

Government to extend Pilot Scheme for Supporting Patients of Hospital Authority in Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area till end of March next year

The Health Bureau (HHB) announced today (March 7) the extension of the Pilot Scheme for Supporting Patients of the Hospital Authority in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA) till March 31 of next year in a bid to enable eligible patients of the Hospital Authority (HA) to continue receiving subsidised consultation services at the University of Hong Kong-Shenzhen Hospital (HKU-SZH).

To enable Hong Kong citizens to develop, live and reside on the Mainland, the Government launched the Pilot Scheme on May 10 last year making reference to the experience from the Special Support Scheme during the COVID-19 epidemic, so that patients with scheduled follow-up appointments at designated Specialist Out-patient Clinics (SOPCs) or General Out-patient Clinic (GOPCs) of the HA (eligible patients) can receive subsidised consultations at the HKU-SZH. By the end of this February, over 4 000 eligible patients have enrolled into the scheme. These patients only need to pay a consultation fee of RMB100 for each subsidised consultation at the HKU-SZH and the remaining fee is subsidised under the Pilot Scheme.

The HKU-SZH conducted a survey among patients participating in the Pilot Scheme between the end of last year and early this year. The survey results revealed that nearly 60 per cent of the participating patients are elderly persons aged 65 or above. Moreover, 96 per cent of the patients have their habitual residence in Guangdong Province, with some 60 per cent currently residing in Shenzhen. Over 90 per cent of the participating patients were satisfied with the services delivered under the Pilot Scheme at the HKU-SZH and enjoyed the convenience of attending follow-up consultations on the Mainland that had spared them the tiring journeys between the Mainland and Hong Kong.

Having considered the effectiveness of the Pilot Scheme in addressing the patients' need for frequent follow-up consultations, the Government decided to extend the Pilot Scheme for one year. From April 1 this year to March 31 next year, eligible patients can continue to receive subsidised consultation services at the HKU-SZH.

The Secretary for Health, Professor Lo Chung-mau, said, "The Government has all along been committed to taking forward medical collaboration in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area for providing greater convenience to Hong Kong citizens residing in or frequently travelling to and from GBA cities. Apart from this Pilot Scheme, the Government announced last month the

inclusion of seven medical institutions in the GBA in the Elderly Health Care Voucher Greater Bay Area Pilot Scheme to offer eligible Hong Kong elderly persons additional options of service points for using the Elderly Health Care Vouchers in the GBA in the future. The pilot medical institutions are expected to gradually launch the relevant arrangements starting from the third quarter of this year.

"In the light of the Chief Executive's announcement of making optimal use of GBA healthcare services in the Policy Address, the HHB will identify healthcare services with pressing demand and of lower risks, and plan for strategic procurement of relevant services from suitable GBA medical institutions for Hong Kong citizens. The move aims to alleviate the pressure exerted on the public hospitals in Hong Kong and shorten the waiting time of citizens. We will make an announcement as soon as the details are finalised."

In order to provide more effective support to Hong Kong citizens utilising cross-boundary healthcare services in the GBA, new functions will also be added to the eHealth mobile application later on to enable citizens in need to receive more seamless and comprehensive healthcare services.

"In the long term, the HHB will keep on monitoring closely the progress of various GBA medical collaboration initiatives. Apart from reviewing the effectiveness of arrangements such as the Pilot Scheme in due course, we will also keep up with the strengthening of medical collaboration with the Mainland, contributing to the national strategy of 'Healthy China'," Professor Lo stressed.

The arrangements under the extended Pilot Scheme will remain as the status quo. Eligible patients will be required to pay a consultation fee of RMB100 for each consultation received at the designated outpatient clinic of the HKU-SZH (except for specified persons whose medical fees would be waived upon verification by the HA) while the remaining consultation fee will be subsidised by the Pilot Scheme, subject to a cap of RMB2,000. The relevant subsidy will be valid until March 31 next year. The scope of subsidised consultation services under the Pilot Scheme will continue to cover major SOPC and GOPC services provided by the HA, namely anaesthesiology (pain clinic only); cardiothoracic surgery; clinical oncology; ear, nose and throat; eye; gynaecology; internal medicine; neurosurgery; obstetrics; orthopaedics and traumatology (orthopaedics); paediatrics, and surgery. However, episodic illnesses, inpatient or day inpatient, as well as Accident and Emergency services are not included.

All subsidies for current participating patients of the Pilot Scheme will expire on March 31 this year. As such, relevant patients should review their remaining subsidy balance and consider using it according to clinical needs by the end of March.

