

CMAB responds to Ombudsman's direct investigation report

In response to the Ombudsman's direct investigation report on the "Government's Arrangements for Engaging Outside Interpretation Services", which was released today (July 22), a spokesman for the Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau (CMAB) said that the bureau in general accepted the related recommendations and would study them carefully.

"The Government is committed to eliminating racial discrimination and promoting equal opportunities for people of diverse race. To strengthen support for people of diverse race, the CMAB improved the Administrative Guidelines on Promotion of Racial Equality (Guidelines) in April last year. The scope of application of the new Guidelines has been extended to all Government bureaux, departments and related organisations (collectively referred to as public authorities) providing services to people of diverse race, making a total of over 100, thereby promoting effectively equal access to public services for people of Hong Kong, regardless of their race. Given the broad range of government services, each public authority will determine the practical arrangements required to implement the Guidelines, taking into account its own operational circumstances such as to adjust their policies, measures or services with a view to promoting racial equality. The CMAB is responsible for maintaining an overview on the overall implementation of the Guidelines," the spokesman said.

The spokesman added, "We are pleased to know that the Ombudsman's report affirmed and recognised the Government's efforts and attitude in implementing and making progressive improvements to the Guidelines."

People of diverse race may encounter difficulties in accessing public services due to a language barrier. The new Guidelines contains a guidance note on provision of language services. Public authorities are required to proactively offer appropriate language services to those in need so that service users who cannot communicate effectively in Chinese or English (i.e. Cantonese, Putonghua and English, as well as written Chinese and English) can have access to public services. Having regard to the actual situation, public authorities will arrange the most appropriate interpretation services based on the needs of people of diverse race and the scope of services. Generally speaking, interpretation services can be broadly classified into two categories, namely general interpretation services, and interpretation services in specialised and professional areas.

On general interpretation services, the Centre for Harmony and Enhancement of Ethnic Minority Residents (CHEER Centre), which is operated by the Hong Kong Christian Service and commissioned by the Home Affairs Department, offers free and instant telephone interpretation and enquiry services between English and eight other common languages (i.e. Bahasa Indonesia, Hindi, Nepali, Punjabi, Tagalog, Thai, Urdu, and Vietnamese).

Regarding interpretation services in specialised and professional areas, the relevant public authorities may approach companies, organisations or individuals providing interpretation/translation services in the market in accordance with the relevant procurement regulations to meet their respective service needs, or obtain such services through in-house interpreters/translators.

"We note that the Ombudsman's observations and recommendations pertaining to the outside interpreters of foreign languages and other Chinese dialects are mainly concerned with law enforcement agencies that need to engage professional foreign language interpretation services in legal aspects. In fact, the general interpretation services currently provided by the CHEER Centre has satisfied the interpretation service needs of most of the public authorities to help people of different races to obtain public services," the spokesman said.

"CMAB will co-ordinate with relevant policy bureaux/departments to carefully study the recommendation of the Ombudsman to develop a central database of outside foreign language interpreters with a view to further facilitating the procurement of foreign languages interpretation services by public authorities and promoting the effective implementation of the Guidelines."