

Ombudsman probes management of records on Government websites and social media accounts (with photo)

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

The Ombudsman, Ms Winnie Chiu, today (October 24) announced the launch of a direct investigation into the management of records on Government websites and social media accounts.

With the advancement of information technology, the Internet and social media are playing greater and considerably more important roles in enhancing public administration. Currently, GovHK provides web links to main websites of more than 80 government bureaux and departments. To cater for specific official business or operational needs, the Government also launches thematic websites from time to time. Moreover, around 70 per cent of government bureaux and departments have created accounts on social media platforms such as Weibo, Facebook, YouTube and Instagram. Under the Government's prevailing records management policy, any recorded information in any physical format or medium created or received by a bureau/department during its course of official business and kept as evidence of policies, decisions, procedures, functions, activities and transactions should be captured and properly maintained in the recordkeeping system of the bureau/department. The existing requirements for managing traditional records (such as printed and email records) equally apply to the records on government websites and social media accounts.

A preliminary inquiry by the Office of The Ombudsman reveals that, in comparison with the long-standing practice of managing traditional records, the Government Records Service (GRS) launched two pilot projects of archiving government websites in 2018 and 2022 and conducted a preliminary study of social media archiving in 2021. Relevant work is still at its initial stage. Meanwhile, complaints received by the Office in recent years show that information made available to the public via government websites or social media at different points in time may continue to be a source of concern or discontent despite amendments or removal of such information with the passage of time or due to specific considerations. Where information keeps changing rapidly, when and how bureaux/departments update their websites or social media accounts could become crucial information or evidence of their responses to enquiries or complaints. Hence, proper preservation of records is of paramount importance. The Office has also noticed that development in records management of government websites and social media accounts in other regions has reached different levels.

Ms Chiu said, "Records are valuable resources enabling the Government to learn from experience and make evidence-based decisions as well as meeting operational and regulatory requirements. Proper records preservation and

management are indispensable to good governance. As the use of information technology has become part of daily life, it is a dominant trend for the Government to make use of websites and social media in performing public functions. It falls upon the Government to properly manage the voluminous electronic records that come with such usage in this digital era. Being the Government's central records management agency, the GRS is duty-bound to provide specific guidelines and necessary support to bureaux/departments to ensure proper records management. Therefore, I have decided to launch a direct investigation into the GRS to examine the management of records on government websites and social media accounts, the scope of which covers how relevant records are currently managed, whether the GRS has given sufficient and effective guidelines and support to bureaux/departments, and the results of the GRS's pilot projects and preliminary study on archiving government websites and social media accounts. Where necessary, we will make recommendations for improvement. Furthermore, we will examine and make reference to relevant records management work in other regions."

In conducting this direct investigation into the GRS under the Administration Wing, the Office will also enquire with certain bureaux/departments having more frequent contact with the public and considerable data traffic about their websites or social media accounts, so as to grasp the current practice of various bureaux/departments in managing such records.

The Ombudsman welcomes information and views from members of the public on this topic. Written submissions should reach the Office of The Ombudsman by November 24, 2023:

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