For discussion
on 6 July 2010

Legislative Council Panel on Security
Updating and Replacement of
Fire Services Equipment and Apparatus

Purpose

This paper informs Members of the Administration's response to the concerns raised by the staff representatives of the Fire Services Department (FSD) at the meeting of the Panel on Security, as well as the progress of follow-up actions.

Background

2. At the meeting on 4 May 2010, Members were briefed on the existing procedures for procuring fire service equipment and apparatus, as well as proposed measures to expedite the relevant processes vide LC Paper No. CB(2)1409-10(07). At that meeting, the staff representatives of the FSD made written submissions and gave comments on the relevant issues. The Administration's response to those comments and the progress of follow-up actions taken are set out in the ensuing paragraphs.

Expediting procurement procedures

3. The Administration attaches great importance to ensuring the safety of frontline staff, and has regularly updated and replaced fire services equipment and apparatus to provide better safeguard to their safety. We appreciate the wish of frontline staff to expedite the procurement process so that newly acquired equipment and apparatus could be put into use as early as possible. In response to their request, we have already conducted a review and decided to adopt a more proactive approach by making an early start on the time-consuming but necessary steps (e.g. drawing up specifications and tender documents, invitation for tender, etc), so as to enable the FSD and relevant departments to award procurement contracts and finalise delivery arrangements as soon as possible after funding is available. With these improvement measures, the lead time for procuring equipment with the most

stringent requirements is expected to be reduced by around a year. In fact, for the procurement of equipment with relatively simple specifications and readily available stock, such as fire fighting hose and protective gloves, the time required would be shorter. The whole process will normally be completed in around 6 months. The relevant improvement measures are already set out in LC Paper No. CB(2)1409-10(07) tabled at the meeting on 4 May 2010.

4. The FSD has already adopted this approach for the large-scale procurement of new fire tunics and over trousers. Shortly after funding was approved by the Legislative Council in late April this year, the FSD was able to award the procurement contract in early May. New fire tunics and over trousers with better protective functions are expected to be delivered to Hong Kong in batches between October this year and March next year, and distributed for use by frontline staff at the same time.

Involvement of frontline staff in procurement

5. At present, a number of channels are in place for frontline staff of the FSD to give views and make requests on equipment or apparatus for the management's consideration. For new equipment, the FSD will not only arrange trial use of samples by frontline staff to collect comments from users, but will also consult the trade unions and staff relations units through the Standard Stowage Review Committee ("the Committee") The Committee, which includes rank and file frontline staff and representatives of staff unions as members, meets bimonthly to discuss the introduction of new technology, equipment and apparatus. In addition, the FSD management also invites frontline personnel and representatives of staff unions to attend international exhibitions on fire services apparatus to search for advanced equipment. The Department has always given due consideration to the views of frontline personnel, and will take such views into account when drawing up the specifications of new equipment and apparatus for procurement.

Purchasing products from specific suppliers or of specific models

6. Under the World Trade Organisation Agreement on Government Procurement (WTO GPA) and the Government's Stores and Procurement Regulations, generally speaking, the procuring departments should not specify the manufacturer(s) or model(s) for the apparatus and equipment to be acquired. The requirements under the GPA are part of the major

measures by the WTO for encouraging fair and open global trade. When drawing up tender specifications, departments should set out clearly all functional requirements and performance standards of the products required. Open tendering provides the departments with more options and allows them to choose products which suit their operational needs at the best value. It is more cost-effective than relying on a single supplier or purchasing a specific model. However, if the equipment or services to be acquired are required to be compatible or interchangeable with the existing ones, the departments concerned may consider inviting single or restricted tenders (i.e. from specific manufacturers, or for specific models or specific materials). As a matter of fact, the FSD has made procurement by single tender due to operational needs in recent years. For example, as certain specific equipment must be used during high angle rescue training, the FSD has specified a particular model when procuring the relevant equipment so as to meet its operational needs.

7. The need to comply with the WTO GPA makes it unavoidable that equipment or apparatus with the same function but supplied by different manufacturers may need to be used concurrently during the replacement cycle. The same situation is commonly encountered by other fire-fighting brigades worldwide. However, we must emphasise that all fire services apparatus acquired needs to comply with the specifications and international standards. As a matter of fact, the principles of operation for the same type of apparatus supplied by different manufacturers should be very similar. It should not be difficult for professional fire fighters to master the operation of such apparatus. In addition, the FSD will provide frontline staff with explanatory notes or operating manuals for their reference, and offer relevant training according to their needs. For apparatus with more complex operation, the FSD will arrange training for frontline staff by the manufacturer concerned or trained professionals. Moreover, the daily duties of the frontline staff include drills which aim at enhancing their proficiency in the use and operation of the equipment assigned to them. Therefore, the use of apparatus with the same function but purchased from different manufacturers should not affect the operational efficiency or safety of frontline staff.

Chinese operational instructions

8. Starting from 2007, the FSD has stipulated in its procurement contracts for all new apparatus that suppliers should provide operational instructions in both Chinese and English. At present, there are 120 different

types of apparatus in use by the FSD, of which 100 types are already provided with Chinese operational instructions. Operational instructions for the remaining 20 types are being translated into Chinese, and should be available within this year.

Inspection and acceptance of equipment

9. For the procurement of new equipment and apparatus, FSD will clearly specify the product requirements and specifications in the tender documents. In their tender submissions, suppliers must declare that the equipment or apparatus to be supplied are in compliance with all relevant requirements and specifications set out in the tender documents. In some cases, suppliers are also be required to provide relevant supporting certificates.

