

LC: Speech by CS in presenting Government Minute in response to Annual Report of The Ombudsman 2020

Following is the speech (translated from Chinese) by the Chief Secretary for Administration, Mr Matthew Cheung Kin-chung, in presenting the Government Minute in response to the Annual Report of The Ombudsman 2020 in the Legislative Council today (December 16):

Mr President,

The Annual Report of The Ombudsman 2020 was submitted to the Legislative Council on July 8 this year. Today, I submit the Government Minute (GM) responding to the recommendations as set out in the Annual Report.

This is the first Annual Report prepared by The Ombudsman, Ms Winnie Chiu. In 2019-20, the total number of complaints received by the Office of The Ombudsman increased to as high as nearly 20 000 cases, almost quadrupling the figure from the previous year and representing an all-time high, resulting in an unprecedented workload. Despite the immense work pressure, the Office was able to handle smoothly public complaints in an impartial and efficient manner.

In the Annual Report, The Ombudsman summed up 10 direct investigation and 240 full investigation cases, making a total of 177 recommendations. The GM has responded to all the recommendations made by The Ombudsman. I am pleased to see that government departments and relevant public bodies have accepted the vast majority of the recommendations and have taken or are taking follow-up action. Among all the cases, there is only one case for which some of the recommendations were not accepted. The relevant department has already provided detailed supplementary information to The Ombudsman, explaining its reasons and providing detailed responses in the GM.

I note that The Ombudsman's Review section of the Annual Report highlighted the importance of direct investigation as a useful tool for the Office to look into systemic issues and foster positive changes in public administration. The Government fully agrees with this view. In addition to investigating public complaints, The Ombudsman has time and again exercised the statutory power to initiate direct investigation into problems involving systemic flaws or maladministration of significant public interest. The Ombudsman looked at various issues of community concern from a wider perspective and recommended comprehensive and systematic solutions, with a view to promoting proactive cross-departmental co-ordination and collaboration.

The Ombudsman has already initiated eight direct investigations in the first nine months of 2020-21, looking into such matters as the Government's

mechanism for monitoring vaccines provided by private healthcare facilities, and the management and effectiveness of waste separation bins. We look forward to receiving the valuable advice and recommendations of The Ombudsman from the above investigations, and the bureaux and departments concerned will continue to work closely with the Office to improve public administration.

On access to information, the number of requests for information received by government departments has continued to rise in recent years. In 2019-20, over 9 300 requests for information made under the Code on Access to Information were received from members of the public, representing an increase of over 20 per cent as compared to the previous year's figure. Requests for information not made under the Code were numerous. Since the promulgation of the Code, all the information requested has been provided in 94 per cent of the cases while part of the information requested has been provided in 3 per cent of the cases.

The Ombudsman also pointed out in the Annual Report that the Office received 100 complaints concerning non-compliance with the Code during the year, which is also a record high. Yet, in comparison with the total number of requests handled by government departments or public bodies last year as I have just mentioned, the complaints account for only about 1 per cent of the total figure. We appreciate that public expectations for access to information are rising. As such, in spite of the large number of requests received, government departments will continue to strengthen staff training, so as to increase civil servants' understanding of the Code and enable them to handle each request with a positive attitude in accordance with the Code.

I would like to express my gratitude to The Ombudsman and her professional team for their unstinting efforts in identifying the cruxes of complicated and cross-departmental problems. Through its independent, fair and impartial investigations as well as positive interactions and communication with departments, the Office has redressed grievances by smoothly addressing issues arising from maladministration in the public sector. As always, the Government will continue to support fully The Ombudsman's work and ensure effective implementation of all improvement measures. We will also step up our proactive efforts in raising the overall quality and standard of public administration in Hong Kong.

Thank you, Mr President.