

**Investigation Report
Complaints against the Post Office and
Rating and Valuation Department
for Discontinuation of Postal Service
to an Address in a Village in the New Territories**

The Complaint

The Complainant complained against the Post Office (“PO”) for sudden discontinuation of postal service to his address in a village since March 2018. The Complainant enquired with PO about the discontinuing of postal service and was told that it was because his address was not registered with the Rating and Valuation Department (“RVD”).

Details of Complaint

2. The Complainant has rented a house in a village in the New Territories since 2009. From March 2018 onward, the Complainant stopped receiving any letter. In September 2018, the Complainant’s wife and the Complainant complained to PO respectively and were both told that the postal service had been discontinued as their address was not registered in RVD.

3. The Complainant considered the sudden discontinuation of postal service unreasonable, given that PO had provided postal service for that address for over 50 years. The sudden discontinuation of postal service had serious implications on the living of the Complainant and his family.

4. He, therefore, complained to The Ombudsman.

Investigation

5. The Complainant lodged with this Office a complaint against PO initially. As RVD might also be involved in the matter, The Ombudsman included it as one of the departments under complaint and informed the Complainant.

6. Having examined the Complainant’s information, The Ombudsman decided to conduct a full investigation and informed PO, RVD and the Complainant.

Our Findings

RVD’s Comments

Standard Procedures

7. RVD is responsible for the allocation of building numbers throughout Hong Kong. While it is not a statutory requirement for owner to apply for a building number, owner who requires a building number for his property for purposes including obtaining postal service can send RVD a written application and relevant supporting documents. For application for building number in the rural area, RVD will inform the owner of the property concerned in the process of building number allocation. If the applicant is not the property owner, RVD will request the applicant to provide the owner's authorisation. After RVD has allocated a building number and notified the applicant, the allocated building number can be included and used in the property address (e.g. postal service). RVD will also inform PO in writing of each newly allocated building number upon completing the relevant allocation work.

The case

8. Among the building numbers that RVD has allocated for the village concerned, there is no building number of the Complainant's address. Therefore, the so-called building number as appeared in the address concerned is not allocated by RVD. RVD noted that the Complainant had provided a copy of RVD's "JULY TO SEPTEMBER QUARTER 2018 DEMAND FOR RATES" ("Rates Demand") in respect of a rating property for which the address or description of tenement included the so-called building number. RVD explained that the address or description of tenement ("Tenement Description") used in the Rates Demand is the address or description of a rating property contained in the Valuation List, which is prepared for rating purpose in accordance with the Rating Ordinance, Cap. 116. RVD's practice is that the Tenement Description will include a rating property's building number, if available; or a rating property's lot description, which is usually the case if no building number has been allocated; and/or an informal property description, which is commonly shown in bracket (as this case has demonstrated).

9. In September 2018, RVD received an application for a building number for the property on the DD lot concerned. The applicant is not the owner of the property concerned, and has not provided an authorisation letter from the owner of the property. In October 2018, RVD requested the applicant to provide the owner's authorisation letter. Upon receiving the authorisation, RVD will process the application and reply the applicant in due course.

PO's Comments

Background

10. Mail delivery to villages has all along been provided through a combination of the following modes:

- (a) door-to-door ("DTD") delivery;

- (b) communal letter boxes (“CLBs”), under which mail items for different addresses of a village will be delivered to a CLB from where the addressees will collect their respective mail items;
- (c) nested letter boxes (“NLBs”) with each address having an individual letter box equipped with individual lock and key (similar to the NLBs usually found in high-rise buildings); and
- (d) other means, for example, village representative and accommodation address (i.e. a store or a grocery shop in the village from which the addressees will collect their respective mail items).

11. According to traceable records, for the mail delivery to villages, the main mode adopted up to the 1970s was CLB. Considering that proper building numbering was needed so that DTD delivery could be properly conducted, it was PO’s policy to provide delivery service only when a house in a village had been allocated a building number by the Buildings and Lands Department (“BLD” and later RVD). Subsequently, with the rapid development of villages, PO at that time also entertained requests for DTD delivery even without building numbers, provided that it was operationally possible to do so, for example, the house was accessible at a discernible location and the mail volume could be coped with.

12. Going into 1980s/1990s, the development of new villages continued while many houses did not have building number. PO rejected requests of DTD delivery to houses without building numbers. The matter was then studied by the then Commissioner for Administrative Complaints and the then Office of the Members of the Executive and Legislative Councils (“OMELCO”) in 1990/1991. Since then, PO adopted the policy that addresses already being served (irrespective of whether building numbers have been allocated) would continue to be provided with delivery service but such houses should apply for a building number as soon as possible (“grandfathered cases”), whereas new cases would not be provided with delivery service until they had been allocated with a building number. The mail delivery service to “grandfathered cases” would be discontinued if delivery is no longer possible, for example, the building concerned has been demolished or become inaccessible. With the help of the Home Affairs Department (“HAD”, and its predecessor the City and New Territories Administration), PO and RVD have since been encouraging the villagers concerned to apply for building numbers.