10. To ensure that all fire services equipment and apparatus delivered are in compliance with the specifications, the FSD will assign officers to perform inspection and acceptance tests. Each officer so assigned must possess the relevant qualifications or required expertise. For example, Breathing Apparatus Officers are required to receive specific training on breathing apparatus and related equipment (e.g. breathing apparatus and diving equipment) including knowledge and skills on their design, operation, and maintenance. Therefore, each Breathing Apparatus Officer is qualified to perform the inspection and acceptance tests on breathing apparatus and related equipment. To enhance the ability of its staff to perform such duties, the FSD will from time to time send officers abroad to receive technical training from the manufacturers. For major equipment, the FSD may even send its officers to perform inspection and acceptance tests overseas as and when required. For example, for the procurement of fire appliances, the department will send professional engineers to perform inspection and acceptance tests of the vehicles at the manufacturers' production facilities overseas, so as to ensure compliance of the requirements and specifications set out in the tender documents before delivery.

Consultancy study

11. To further improve the procurement process of fire services equipment and apparatus, the Security Bureau and the FSD have co-commissioned the Government's Efficiency Unit (EU) to conduct a study with the following terms of reference –

(a) Examine the existing procurement arrangement of the FSD with a view to speeding up the process and ensuring timely delivery of new equipment;

(b) Review the existing organisation and manpower for procurement at the FSD, examine roles and responsibilities of the staff involved, and see if they are equipped with the requisite skills and knowledge to perform their roles effectively and efficiently;

(c) Explore potential application of information technology management systems in support of a more effective logistics and supply chain management; and

(d) Review the training arrangement for frontline staff in the use of newly procured equipment.

12. The study is in progress and is expected to be completed within the second half of this year. During the course of the study, the EU will consult and visit the relevant units within the FSD (e.g. those responsible for procurement and acceptance tests, as well as the end users). The EU will also take into account the views of staff representatives.

Manpower deployment for fire services

13. The Administration has all along attached great importance to the provision of fire services and considered the FSD's requests on manpower allocation having regard to the Department's operational needs. In the past five years, FSD has been given additional resources for the creation of 128 posts for fire personnel. The new posts were provided to meet new service needs, enhance enforcement and inspection of old buildings, and strengthen real-fire training of frontline staff. The FSD will continue to deploy its manpower in a flexible manner in accordance with actual demand for various services. Where necessary, it will apply for additional resources through the established mechanism.

14. In respect of frontline fire fighting service, a total of around 5 400 fire personnel in the FSD are deployed to 80 land-based fire stations and six fire boat stations at present. The FSD's performance pledge is to respond to 92.5% of all building fire calls within 6 minutes in built-up areas, and

within 9 to 23 minutes in areas of dispersed risks or isolated developments. The FSD has met its performance pledge in the past four years with the relevant statistics set out in the table below –

Year	2006	2007	2008	2009
No. of total building fire calls	28 171	26 438	29 722	30 632
Percentage of calls meeting the Graded Response Time	93.89%	94.3%	94.7%	95.6%

15. The FSD has put in place an effective mechanism to ensure that there is sufficient fire fighting strength within all three operational commands (i.e. Hong Kong Command, Kowloon Command and New Territories Command) to meet the calls for emergency services. The 80 land-based fire stations and six fire boat stations are located in various districts around Hong Kong. The location, the number of fire personnel as well as the number and type of fire appliances deployed at each station are the result of detailed risk assessment during the planning process, taking into account relevant factors including the population density, land use and building types in the adjacent areas. In addition, the mobilisation of fire personnel and fire appliances is highly dynamic, allowing the fire fighting resources within the entire network to complement one another and making it possible for reinforcements to arrive expeditiously in case of major incidents. The mobilisation system ensures that the FSD has sufficient manpower to handle each and every emergency incident in an effective and timely manner.

16. In respect of fire prevention, around 350 fire personnel are currently deployed to the two fire prevention commands (namely the Licensing & Certification Command and the Fire Safety Command). They are specifically tasked to carry out fire prevention duties, such as drawing up and vetting fire safety standards for buildings, railway systems and licensed premises, conducting inspections of fire services installations and ventilation systems, and handling complaints of fire hazards and dangerous goods and so on. Apart from these two fire prevention commands, fire personnel at all fire stations are also involved in handling some fire prevention work in their respective districts. These include handling of complaints (e.g. obstruction of fire escapes and locking of fire exits), and carrying out inspections of major facilities (e.g. hospitals) and buildings / premises with higher potential

fire risks (e.g. construction sites, storage facilities for dangerous goods, and temporary places of public entertainment) within the district. The involvement of fire personnel from fire stations in handling fire prevention work within their districts allows them to become more familiar with the situation and potential risks in their areas. Armed with this enhanced knowledge, frontline fire personnel are able to respond and put out fires more quickly, safely and effectively. When accidents occur, the fire fighting and rescue work of frontline fire personnel is of course very important. But what is equally important is their involvement in fire prevention work, which can help reduce the chance of fire occurring in the first place. It can also minimise casualties by providing the necessary protection for evacuating residents as well as firemen in the case of a fire.

Advice sought

17. Members are invited to note the content of this paper.

Security Bureau
Fire Services Department
June 2010