

Office of The Ombudsman announces direct investigation report on “Mechanisms for Verifying Travel Records of Comprehensive Social Security Assistance/Social Security Allowance Applicants and Recipients” (with photo)

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

The Ombudsman, Ms Winnie Chiu, today (January 21) announced the completion of a direct investigation, namely "Mechanisms for Verifying Travel Records of Comprehensive Social Security Assistance/Social Security Allowance Applicants and Recipients".

To qualify for assistance or an allowance under the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) Scheme and the Social Security Allowance (SSA) Scheme, applicants must satisfy the prescribed eligibility criteria, including the residence requirements. After approval of applications, CSSA recipients and SSA recipients must reside in Hong Kong during receipt of the assistance/allowance, with their number of days away from Hong Kong not exceeding the permissible limits (absence limits). During its investigation of individual complaint cases, the Office of The Ombudsman found that there might be inadequacies in the relevant mechanism. Hence, The Ombudsman initiated a direct investigation against the Social Welfare Department (SWD).

The Office's investigation has revealed that under the established mechanism, every month the SWD provides the Immigration Department (ImmD) with the Hong Kong identity card (HKIC) numbers of SSA applicants and CSSA/SSA recipients for the ImmD to conduct data matching (Regular Data Matching). After receiving from the ImmD the records of the persons concerned who travelled with their HKICs, the SWD uses those records to verify whether applicants and recipients satisfy the relevant residence requirement or absence limits. Nevertheless, since Regular Data Matching is conducted using only the HKIC numbers of the persons concerned, it is unable to obtain their accurate travel records through Regular Data Matching if those persons used travel documents other than the HKIC to exit and/or enter the territory. Consequently, it is unable to ascertain that the persons concerned indeed satisfy the residence requirement or absence limits.

Upon the Office's pointing out that the existing procedures of Regular Data Matching should be improved, the SWD responded positively and has started enhancing Regular Data Matching since January 2020. The scope of

Regular Data Matching is now extended to cover the travel documents issued by the ImmD. The scope will be further extended to cover the travel documents issued by other countries and territories.

Moreover, the Office has noted that CSSA applicants are not subject to Regular Data Matching. After examination, the Office considers this practice appropriate. This is because most CSSA applicants can satisfy the residence requirement of having resided in Hong Kong for at least one year since acquiring Hong Kong resident status to the date prior to the date of application. Moreover, even after conducting Regular Data Matching on CSSA applicants, the ImmD may not be able to provide their complete travel records for confirming whether they satisfy the residence requirement, as the computerised database of the ImmD only retains travel records for 10 years. In addition to Regular Data Matching, the SWD has also established a mechanism with the ImmD under which the SWD can use where necessary a specific memorandum to obtain, for verification purposes, the detailed travel records of the persons concerned from the ImmD on a case-by-case basis. The Office considers that the current practice can largely strike a balance between verifying the eligibility of CSSA applicants in terms of the residence requirement and offering them timely assistance to meet basic needs.

In the light of the above, The Ombudsman recommends that the SWD complete all the enhancements to Regular Data Matching as soon as possible, thereby improving the inadequacies in existing procedures.

The full investigation report has been uploaded to the website of the Office of The Ombudsman at www.ombudsman.hk for public information.

