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# Access fee for papers

By FUNG WAI-KONG

THOSE making use of a pilot scheme for accessing government information must pay \$5.30 per sheet for photocopying records.

Efficiency Unit deputy chief David Weeks said the charge was reasonably cheap compared with other countries, explaining it took into account administrative and staff costs. "For example, Canada charges C\$5 (HK\$27.60) for each sheet of paper," he said.

Under the scheme, the public can - from March 1 - get application forms from district offices and ask to see government records from nine departments and branches.

They are the Home Affairs Branch, Home Affairs Department, Works Branch, Recreation and Culture Branch, Government Supplies Department, Highways Department, Social Welfare Department, Customs and Excise Department, and Architectural Services Department.

Mr Weeks said the access-to-information code, to be modified after the six-month pilot scheme, would be extended to all departments by the end of 1996.

There are 16 categories of information which departments may withhold from the public, such as any documents which may affect Hong Kong's security.

The minutes of government advisory committees will not be available for public scrutiny.

However, Mr Weeks said the 16 exemption areas were not mandatory and officials could take into account public-interest value before deciding whether to reveal or withhold information.

He refused more specific comment on whether sensitive information would be made available under the initiative, saying only that departments would stick to the code when making decisions.

People can appeal to the Commissioner for Administrative Complaints, or ombudsman, if their requests are declined by the Government. However, the ombudsman does not have the power to order disclosure of a document.

Independent legislator Christine Loh Kung-wai's private member's bill on freedom of information is likely to be rejected by the Government.

A senior official said the bill had significant implications for public finance which the Government would not accept.

The bill would also mean a marked increase in the ombudsman's workload, the official said.

But Ms Loh rejected the Government's view, saying it was an excuse to block the bill. She said her bill would not incur additional government expense because the Government was committed to an administrative code on access to information.

The Government can veto a private member's bill if the bill incurs government expense.