

# Office of The Ombudsman announces results of direct investigation into Allocation Mechanism of Ward Offices under Housing Department

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

The Ombudsman, Ms Winnie Chiu, today (December 12) announced the completion of a direct investigation into the Allocation Mechanism of Ward Offices under the Housing Department (HD).

The HD currently provides suitable non-domestic premises in its public rental housing (PRH)/residential estates for lease to District Council (DC) and Legislative Council (LegCo) Members as offices (ward offices). As at December 31, 2018, there were 334 ward offices in 189 PRH/residential estates under the HD, and as at May 31, 2019, the leasing rate of the HD's ward offices exceeded 96 per cent, and there were still 13 vacant ward offices available for lease by Council Members.

Under the current allocation mechanism, the HD allocates ward offices according to the following order of priority: 1) elected DC Member of the constituency concerned; 2) other DC Members of the district; 3) LegCo Members returned by the geographical constituency concerned; and 4) LegCo Members returned by functional constituencies.

The Office of The Ombudsman has in the past received comments from individual Council Members, criticising the HD's current allocation mechanism as being unfair. While some Council Members have not been allocated any ward office, some other Council Members who are already sitting tenants can still lease an additional ward office by virtue of their higher priority status. As a result, Council Members in lower priority categories may find it difficult to be allocated a ward office.

Figures provided by the HD show that, for the current terms of the DCs and LegCo, the successful allocation rates of ward offices for the Council Members of all the four priority categories were as high as 80 per cent or above (in terms of number of Council Members who had applied for leasing a ward office). Even for LegCo Members returned by functional constituencies, who were given the lowest priority under the allocation mechanism, the successful allocation rate was over 90 per cent. This reflects that the current allocation mechanism has not kept LegCo Members returned by functional constituencies from leasing the HD's ward offices.

Individual Council Members opined that the HD should consider allocating vacant ward offices first to those Council Members who have not been allocated any ward office. On this proposal, the HD had sought separately the

views of LegCo Members and DC Members of different political parties. The views collected, however, unanimously objected to the proposal. This shows a lack of consensus among Council Members in that regard.

On the other hand, the Office has received complaints from Council Members about unfairness of the joint tenancy arrangement for ward offices, as it allows the original Council Member tenant to, before terminating his or her tenancy of a ward office, circumvent the HD's allocation mechanism by adding another Council Member as a joint tenant of the ward office, thus resulting in de facto "inheritance of tenancy". The Office is glad to note that in response to its recommendations, the HD has revised the joint tenancy arrangement for ward offices to plug the loophole.

Overall, the Office considers that the HD's existing allocation mechanism of ward offices has already taken into account the needs and limitations of Council Members of different priority categories, and the allocation arrangements are, by and large, appropriate. That said, the HD should continue to review in a timely manner the arrangements for allocating ward offices and make revisions where necessary.

The Office understands that Council Members of different priority categories hope to set up ward offices in PRH/residential estates under the HD to serve the public. However, the HD only added 21 new ward offices in its PRH/residential estates in the past four years. In the long run, the HD should continue to study ways to increase the supply of ward offices as far as practicable so that more Council Members can set up service points in the HD's PRH/residential estates.

Furthermore, the HD should continue to review regularly the situation of vacant ward offices, and actively study the feasibility of putting the ward offices found to have been vacant for a long period to other uses for better utilisation of resources.

The full investigation report has been uploaded to the website of the Office of The Ombudsman at [www.ombudsman.hk](http://www.ombudsman.hk) for public information.