Eligible patients with the intention to continue participating in the Scheme may make a consultation appointment as usual with the HKU-SZH through existing channels. However, they should have the declaration to confirm continued participation at the HKU-SZH completed before receiving any subsidised consultation service. For patients who wish to quit the Scheme and

return to Hong Kong for follow-up consultations at the HA's SOPCs or GOPCs, they may approach the HKU-SZH and the hospital will make referral for them to arrange follow-up appointments at the HA's corresponding out-patient clinics according to their clinical needs.

As for eligible patients who are new to the Pilot Scheme or those who have joined the Scheme but need to have their personal information updated, they may submit their application to the HKU-SZH from April 1 onwards.

Details of the extension of the Pilot Scheme will be uploaded to the website of the HKU-SZH later for public reference. For enquiries, citizens may also call the HA (Tel. No.: 2300 7070; Service Hours: 9am – 6pm, Mondays to Fridays, except public holidays) or the HKU-SZH (Tel. No.: (+86) 0755-86913101; Service Hours: 8am – 12.30pm and 2pm – 5.30pm, Mondays to Fridays, except public holidays).

[Efficiency Office's response to Office of The Ombudsman's direct investigation report](#)

Regarding a report released by the Ombudsman today (March 7) on its direct investigation into the effectiveness of 1823 in handling complaints and enquiries, the Efficiency Office (Eff0) is pleased to note that the Ombudsman recognises the excellent efficiency of 1823 in handling public enquiries. 1823 achieved first-call resolution at 99 per cent for telephone enquiries, which is in line with its aim of providing a one-stop enquiry service. The Ombudsman also affirms 1823's positive attitude during the epidemic in actively taking measures to improve its services and providing advice to departments to handle enquiries more effectively. A spokesperson for the Eff0 said that 1823's service level had been affected by the epidemic and the need to support extra anti-epidemic related hotlines. As society moved towards a full resumption to normalcy, 1823's services had generally returned to normal in 2023, with 90 per cent of the calls handled.

The Eff0 has committed to continuously improving the performance of 1823 over the years. 1823 has already implemented or will implement seven recommendations mentioned in the report. The Eff0 accepted the remaining recommendations and would actively follow up on them. In summary, the main improvement measures of 1823 in different areas include:

- For handling of complaints (including requests for government service), in accordance with the Ombudsman's recommendation, the Eff0 would systematically sort out unresolved cross-departmental complaints involving district issues and submit a report to the Task Force on

District Governance (TFDG), chaired by the Deputy Chief Secretary for Administration, for deliberation with relevant departments, and providing guidance. In addition, the Eff0 will develop a mechanism and formulate associated guidelines for submission of cases to the District Officer or the TFDG in a systematic, appropriate and timely manner, as well as regularise the escalation mechanism.

- For enhancing operational efficiency, 1823 has launched a series of projects since 2023 that use new technologies to enhance operational efficiency. Among them, 1823 had completed the telephony system upgrade project at the end of 2023. 1823 is also expanding its artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot for enquiry service in answering frequently asked questions under its service scope; and conducting a project to pilot the use of generative AI technology to assist colleagues in drafting responses to written enquiries from citizens. In addition, 1823 will apply AI speech-to-text technology to transcribe citizens' voicemail messages into text so as to enhance the handling efficiency; and provide self-service to citizens for receiving the requested information by short message service (SMS).
- For strengthening of collaboration and communication between departments and 1823, 1823 will continue to provide advice to participating departments on their information dissemination and strengthen collaboration and communication with departments in accordance with the Ombudsman's recommendations. 1823 will also discuss and formulate backup plans and contingency measures with relevant departments for addressing unexpected and emergency situations.
- For better use of data for analysis, 1823 will continue to follow the existing arrangement to provide case data to departments and submit various case statistics and analysis reports to participating departments so that they can combine with their own operational data as well as enquiry and complaint data collected from other channels for comprehensive analysis. In order to make better use of the data collected from daily operations, 1823 will further consolidate the case data collected for comprehensive analysis by policy bureaux/departments to further improve government services.

[Office of The Ombudsman announces](#)

results of direct investigation into effectiveness of 1823 in handling complaints and enquiries (with photos)

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

The Ombudsman, Ms Winnie Chiu, today (March 7) announced the completion of a direct investigation into the effectiveness of the 1823 service in handling complaints and enquiries, and made 13 recommendations for improvement to the Efficiency Office (EO).

Established more than 20 years ago, 1823 under the EO provides a one-stop service round the clock to answer public enquiries about the services of 23 participating departments, and receive complaints about any area of Government services.

The Office of The Ombudsman's investigation reveals that over the past six years, the service handled an average of around 1.95 million enquiries annually. In the case of telephone enquiries, 1823 achieved first-call resolutions of issues 99 per cent of the time, in line with its aim of providing a one-stop enquiry service. Regarding complaint handling, the Office finds that 1823's existing mechanism cannot effectively resolve cross-departmental complaints and complaints involving unclear delineation of responsibilities, nor can it ensure direct communication and collaboration among departments.

