

**Public Hearing of the LegCo Public Accounts Committee
on 12 December 2023**

**Opening remarks of
the Secretary for Environment and Ecology**

Chairman,

I would like to thank the Audit Commission (Audit) for its comprehensive review of the licensing work for food premises and providing valuable comments. We accept all the recommendations of the Audit, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) and relevant departments will proactively follow up on relevant recommendations.

Food premises are closely related to people's livelihood, and the catering trade also makes significant contribution to the economy of Hong Kong. The FEHD ensures that food premises comply with statutory requirements through a licensing regime, and will proactively improve the regime to facilitate trade operation as far as possible. Early this year, the FEHD introduced the "Professional Certification System" which adopts an approach of "licence first, inspection later" into the licences for light refreshment restaurants and food factories to shorten the processing time, as well as markedly relaxed the restrictions on the scope of food items that can be sold at light refreshment restaurants. In the first quarter of next year, the FEHD will expand the scope of the "Professional Certification System" to cover general restaurants, and introduce a "composite permit" to cover multiple restricted food items to obviate the need for separate applications for each individual items. These reforms in the regime have received support from the trade.

Currently, there are a total of 45,000 food business licences and permits in Hong Kong, with over 10,000 new applications each year. The FEHD has to consult various departments, including the Buildings Department, Fire Services Department, Environmental Protection Department, and Planning Department etc., when reviewing food business licence applications to ensure compliance with requirements in various aspects such as environmental hygiene, building safety, fire safety, environmental protection, and planning. During the approval process, these departments would conduct multiple on-site inspections and maintain communication with licence applicants, whereas applicants are required to provide supplementary information, modify plans, and take measures to meet licensing requirements according to the departments' comments. Therefore, the processing time for food business licence applications can vary significantly. This is especially so during the period covered by the audit report as during the pandemic, it was challenging to arrange on-site inspections at premises and the

FEHD also needed to mobilize a considerable manpower to handle other emergency duties related to the pandemic, which inevitably affected the licence processing time.

As society returns to normalcy, the FEHD will step up efforts in optimising the licensing work for food premises and proactively follow up on the recommendations of the Audit. The FEHD will focus on three areas. First, the FEHD will enhance service efficiency through improving the licensing procedures. For example, the FEHD will review the current arrangement for Application Vetting Panels, the communication arrangement with various departments, as well as the various guidelines and timeframes concerning the licensing processes, so as to enhance their practicability and facilitate the operation of food businesses.

Second, the FEHD will make good use of technology and continue to promote digitalisation. The FEHD is enhancing the existing Licence Management Information System to more effectively record the processing time required for various tasks and ensure proper storage of the records for monitoring and analysis purposes. In the first half of next year, the FEHD will also issue e-licences for all food business applications and provide applicants with more information on the application status online, increasing the transparency of the vetting process. In addition, in the first quarter of next year, the FEHD will publish a “DIY application for food business licences” to facilitate applicants to better understand the licence application process from the users’ angle. The FEHD will also expedite the implementation of electronic application referral mechanism with more departments, to make collaboration smoother and more efficient.

Third, the FEHD will continue to strengthen staff training. The FEHD has reminded its staff to follow the relevant guidelines in processing licence applications and timely report and follow up on case progress to ensure timely processing of applications. The FEHD will take action on the cases mentioned in the audit report seriously.

The Environment and Ecology Bureau will continue to oversee the work of the FEHD at a policy level and support the department in actively following up on and implementing the recommendations in the audit report. We will continue to keep in view the implementation of various enhancement measures to ensure that the licensing system keeps pace with the times.

My colleagues and I are happy to take questions from the committee. Thank you, Chairman.

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