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\$500 charge for abode applicants

By SIMON MACKLIN

LOCAL citizens will be charged less than \$500 to apply for full British citizenship under the nationality package, regardless of whether or not they are accepted.

The Director of Administration, Mr Donald Tsang Yam-kuen, flies to London tomorrow to finalise plans for the implementation of the package, the cost of which is intended to be covered by those applying.

More than 500,000 people are expected to apply for the scheme, which will grant 225,000 Hongkong citizens British passports. The nationality package passed its third reading in parliament earlier this month and is expected to be finalised by the end of next month.

The main cost will be to pay seven Home Office officials from the UK and about 120 local Immigration Department staff.

The British Home Office officials arrive in Hongkong in the autumn once the package has been finalised.

A budget of £800,000 (HK\$10.71 million) has

been set aside to pay for the seven British officials but the cost to the Immigration Department is expected to be much higher.

Office space previously used by the department's Vietnamese refugee division has been allocated for the processing at the new headquarters in Harbour Road, and about 20 staff have already been deployed to prepare for the implementation of the scheme.

The staff are writing guidelines for applicants and planning how to deal with the flood of people expected to send in forms within weeks of applications being invited.

Costs will also have to cover the design of a computer program being designed to help process applications.

The Immigration Department will draw between 100 and 120 officers from various sectors, including entry checkpoints, to help process applications.

About 100 new junior staff will be employed to help fill the gaps created when staff are deployed to deal with applications.

Officials say it would be unfair for those whose applications were accepted to

subsidise the cost of those whose applications are rejected.

But they stress the final figure has yet to be decided.

"It should be quite cheap. It should be less than \$500," one official said.

The Government is also planning an extensive publicity campaign beginning in November which will include television announcements.

But the campaign should be relatively cheap because the Government has free access to television spots for announcements of public interest.

The fee is certain to be less than the \$1,200 charged by the Singapore authorities for migrants.

Other countries, including Australia, also charge applicants for processing migration applications although most have a fee far higher than \$500.

A government spokesman said the main aim of Mr Tsang's trip to England would be to brief members of the House of Lords before the British Nationality (Hongkong) Bill has its second reading in the upper house on Friday.