

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

PANEL ON CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS

PANEL ON HEALTH SERVICES

PANEL ON ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS

(Meeting on 14 December 1998)

**REFORM OF DISTRICT ORGANISATIONS:
CONSULTANT'S REPORT ON FOOD SAFETY
AND ENVIRONMENTAL HYGIENE SERVICES**

INTRODUCTION

This note informs Members of the Consultant's Report on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene Services and the Administration's response to the Consultant's recommendations.

BACKGROUND

2. In his Policy Address delivered in October 1998, the Chief Executive announced the Administration's intention to introduce structural changes to the current framework for the delivery of food safety and environmental hygiene services to respond to public concerns about the fragmentation of responsibilities for these matters among different agencies within Government and the Provisional Municipal Councils.

3. To ensure an effective and streamlined framework for food safety control and environmental hygiene after the Government assumed direct responsibility, we commissioned a Consultancy Study on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene Services, with a view to improving leadership, efficiency, policy formulation and co-ordination. The consultant appointed to undertake this study was Mr Albert C C LAM, J.P., a retired civil servant who had extensive experience and working knowledge of municipal services and district administration. The consultant undertook wide-ranging consultations with relevant government officials, public health experts, the medical community, and community leaders.

The Consultant's Report

4. Mr Lam has now submitted his final report. A copy of the report is at **Annex A**. His main recommendations are summarised as follows-

New organisational framework

- (a) a new department of food and environmental hygiene should be set up to deal with environmental hygiene services and food-related matters;
- (b) the department should be responsible, among other things, for food standards, management of food safety issues, import and export control of food products, enforcement of hygiene standards; licensing of food premises, nutritional health, veterinary public health and waste collection;
- (c) staff for the new department should be drawn from the Urban Services Department (USD), Regional Services Department (RSD), Department of Health (DH), and Agriculture and Fisheries Department (AFD);
- (d) a new policy bureau should be set up to deal with policy issues concerning the environment, the ecology, nature conservation, food safety and environmental hygiene. The bureau will oversee the new department, the Environmental Protection Department (EPD) and AFD;
- (e) the organisational structure for the new department and bureau at the senior management level is proposed, with suggested creation and deletion of certain posts. It would result in net savings in staff costs of some \$ 28 million per annum;
- (f) an advisory committee comprising public health professionals and academics, food experts, food trade representatives and community representatives should be set up to advise the new bureau and new department on policy issues related to food and environmental hygiene;
- (g) the authority for the issue of various licences and permits currently issued by the Provisional Municipal Councils should be transferred to the director of the new department, with the exception of liquor licences which should be handled by a new Liquor Licensing Board comprising non-officials.

Role of Legislative Council and District Boards

- (h) the role of the Legislative Council in monitoring food and environmental hygiene services should be enhanced after reorganisation through scrutinising the policy programmes and initiatives and establishment of the new bureau and new department and capital works projects above a certain financial ceiling, etc.;
- (i) the District Boards (to be renamed “District Councils”) should play a greater role in advising on food and environmental hygiene services at the district level;

Immediate Task

- (j) a Task Force should be set up as soon as possible to prepare for the establishment of the new department and new bureau;
- (k) the legislation for the transfer of functions, contractual rights, duties and liabilities of the Provisional Municipal Councils should be introduced as soon as possible; and

Longer-term Task

- (l) a number of areas such as cleansing service and waste management should be further studied to improve efficiency and effectiveness in service delivery in due course.

The Administration’s Response

5. We have considered the report and accepted most of the recommendations in principle. Some recommendations, especially those dealing with specific staffing proposals will need to be further studied and justified on a case by case basis. We will also need to ensure that the structure of the new Bureau is adequate to provide better policy advice, direction and co-ordination. A booklet summarising the main recommendations and our initial responses is at **Annex B**.

6. We believe that the new structure will enable us to improve services to the community and meet new challenges concerning food safety, environmental hygiene, environmental protection and nature conservation in the 21st century for a healthier, cleaner and greener Hong Kong. In particular, it will

- (a) ensure the provision of better food safety and environmental hygiene services;
- (b) ensure a system is in place for efficient co-ordination and prompt response to food incidents and other emergency situations;
- (c) facilitate overall co-ordination over waste management, nature conservation and other environmental issues; and
- (d) in the longer term, ensure more cost-effective utilisation of resources.

7. Under the new structure, the new department of food and environmental hygiene and the Department of Health will maintain close working relationship in managing food-related incidents and devising appropriate public health preventive measures. The new department will deal with food-related matters and environmental hygiene services. The Department of Health will remain Hong Kong Special Administrative Region's health authority and continue to represent the Region in global public health affairs. It will continue to co-ordinate territory-wide disease surveillance and monitoring, investigation, research and general health education in relation to disease prevention and control.

8. The Consultant's report has focused, as directed, on improvement to food and environmental hygiene. It is our objective that the new Bureau will also provide a more effective instrument for the development of programmes to protect and improve the environment. These cover waste reduction, improvement to air and water quality, energy efficiency and conservation and prevention of environmental problems through environmental impact assessments and planning. The Advisory Council on the Environment will be maintained to give the new Bureau Secretary advice on environmental issues. The new Bureau and its departments will also provide the environmental input for the sustainable development process.

9. The new framework for delivery of arts and culture and sports and recreation services is being studied by the Secretary for Home Affairs and his consultant, subject to consultation with members of the public and the organisations concerned. Details are expected to be finalised in early 1999. The

LegCo Panel on Home Affairs will be briefed on the recommendations in due course.

Next Steps

10. We hope to establish a Task Force as soon as possible to follow up on the Consultant's recommendations concerning the legislative amendments and reorganisation.

Constitutional Affairs Bureau
10 December 1998