

Access to information scheme set for launch

By Flora Wong

ABOUT 10 government policy branches and departments will open their doors to information seekers next year.

The pilot scheme is the first step in an \$80-million-a-year program the government offered up in place of legislation, which was demanded by legislators.

Under the scheme, several departments will be subject to an access of information code, according to a government official.

The official told *The Hong Kong Standard* the branches and departments included would be those in the public domain.

The Post Office, Water Authorities, Housing, Education and Transport Departments are likely to be included but the police will definitely not be.

Information held on both individuals and government policies would be made available within a certain period following a request, the official said.

If access to information was denied, reasons would be given.

Departments and branches consulted had not resisted the code's introduction, the official said, but had suggested fine-tuning to address individual departmental set-ups.

An across-the-board draft code, and guidelines for individual branches and departments would be developed before the scheme was launched.

A senior government lawyer was consulted on the legal implications of the code.

However, the code was not legally binding.

Information concerning private individuals, commercial secrets, public security, judicial integrity, foreign relations and management of the economy, however, are not expected to be covered by the code.

The Commissioner for Administrative Complaints will address grievances brought against departments for denying information seekers the data they seek.

The full implementation of the code — by the end of 1996 — is expected to cost as much as \$80 million a year.

Officers welcomed the code and that it would make the government more open and accountable, a Civil Service union said.

Legislator Christine Loh and the Hong Kong Journalists Association have been pressing the government to introduce an information access bill.

However, the government agreed to introduce an administrative code only.