

Ombudsman probes Government's arrangements for engaging outside interpretation services

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

The Ombudsman, Ms Winnie Chiu, today (October 12) announced the launch of a direct investigation to probe whether there is room for improvement in the Government's arrangements for engaging outside interpretation services.

According to the Administrative Guidelines on Promotion of Racial Equality (the Guidelines) promulgated by the Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau (CMAB), all Government bureaux and departments (B/Ds) as well as related public organisations under their respective purview that deliver services to people of different races have a duty to provide those in need with appropriate interpretation services in foreign languages. The aim is to ensure that those people can enjoy equal access to public services.

At present, apart from engaging the general interpretation services provided by the Centre for Harmony and Enhancement of Ethnic Minority Residents, which is commissioned by the Home Affairs Department, B/Ds and their related organisations also procure suitable interpretation services in foreign languages and Chinese dialects in the market, taking into account their own operational needs and circumstances.

Provision of appropriate and reliable interpretation services in foreign languages and Chinese dialects is crucial to the Government's delivery of services and support to people of different races and languages. To protect the rights and interests of people only speaking foreign languages or other Chinese dialects, and also to enhance operational efficiency of the Government, it is vital for interpreters to have attained recognised qualifications and have interpretation skills of a certain level. Nevertheless, the Government has not compiled information about outside interpreters for foreign languages and Chinese dialects (other than Putonghua and Cantonese) for hiring by B/Ds and related public organisations. Moreover, the qualification requirements for such interpreters are not uniform across the Government. This Office's preliminary inquiries found that in the past, several law enforcement departments would refer to the Judiciary's registered list of part-time court interpreters, while looking for outside interpreters for foreign languages and Chinese dialects. The Judiciary Administration, however, has since August 2018, ceased making the list available to other parties.

This Office is of the view that it is time-consuming and resource-intensive for B/Ds and related public organisations to source and procure outside interpretation services on their own. Furthermore, there is hardly any guarantee as to the standard of interpreters.

In this light, The Ombudsman initiates this direct investigation into the Government's arrangements for engaging outside interpretation services, with a view to examining how the CMAB can improve the overall arrangements for engaging outside interpreters for foreign languages and Chinese dialects while implementing the Guidelines.

Ms Chiu said, "Hong Kong is a multicultural society committed to forging the inclusion of people of diverse races and languages. I hope that this direct investigation can prompt the Government to improve its arrangements for engaging outside interpreters for foreign languages and Chinese dialects, boost its administrative efficiency and strengthen the monitoring of the quality of interpretation services engaged by the Government, so that the spirit of the Guidelines can be carried through."

The Ombudsman now invites members of the public to give their views on the above topic in writing to the Office of The Ombudsman by November 12, 2020:

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