13. As and when RVD issues a notification letter to inform the applicant of the building number, it will send a copy to PO. PO does not have other regular updating of a running list of houses with building number.

The Case

14. The Complainant’s house is one of the “grandfathered cases” being served under DTD mode. After investigation, PO found that the delivery service to the house

concerned should have been suspended intermittently from March 2016 to November 2018 due to inadequate internal record keeping and handover during changes of postmen. After the previous delivery postman retired in March 2016, there have been changes in postmen for the delivery beat concerned, some of which were not aware of the location of the Complainant's house. In May 2017, a Postal Inspector ("Staff A") decided not to provide delivery service to the house after confirming with RVD that the house concerned did not have a building number.

15. Upon receipt of complaints from the complainant's wife and the complainant in September 2018 respectively, another Postal Inspector ("Staff B") confirmed with RVD again that so-called building number was not a building number allocated by RVD. Staff B further enquired with the Postman serving the relevant delivery beat ("Staff C") and conducted a site visit together. Staff B found a house with so-called building number painted in red on the wall but Staff C could not confirm if that was the location concerned. Staff B then replied to the Complainant and his wife that no delivery service would be provided unless a building number is allocated by RVD.

16. PO regretted that Staff A and B have not followed the established policy to provide DTD delivery to the Complainant's house and apologised for any inconvenience caused to the Complainant.

17. The delivery service to the Complainant's address has been resumed since November 2018. PO confirmed that DTD delivery service is currently provided to 14 houses without official building numbers at the village concerned (including the complainant's house). The district Delivery Office has conducted staff briefing to remind them of the importance of proper handing-over arrangement among delivery postmen when there are changes in delivery beats, and to improve internal records on delivery service provided in villages to avoid recurrence.

18. PO supplemented that they will review the modes of delivery for villages. PO will also work with other departments (including HAD and RVD) with a view to improving the workflow with these departments, renewing efforts to urge villagers to apply for a building number, and setting up NLBs as soon as possible.

Our Comments

RVD

19. From the above, we are of the view that the suspension of mail delivery service had nothing to do with RVD. Moreover, RVD had duly handled the Complainant's application for building number and adequately advised the Complainant to provide the owner's authorisation letter. We found no maladministration on RVD's part.

PO

20. Having studied in detail the information and relevant records provided by PO, The Ombudsman finds the following inadequacies on the part of PO:

Lack of Comprehensive Record on Grandfathered Cases

21. While PO may have some records on grandfathered cases, they do not keep a comprehensive list. As such, provision of DTD delivery service to grandfathered cases relies heavily on the experience of the postman concerned and whether the postman has passed on the practice to the successor or substitute. Such practice is prone to errors. Should PO keep a comprehensive list of all grandfathered cases, postmen could follow the list and continue DTD delivery, thus minimising chances of human errors.

Inadequate Staff Training on Delivery Policy for Grandfathered Cases

22. From the records provided by PO, its staff at the district Delivery Office noticed that house with the so-called building number existed on the mail sorting rack of the delivery beat concerned. As such, they should be aware that postal service might have been provided to the house before. However, after reconfirming with RVD that the building number was not provided by RVD and conducting site visit, PO decided to suspend the provision of DTD service to the house. In the circumstances, we consider it highly likely that the staff involved were not aware of the policy of grandfathered cases and misunderstood that delivery service would only be provided to address with building number allocated by RVD. We considered it important for every postman to be familiar with the delivery policy for grandfathered cases so as to avoid recurrence of similar incident.

Inadequate Publicity Programmes

23. As a tenant, the Complainant did not know that the owner of the house had not applied for a building number and not until he had enquired with PO did he know that PO would not provide delivery service to address without a building number. PO should enhance public awareness of the importance of applying for a building number for the purpose of postal delivery, with special emphasis to encourage the building owners of the grandfathered cases to apply for a building number.

Other Observation

24. Under the current practice, there is no regular updating of a running list of address that has a building number (see **paragraph 13**). We consider that PO should, in consultation with RVD, review the current practice, set up a master list of addresses with building number and devise a mechanism to update and cross-check the list to ensure accuracy.

Conclusion

25. In the circumstances, The Ombudsman considers the complaint against PO **substantiated**.

Recommendations to PO

26. For improvement, The Ombudsman makes the following recommendations to PO:

- (a) To keep a comprehensive list of all grandfathered cases (see **paragraph 21**);
- (b) To strengthen staff training on the policy of grandfathered cases (see **paragraph 22**);
- (c) To enhance public awareness of the importance of applying for a building number for the purpose of postal delivery, with special emphasis to encourage the building owners of the grandfathered cases to apply for a building number (see **paragraph 23**);
- (d) To, in consultation with RVD, review the current practice, set up a master list of addresses with building number and devise a mechanism to update and cross-check the list to ensure accuracy (see **paragraph 24**).

Final Remarks

27. Both RVD and PO have accepted the comments and conclusion of our investigation report. The Ombudsman is pleased to note that PO has undertaken to implement our recommendations in **paragraph 26** above. We would monitor the progress of implementation.

Office of The Ombudsman
April 2019