

\$147m to pay for outside lawyers

By KENT CHEN

THE Legal Department will spend \$146.9 million on hiring outside help over the next 12 months, compared with the \$163 million spent in the last 12 months to cover shortages of staff with expertise in certain areas.

But overall, the department's expenditure will go up slightly from \$422.9 million in 1991-92 to \$428.4 million - a mere \$5.5 million (or 1.3 per cent) over the current revised estimate.

Although expenditure on personal emoluments will be increased by \$21.2 million to a total of \$236 million, other departmental expenses and charges will have to be cut to match limited growth.

Departmental expenses can be cut because the Architectural Services Department will take over the payment of telephone rentals for the Queensway Government Offices Building for the 1992-93 period.

The cut in charges against the revised estimate for 1991-92 is mainly due to an anticipated reduction in court costs, from \$12.5 million this year to \$10.9 million next year, as a result of a drop in costs awards in civil cases.

The Legal Department aside, the judiciary and the Legal Aid Department have only been given 3½ per cent and 7.3 per cent increases respectively.

Expressing concern at the slow growth, legislator Mrs Elsie Tu said she believed there would be more cases to be heard by the judiciary and more applications for Legal Aid because of the



Elsie Tu expects more cases and Legal Aid applications.

introduction of the Bill of Rights Ordinance.

Mrs Tu said she would ask officials the reasoning behind these estimates.

The judiciary's estimate for the year 1992-93 was \$392.7 million, as against actual expenditure of \$328.2 million in the current year.

In the new financial year, there will be zero growth in manpower of 1,553, at a time when the judiciary is hearing far fewer cases than is considered desirable.

The average waiting time for criminal appeals to be heard in the Court of Appeal was 90 days last year, which is one month longer than the maximum acceptable time of two months.

In the High Court, it took an average of 268 days for a criminal case to be heard, compared with the maximum acceptable time of two to three months from filing an indictment.

The Government maintained that the average waiting time would be shortened by administrative steps, but did not explain how this could be achieved without increasing manpower.

Under the current estimate, a large sum of the \$13.4 million total increase will go to salaries payment, which will increase from the revised estimate of \$337 million in 1991-92 to the estimated \$345 million in the coming year.