the process of investigation monitored. Complaint statistics should be maintained, readily retrieved, and capable of being analysed;
- (f) ***Transparent.*** Complainants should be informed of the reasons why the conclusion/outcome was reached. Statistical information on complaint handling outcomes and trends should be published on a regular basis;
- (g) ***Straightforward.*** Complaint handling procedures should not be cumbersome;
- (h) ***Receptive.*** Every complaint should be approached with a positive attitude. Staff should not try to stop a complaint being made;
- (i) ***Confidential.*** Information should be available to staff on a need-to-know basis. Personal or confidential information about individual cases should not be made public; and
- (j) ***Effective.*** People should have confidence in the complaint handling system. Their complaints should result in strategy, service delivery and policy reviews and improvement, where appropriate.

Source: *EU guides*

**Complaints Management Section
Organisation chart
(31 March 2012)**



Source: FEHD records

Note: The Deputy Director (Administration and Development) and the Assistance Director (Administration) also oversee areas (e.g. personnel matters and translation services) other than the management of public enquiries and complaints.

**Service requests and complaints recorded by District Offices
(2011-12)**

District Office		Total number of cases recorded	Representing:	
			Number of cases recorded as complaints	Number of cases recorded as service requests
A	Mongkok	15,015 (100%)	1,945 (13.0%)	13,070 (87.0%)
B	Southern	4,976 (100%)	161 (3.2%)	4,815 (96.8%)
C	Wong Tai Sin	4,905 (100%)	116 (2.4%)	4,789 (97.6%)
D	Central/Western	12,777 (100%)	290 (2.3%)	12,487 (97.7%)
E	Kowloon City	11,722 (100%)	247 (2.1%)	11,475 (97.9%)
F	North	6,618 (100%)	132 (2.0%)	6,486 (98.0%)
G	Sham Shui Po	11,686 (100%)	183 (1.6%)	11,503 (98.4%)
H	Sai Kung	6,935 (100%)	103 (1.5%)	6,832 (98.5%)
I	Eastern	17,469 (100%)	228 (1.3%)	17,241 (98.7%)
J	Tai Po	5,662 (100%)	62 (1.1%)	5,600 (98.9%)
K	Islands	2,632 (100%)	28 (1.0%)	2,604 (99.0%)
L	Wan Chai	9,365 (100%)	87 (0.9%)	9,278 (99.1%)
M	Kwai Tsing	7,737 (100%)	73 (0.9%)	7,664 (99.1%)
N	Yau Tsim	8,859 (100%)	74 (0.8%)	8,785 (99.2%)
O	Sha Tin	9,054 (100%)	36 (0.4%)	9,018 (99.6%)
P	Tuen Mun	8,121 (100%)	30 (0.4%)	8,091 (99.6%)
Q	Tsuen Wan	7,792 (100%)	25 (0.3%)	7,767 (99.7%)
R	Kwun Tong	10,023 (100%)	10 (0.1%)	10,013 (99.9%)
S	Yuen Long	11,885 (100%)	6 (0.1%)	11,879 (99.9%)
Total		173,233 (100%)	3,836 (2.2%)	169,397 (97.8%)

Source: FEHD records

**Useful management information which could be compiled
from the Complaints Management Information System database**

	Subject matter	Concern (Example)	Information which could help the FEHD gain insight into the concern (Example)
1	Accessibility of the complaint handling system	Channels for enquiries and complaints are not appealing to the public (see para. 2.9)	(a) Enquiries and complaints received by different channels (b) Actual usage of a channel (i.e. number of enquiries and complaints received) as a proportion of the channel's expected usage (c) Trends in the usage of different channels over time
2	Recording public enquiries and complaints	Inconsistent practices among District Offices in classifying cases into service requests and complaints (see paras. 2.21 and 2.22)	(d) Proportion of cases recorded as complaints by different District Offices (e) Trends in the proportion of complaint cases over time for individual District Offices
3	Timeliness of responses to service requests and complaints	Time frames not met in giving replies to the public (see paras. 3.9 to 3.12)	(f) Operational units which are more prone to missing milestones for giving replies (g) Seasonal fluctuations in the number of cases which missed the milestones (h) Relationships between (f), (g) and other parameters of individual operational units (e.g. staff turnover, training needs and workload)

Appendix D
 (Cont'd)
 (para. 5.6 refers)

Subject matter		Concern (Example)	Information which could help the FEHD gain insight into the concern (Example)
4	Repeated service requests and complaints from the public	Systemic issues underlying repeated cases not effectively addressed (see para. 3.20)	(i) Black spots as highlighted by repeated complaints in terms of case nature, geographical locations, responsible operational units, etc. (j) Trends in different black spots over time (k) Black spots which need to be addressed at a strategic level involving policy considerations
5	Monitoring of long-outstanding cases of service requests and complaints	Long periods of inaction in some cases (see paras. 4.18 and 4.19)	(l) Cases for which no new actions have been recorded in the CMIS after a lapse of, say, 30 days

Source: Audit analysis of FEHD records

Acronyms and abbreviations

Audit	Audit Commission
BD	Buildings Department
BPR	Business process re-engineering
CMIS	Complaints Management Information System
EU	Efficiency Unit
FEHD	Food and Environmental Hygiene Department