

Ombudsman probes Government handling of misconnection of private building sewers to stormwater drains

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

The Ombudsman, Ms Winnie Chiu, declared a direct investigation today (May 21) to examine whether the Government has properly handled problems related to the misconnection of private building sewers to stormwater drains.

According to information from the Environmental Protection Department (EPD), the misconnection of private building sewers to stormwater drains, which leads to the discharge of untreated sewage into the sea, is one of the major causes of the pollution that degrades the quality of coastal waters in Hong Kong. There are also media reports from time to time about cases of sewage discharged from private buildings into the sea through stormwater drainage systems in certain districts. This has resulted in unpleasant odours at the waterfront causing a prolonged nuisance to residents and passers-by in the vicinity.

For handling the misconnection of private building sewers to stormwater drains, the division of responsibilities of respective government departments are as follows. On receipt of a relevant complaint, the EPD will look into the matter from the perspective of environmental protection, and will institute prosecution against illegal sewage dischargers pursuant to the Water Pollution Control Ordinance. The EPD is also responsible for the co-ordination and planning of installation of "dry weather flow interceptors" in various districts to help alleviate the impact on coastal water quality caused by sewage entering the stormwater drainage system during dry seasons. The Buildings Department (BD) will conduct an investigation from a building structural safety point of view and issue statutory orders to the property owners concerned under the Buildings Ordinance to demand rectification of misconnected pipes and prosecute those not in compliance with the orders. The Drainage Services Department (DSD), with a supportive role to play, is responsible for the detection of misconnection cases during its routine inspections. The DSD is also responsible for the construction and operation of the "dry weather flow interceptors". This direct investigation aims at examining the effectiveness of work done by the three departments in handling cases of misconnection of private building sewers to stormwater drains, especially in their performance at the location of the misconnection as well as the departments' pursuit of liability and implementation of remedial measures.

Ms Chiu said, "Proper maintenance of private buildings, including ensuring correct connections of pipes, is a duty incumbent upon property owners. However, the sewage pipes of some private premises and communal

sewers of some private buildings have been misconnected to the stormwater drainage system for various reasons, leading to the discharge of untreated sewage into the sea. Our preliminary inquiry has revealed a number of cases dragging on for years without resolution. As long as the misconnected sewers remain unrectified, a huge volume of effluent will continue to flow into the sea and cause pollution day after day. Such a situation is highly unsatisfactory. I have, therefore, decided to initiate this direct investigation to examine whether the EPD, BD and DSD have appropriately handled this issue. I will be making recommendations for improvement where necessary."

The Ombudsman is inviting views from members of the public on this topic. Written submissions should reach the Office of The Ombudsman by June 21, 2020:

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