The Office also identifies room for improvement in 1823's handling of calls, co-operation arrangements with participating departments, daily operations and use of data.

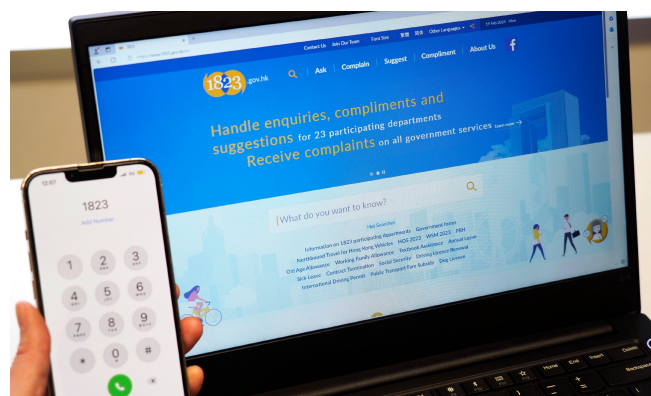
Ms Chiu said, "Most complaints which are cross-departmental and involving unclear delineation of responsibilities are about district problems directly related to people's livelihood. Simply relying on 1823's existing escalation mechanism does not ensure that these complaints are properly handled. Under the Government's proposals to improve district governance, the Task Force on District Governance (TFDG), led by the Deputy Chief Secretary for Administration, has been set up to steer and co-ordinate cross-departmental district issues. The District Officers of the Home Affairs Department are representatives of the Government at the district level who co-ordinate departments' services and assist in problem solving locally. 1823 should escalate cases about recurring district problems with unclear delineation of responsibilities to the District Officers or the TFDG in a systematic and timely manner with a view to resolving these problems more effectively through the high-level structure of the Government."

The Office's recommendations for improvement to the EO include:

- Stringently enforce the requirement that departments reply within a specified time limit with reasons if they consider a case outside their purview or should be handled by another department; if departments fail to reply after the deadline, 1823 can activate the escalation mechanism outright or request departments to review the case under the mechanism, so as to ensure timely handling of complaints;
- Establish a mechanism and draw up guidelines to standardise and regularise the procedures for escalating cases about recurring district problems with unclear delineation of responsibilities to the District Officers or the TFDG in a systematic, proper and timely manner;
- Request participating departments to submit forecast plans of new services or arrangements on a regular basis for preparation accordingly, and remind departments from time to time of the importance of updating the knowledge base;
- Proactively monitor and conduct timely review of the newly upgraded telephone system with a view to further enhancing 1823's call answering rate, and expand the application of artificial intelligence on enquiry handling;
- Further consolidate the data collected from enquiries and complaints handled by 1823 to facilitate bureaux/departments capturing the data required and conduct comprehensive analyses, with a view to improving Government services; and
- Conduct systematic analyses of cross-departmental cases and consolidate relevant data, submit reports to the TFDG from time to time to facilitate the Government's resolution of cross-departmental district issues and formulation of long-term strategies to enhance district administration.

The EO has accepted the improvement recommendations made by the Office.

The full investigation report is available on the website of the Office of The Ombudsman at www.ombudsman.hk for public information.



Office of The Ombudsman announces results of direct investigation into regulation of licensed swimming pools by Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (with photo)

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

The Ombudsman, Ms Winnie Chiu, announced at a press conference today (March 7) the completion of a direct investigation into the regulation of licensed swimming pools by the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) and made 12 recommendations for improvement.

Swimming pools in Hong Kong can largely be categorised into public swimming pools operated and managed by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) and private swimming pools licensed and regulated by the FEHD pursuant to the Swimming Pools Regulation subsidiary to the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance. At present, there are around 1 400 licensed swimming pools across the territory. As the licensing authority, the FEHD ensures licensees' compliance with the Regulation and licensing conditions mainly through regular inspections and complaint handling to protect swimmers' safety and maintain environmental hygiene.

The investigation by the Office of The Ombudsman revealed that swimming pools might be closed during the FEHD's surprise inspections. In one case, the FEHD managed to conduct only one successful inspection during the entire swimming season. Currently, no guidelines on how the FEHD staff should handle such situations are in place. Hence, it is difficult to ensure that the frequency of successful inspections would be on target. The Office had found from a site inspection that undesirably, the FEHD failed to identify irregularities (such as the abnormal test result of pH value of pool water) of the licensed swimming pool concerned from its inspection. In addition, there are different checking methods for some inspection items, which vary in rigorousness, and health inspectors may not always adopt the most reliable method during inspections. Meanwhile, owing to omission of important items in the previous inspection record form, the FEHD's inspections were unable to ensure full compliance of swimming pools. Certain items on the inspection record form were too generic and lacked specification, making it difficult to apprehend the actual circumstances of inspections through the form. Improprieties involving compilation of inspection records were also noticed; for example, the condition of an inspection item was recorded as satisfactory even though it had not been duly checked by the health inspectors, and the verbal warning given during an inspection was not logged by the health inspector.

