

Office of The Ombudsman announces results of direct investigation into effectiveness of 1823 in handling complaints and enquiries (with photos)

The following is issued on behalf of the Office of The Ombudsman:

The Ombudsman, Ms Winnie Chiu, today (March 7) announced the completion of a direct investigation into the effectiveness of the 1823 service in handling complaints and enquiries, and made 13 recommendations for improvement to the Efficiency Office (EO).

Established more than 20 years ago, 1823 under the EO provides a one-stop service round the clock to answer public enquiries about the services of 23 participating departments, and receive complaints about any area of Government services.

The Office of The Ombudsman's investigation reveals that over the past six years, the service handled an average of around 1.95 million enquiries annually. In the case of telephone enquiries, 1823 achieved first-call resolutions of issues 99 per cent of the time, in line with its aim of providing a one-stop enquiry service. Regarding complaint handling, the Office finds that 1823's existing mechanism cannot effectively resolve cross-departmental complaints and complaints involving unclear delineation of responsibilities, nor can it ensure direct communication and collaboration among departments.

The Office also identifies room for improvement in 1823's handling of calls, co-operation arrangements with participating departments, daily operations and use of data.

Ms Chiu said, "Most complaints which are cross-departmental and involving unclear delineation of responsibilities are about district problems directly related to people's livelihood. Simply relying on 1823's existing escalation mechanism does not ensure that these complaints are properly handled. Under the Government's proposals to improve district governance, the Task Force on District Governance (TFDG), led by the Deputy Chief Secretary for Administration, has been set up to steer and co-ordinate cross-departmental district issues. The District Officers of the Home Affairs Department are representatives of the Government at the district level who co-ordinate departments' services and assist in problem solving locally. 1823 should escalate cases about recurring district problems with unclear delineation of responsibilities to the District Officers or the TFDG in a systematic and timely manner with a view to resolving these problems more effectively through the high-level structure of the Government."

The Office's recommendations for improvement to the EO include:

- Stringently enforce the requirement that departments reply within a specified time limit with reasons if they consider a case outside their purview or should be handled by another department; if departments fail to reply after the deadline, 1823 can activate the escalation mechanism outright or request departments to review the case under the mechanism, so as to ensure timely handling of complaints;
- Establish a mechanism and draw up guidelines to standardise and regularise the procedures for escalating cases about recurring district problems with unclear delineation of responsibilities to the District Officers or the TFDG in a systematic, proper and timely manner;
- Request participating departments to submit forecast plans of new services or arrangements on a regular basis for preparation accordingly, and remind departments from time to time of the importance of updating the knowledge base;
- Proactively monitor and conduct timely review of the newly upgraded telephone system with a view to further enhancing 1823's call answering rate, and expand the application of artificial intelligence on enquiry handling;
- Further consolidate the data collected from enquiries and complaints handled by 1823 to facilitate bureaux/departments capturing the data required and conduct comprehensive analyses, with a view to improving Government services; and
- Conduct systematic analyses of cross-departmental cases and consolidate relevant data, submit reports to the TFDG from time to time to facilitate the Government's resolution of cross-departmental district issues and formulation of long-term strategies to enhance district administration.

The EO has accepted the improvement recommendations made by the Office.

The full investigation report is available on the website of the Office of The Ombudsman at www.ombudsman.hk for public information.

