

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

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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

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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;**

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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**

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- (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.