The Office's investigation also found that licensees are not required

under the existing licensing conditions to maintain duty logs of life-saving attendants. In the absence of corroborative evidence, it is difficult for the FEHD to conduct targeted investigation to ascertain whether a licensee has violated the requirements when handling complaints about insufficient life-saving attendants. With basic equipment excluded, there are also inadequacies in the Department's requirements regarding life-saving and first-aid equipment for licensed swimming pools. On water quality, the FEHD does not regulate how licensees should tackle pollution sources found in pool water, nor are there any criteria for closing swimming pools of substandard water quality.

Moreover, in the absence of an accident notification mechanism for licensed swimming pools, the FEHD has no idea whether a serious accident has occurred in a licensed swimming pool and is hence unable to conduct investigation or take follow-up actions.

Ms Chiu said, "As the licensing authority, the FEHD is duty-bound to properly regulate licensed swimming pools to ensure public safety and hygiene. In light of our findings, it is necessary for the FEHD to make multipronged improvements to its inspection of licensed swimming pools, and to explore amendments to licensing conditions with the industry to further safeguard safety and hygiene. The FEHD should also explore ways to engage pool users in compliance monitoring. We are pleased to learn that in the course of our investigation, the FEHD has made progressive improvements. From a holistic perspective, given the respective strengths of the FEHD and the LCSD in regulating and managing swimming pools, a standing communication mechanism between the two departments should be set up for greater synergy. We hope that the FEHD can promptly implement our recommendations for more effective regulation of licensed swimming pools."

The recommendations made by The Ombudsman to the FEHD include:

- formulate operational guidelines for its staff specifying the follow-up arrangements in the event of closure of swimming pools during surprise inspections;
- strengthen the training for health inspectors regarding the inspection of licensed swimming pools, provide more guidelines on the circumstances under which different checking methods are applicable, and unify the checking standard of inspection items where feasible, with a view to enhancing the quality of inspections;
- implement measures to help health inspectors familiarise with the new inspection items on the inspection record form as soon as possible, while continuing to review other items on the form as necessary to improve the effectiveness of inspections;
- more proactively apply technology and explore the use of mobile apps/smart phones in recording the inspection results for licensed swimming pools;
- explore stipulating in the licensing conditions the requirement for licensees to maintain duty logs of life-saving attendants and produce such records upon the FEHD officers' request, to provide reference for complaint investigation or other enforcement actions;

- establish a notification mechanism for accidents in licensed swimming pools and require licensees to report cases involving casualties within a prescribed period;
- review the existing licensing conditions regarding the requirements for life-saving, first-aid and resuscitation equipment and explore the inclusion of basic equipment. The FEHD should also identify licensed swimming pools of higher risk (such as those of higher usage or used by high-risk groups including school children) and encourage licensees to upgrade relevant equipment;
- with reference to the LCSD's opinions, formulate and issue to licensees in due course guidelines on the handling of pollution sources in swimming pool water. The guidelines will serve as standards for licensees when handling different pollution sources;
- formulate internal guidelines on the handling of complaints about water quality of licensed swimming pools by health inspectors and continue to monitor their implementation;
- step up its enforcement against non-compliant licensed swimming pools;
- explore different ways to engage pool users in the monitoring of licensed swimming pools; and
- set up a standing communication mechanism with the LCSD on the regulation and management of swimming pools for greater synergy and exchanges.

The FEHD has accepted all of the Office's recommendations.

The full investigation report has been uploaded to the website of the Office of The Ombudsman at www.ombudsman.hk for public information.



[Fraudulent website related to Bank of Singapore Limited](#)

The following is issued on behalf of the Hong Kong Monetary Authority:

The Hong Kong Monetary Authority (HKMA) wishes to alert members of the public to a press release issued by Bank of Singapore Limited relating to a fraudulent website, which has been reported to the HKMA. A hyperlink to the press release is available on [the HKMA website](#).

The HKMA wishes to remind the public that banks will not send SMS or emails with embedded hyperlinks which direct them to the banks' websites to carry out transactions. They will not ask customers for sensitive personal information, such as login passwords or one-time password, by phone, email or SMS (including via embedded hyperlinks).

Anyone who has provided his or her personal information, or who has conducted any financial transactions, through or in response to the website, should contact the bank using the contact information provided in the press release, and report the matter to the Police by contacting the Crime Wing Information Centre of the Hong Kong Police Force at 2860 5012.