

**A brief account of Chapter 1 of Report No. 71
“Centre for Food Safety: Management of food safety”
by the Director of Audit
at the Public Hearing of the Public Accounts Committee
of the Legislative Council on Monday, 10 December 2018**

Mr. Chairman,

Thank you for inviting me here to give a brief account of Chapter 1 of Report No. 71 of the Director of Audit, entitled “Centre for Food Safety: Management of food safety”. The Audit Commission (Audit) has recently conducted a review of the management and control of food safety by the Centre for Food Safety (CFS). The findings of this audit review are contained in Chapters 1 and 2 of Report No. 71 of the Director of Audit. In Chapter 1, the audit review has focused on assessment of food safety risks, the food surveillance programme (FSP), management of food incidents and complaints, and communicating with the public on food safety risks, covering both imported and locally produced foods. In Chapter 2, entitled “Centre for Food Safety: Import control of foods”, the audit review has focused on matters relating to import control of foods.

Chapter 1 comprises five PARTs.

PART 1 of the Report, namely “Introduction”, describes the background of the audit.

The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) has the mission of ensuring that food for sale in Hong Kong is safe and fit for consumption. To achieve this mission, it established the CFS which controls food safety in Hong Kong by working in the areas of risk assessment, risk management and risk communication. From 2013 to 2017, the number of food incidents increased by 28%. In 2017-18, the CFS incurred an expenditure of \$592 million, increased by 32% from \$448 million in 2013-14.

PART 2 of the Report examines the CFS's assessment of food safety risks.

Risk assessment forms the scientific basis for control actions. Every year, the CFS conducts a number of risk assessment studies which are comprehensive reviews and analyses of food related hazards that are of public health significance. The CFS carries out a population-based food consumption survey (FCS) for establishing a comprehensive database for food safety risk assessment and enhancing the CFS's risk assessment capacity. During an FCS, the CFS collects data on the types and amounts of foods that people consume for the conduct of food safety studies, including total diet studies (TDSs).

However, Audit observed that the first population-based FCS was completed in 2010 with a delay of 42 months. In May 2017, the CFS commenced the second population-based FCS. Audit examination revealed that this FCS was also progressing slowly, had a lower than expected response rate, and its contractor had not delivered sufficient service hours. Audit noted that the CFS had started to address the above-mentioned issues. Therefore, Audit has encouraged the FEHD to continue to closely monitor the progress of the FCS and the performance of the contractor to ensure timely completion of the second population-based FCS.

According to the CFS, a TDS has been recognised internationally as the most cost-effective way to estimate dietary exposure to food chemicals or nutrients for various population groups and to assess their associated health risks. It provides a scientific basis for assessing food safety risks and regulating food supply, and can facilitate risk managers to focus their limited resources on food chemicals or nutrients that may pose the greatest risks to public health. Audit noted that in the first TDS conducted during March 2010 to December 2014, some substances of high concern and some foods containing high concentrations of substances studied had not been covered. Therefore, Audit has recommended that the FEHD should take necessary measures to cover substances of high concern in conducting TDSs in future.

PART 3 of the Report examines the FEHD's FSP.

The CFS's FSP is designed to control and prevent food hazards. It is a key component of the CFS's food safety assurance programme and is aimed to find out the safety of food supply. The CFS adopts a risk-based approach to formulating the FSP, taking into account risk factors such as past food surveillance results, food incidents occurring locally and overseas, results of risk assessments and views of experts and stakeholders. Audit examined the FSPs of 2015, 2016 and 2017 and noted that some potential food hazards had not been covered for surveillance under the FSPs, yet a large proportion of food samples were not of high-risk nature. Audit examination of the FSP of 2017 also revealed wide variations in the ways more than 60,000 food samples were taken from different types of food outlets and from different food types, as well as cases of non-compliance with sampling requirements. Therefore, Audit has recommended that the FEHD should provide more guidelines on taking food samples, and step up the supervision of sampling work.

For the FSP of 2017, the CFS collected 3,868 food samples through online purchase. 93% of the samples were used for chemical testing and radiation testing, and only 7% underwent microbiological testing. Popularity of online food purchase has been growing in recent years, and there might be risks of bacterial growth during delivery, but the proportion of online samples purchased for microbiological testing was on the low side. Hence, Audit has recommended that the FEHD should review the need for increasing the proportion of online food samples purchased for microbiological testing.

PART 4 of the Report examines the CFS's management of food incidents and complaints.

The CFS defines "food incident" as any event where there is concern about actual or suspected threats to the safety or quality of food that could require intervention to protect public health and consumer interests. For food incidents identified, the CFS conducts initial assessments to find out those requiring further actions for risk management. Such further actions include checking local availability of the affected products, taking samples for testing, recalling the products, publicising the food incidents through press releases, etc. Audit observation revealed that the time taken between collection of food samples and subsequent publicising of unsatisfactory testing results was long.

Recall of foods was not entirely effective, too. Half of the food products were not returned in the 23 recall exercises in 2017, and some recalled foods that required disposal were not disposed of under the CFS's supervision. In this connection, Audit has recommended that the FEHD should closely monitor the time taken to publicise unsatisfactory testing results and the effectiveness of food recall, and provide guidelines on disposal of recalled foods.

For the 5,569 food complaint cases handled in 2017, Audit analysed the time lag between the complaint dates and the CFS's eventual closing of the complaint cases. The time lag was more than 30 days in 61% of cases, including 1% of cases where the time lag was more than 240 days. The long time taken to investigate and close some complaint cases was not conducive to ensuring food safety. Therefore, Audit has recommended that the FEHD should closely monitor the time taken to complete investigation of food complaints, and take measures to expedite the investigation.

PART 5 of the Report examines the CFS's communication with the public on food safety risks.

The CFS communicates with the public on food safety matters through a number of channels, including the Internet, CFS publications, forums for the public and the trade, and talks and exhibitions. It has also implemented two charters to promote food safety. The Food Safety Charter provides facilitation for the trade to incorporate food safety measures in day-to-day practices, while the "Reduce Salt, Sugar, Oil. We Do" Charter calls for the active participation of Food Safety Charter signatories to help members of the public reduce the intake of salt, sugar and oil when dining out. However, Audit noted that the number of charter signatories was limited, and promotion could be improved. In this connection, Audit has recommended that the FEHD should review the two charters on food safety.

Our views and recommendations were agreed by the FEHD. I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge with gratitude the full cooperation, assistance and positive response of the Department's staff during the course of the audit review.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.