

Ombudsman encourages agility and flexibility to enhance quality of public administration (with photo)

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

At the Presentation Ceremony of The Ombudsman's Awards today (November 4), The Ombudsman, Ms Winnie Chiu, encouraged government departments and public organisations to be agile and flexible in changing circumstances and learn from experience so that they could keep an open mind and deliver quality services to the public.

Ms Chiu said, "During the pandemic, government departments and public organisations have made huge efforts in adapting to the new normal. They have continued to make adjustments and improvements as new situations emerged, and put more efforts into communicating with the public. In fact, in an ever-changing environment, there is no way for even the best public administration system to stay in a rut. Rather, public service providers need to be agile and flexible in light of the changing circumstances and the lessons learned on the way. Only by doing so can they keep an open mind and deliver quality services to the public."

The Grand Award this year went to the Water Supplies Department (WSD). Routine meter-reading was suspended during the pandemic and the WSD needed to estimate meter readings based on the past water consumption of account holders. Some members of the public considered their water bills too high and complained to the Office of The Ombudsman. The WSD not only handled the complaints according to its established procedures, but also took the initiative to make special arrangements. It combined billing periods, conducted special meter readings before calculating water charges and proactively explained its actions to the public. These efforts reflected its commitment to enhancing the quality of public administration.

The Environmental Protection Department (EPD) and the Housing Department (HD) were the other two winning organisations. The EPD was earnest and proactive in responding to the Office of The Ombudsman's inquiries by providing comprehensive, clear and detailed information, explaining relevant legislation and procedures, and furnishing the Office with data and records. It often acted quickly on complaints. Its officers conducted multiple inspections at different time periods to understand the actual situation in order to solve the problems and address the complainants' concerns as soon as possible.

The HD adopted a prudent yet people-first approach in handling complaints. In response to the Office's inquiries, the HD always provided lucid and detailed explanations on the course of events and justifications for its actions, as well as information about its procedures and relevant records to help the Office's investigators fully understand the case. In

cases involving the elderly and others in need of help, the HD would go the extra mile to provide assistance pertinent to their needs. Moreover, it was ready to resolve simple cases by way of mediation for prompt solutions to problems.

The Buildings Department (BD) was presented the Award on Mediation for a public organisation this year. In 2020/21, the BD handled 28 complaint cases, or 16 per cent of all the Office's mediation cases in the year, through its mediation service. In the course of mediation, it explained to complainants in clear and plain terms its enforcement policies, procedures and even technicalities in respect of in-situ inspection techniques so that the complainants could have a better grasp of the facts. With misunderstandings eliminated, the focus could then shift from the disputes to solutions.

At the presentation ceremony, Ms Chiu commended the contributions made by the public officers who won the individual awards. She said, "Government departments and public organisations that deliver an efficient and quality performance are invariably backed by a dedicated and diligent staff team. This year, 64 public officers are lauded for their professional and excellent services, and for their courage in accepting responsibilities. They have earned the recognition and commendation of the general public, the department/public organisation concerned and my Office alike."

A full list of individual awards recipients this year and the experiences and thoughts of some of them about receiving the Awards are in Appendices (I) and (II) respectively.

The Ombudsman's Awards Scheme was introduced in 1997. In 1999, the Scheme was extended to honour individual public officers. In 2018, an additional Award on Mediation for a public organisation was introduced.

