

# Ombudsman announces results of direct investigation operation into public services relating to after-death arrangements (with photos)

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

The Ombudsman, Mr Jack Chan, today (December 18) announced the completion of a direct investigation operation into the public services relating to after-death arrangements, and made a total of 10 major recommendations to the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD), the Department of Health (DH), the Hospital Authority (HA) and the Immigration Department (ImmD).

With an ageing trend in Hong Kong's population, the demand for public services relating to after-death arrangements, including death registration matters, mortuary services and funeral arrangements is expected to continue to rise. The dissemination of information on relevant services is very important to the public.

Various government departments are responsible for public services relating to after-death arrangements. The DH and the HA provide mortuary services and issue death documents while the ImmD handles death registrations. As regards funeral arrangements, cremations, burials, handling of cremated ashes and green burials, the bereaved are required to submit applications and follow up with the FEHD. Members of the public can go to the joint offices set up by the ImmD, the DH and the FEHD to register deaths and apply for a cremation for some death cases. However, the joint offices do not handle applications for burials.

Currently, information about after-death arrangements can be found on the Services and Support for the Bereaved webpage on the government website, Gov.HK. Nevertheless, the bereaved have to click on the links to websites of different government departments, one by one, to look for the information they need, which is difficult to find from the linked websites.

Mr Chan said, "It takes time to heal the pain of losing a loved one. During that period of time, family members not only have to face the grief of losing their loved ones, but also have to deal with cumbersome after-death arrangements. Under this kind of pressure, family members may feel helpless and anxious. My Office expects the information on various public services to be more easily accessible and clearly understood so family members can find the information they need quickly, avoiding anxiety and confusion due to insufficient information, and do not need to worry about missing any important steps.

"After the Office initiated this direct investigation operation, the

Office is pleased to note that the FEHD launched the After-death Arrangements thematic website in November this year, aiming to provide information focusing on green burials and after-death arrangements provided by the department. We recommend that based on this online platform by the FEHD, other departments and authorities, including the ImmD, the DH and the HA, should explore the development of a truly interdepartmental one-stop thematic website, with the function of an online application for the relevant after-death public services to enable family members to complete the relevant procedures more expeditiously to save them the inconvenience of having to go to the offices of different departments in person to apply for various services."

Mr Chan added, "I am pleased to note that during our investigation, the Digital Policy Office together with the FEHD, the ImmD, the DH and the HA have commenced a study on the feasibility of streamlining application procedures for public services relating to after-death arrangements. The study covers the feasibility of developing a one-stop online platform and data sharing, and digitalised procedures for the services provided by the departments and the authority concerned. I expect that various departments and organisations will inform the public of their work plans and progress in a timely manner. On the other hand, I think that in the face of emergencies such as serious natural disasters, public health and safety incidents, departments should formulate a crisis response mechanism for critical situations that may lead to mass casualties, and implement proper co-ordination measures to ensure that the most efficient and speedy response will be made in the future, if necessary."

The Ombudsman has made the following improvement recommendations to the FEHD, the DH, the HA and the ImmD:

- All the departments should discuss and examine the feasibility of developing a one-stop thematic website providing information about the public services provided by each of them regarding after-death arrangements;
- All the departments should explore using a one-stop thematic website to further digitalise public services relating to after-death arrangements. They should consider providing more electronic application procedures and personalised services to make it more convenient for the bereaved;
- All the departments should examine how the content of the thematic website can meet the needs of people of different races and cultures;
- The FEHD and the department or authority concerned should organise seminars or forums to explain information and share experiences relating to after-death arrangements on a regular basis;
- The HA and the department or authority concerned should provide more information on dying in place to their service users as well as giving more publicity to the new arrangements in the amended legislation that make it more convenient for patients to choose to die in place;
- The DH should regularly review the availability of body storage facilities in public mortuaries and consider installing additional units in response to the population growth and the ageing trend in Hong Kong;

- The HA should regularly review the availability of body storage facilities in hospital mortuaries and consider installing additional units in response to the population growth and the ageing trend in Hong Kong;
- All the departments should consolidate previous experiences and explore the establishment of an emergency response system and implementation of relevant measures regarding provision of public services relating to after-death arrangements at the time of emergencies or major accidents to prepare for sudden challenges;
- All the departments should conclude previous experiences and arrange regular training to staff providing public services relating to after-death arrangements at the time of emergencies or major accidents, with the aim of increasing the staff's alertness and capability in handling emergencies of a sizeable magnitude; and
- All the departments and the authority concerned should be flexible in redeploying internal resources to meet the rising demand for public services relating to after-death arrangements alongside the ageing trend in Hong Kong's population.

The full report of this direct investigation is available on the Office's website ([www.ombudsman.hk](http://www.ombudsman.hk)) for public information.

