

Arrangements by 1823 and Transport Department for handling public email sent to the department during the epidemic Investigation Report

Between 6 April and 6 May 2022, the complainant complained to this Office against 1823 and the Transport Department (“TD”).

2. On 16 May 2022, we launched a full investigation against TD and the Efficiency Office (“EO”), which oversees the operation of 1823. The investigation was completed on 24 October. Our findings are as follows.

The Complaint

3. The complainant alleged that in response to the COVID-19 epidemic situation, 1823 had since 23 February 2022 suspended the handling of public enquiries and complaints to TD and five other government departments¹ submitted via email, so that it could concentrate its resources to support the hotline service of the Centre for Health Protection and handle incoming calls relating to the epidemic and environmental hygiene issues. 1823 had suggested that the six departments (collectively called “participating departments”) consider handling public email themselves.

4. The complainant emailed TD on 6 April to enquire about how to obtain the TD555 Form (*viz.* the Application Form for Learner’s Driving Licence). The TD computer system continued to redirect his email to 1823. As a result, the complainant received an auto-reply email from the 1823 computer system, which read:

“In view of the severe epidemic situation, 1823 is now providing limited services so that it can focus on handling incoming calls relating to the epidemic and environmental hygiene. The waiting time for other calls may be longer. In addition, 1823 will suspend the handling of enquiries and complaints sent through email, mobile applications, online forms and SMS until further notice. For information of the 1823 participating departments, please refer to the relevant websites and Frequently Asked Questions (<https://www.1823.gov.hk/tc>). We apologise for the inconvenience caused.”

5. The complainant was dissatisfied that 1823 failed to work out with TD proper arrangements for handling public email, causing inconvenience to the public.

Our Findings

¹ The other five departments include Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, Leisure and Cultural Services Department, Housing Department, Highways Department and Office of the Government Chief Information Officer.

1823's Arrangements of Suspending the Handling of Public Email to TD

6. To combat the fifth wave of the epidemic, the Government implemented special work arrangements for its employees starting from 25 January 2022. While generally maintaining basic public services and not affecting anti-epidemic work, policy bureaux and government departments were asked to review the demand for their services, and, having regard to their operational needs, to implement special work arrangements with a view to reducing the number of staff members present in the office at the same time. At that time, 1823 still continued to provide full service, including handling cases sent in by the public via email.

7. Since January 2020, 1823 had to provide support to the hotline of the Department of Health (“DH”) and handle incoming calls relating to the epidemic. In February 2022, 1823 received more than 980,000 epidemic-related calls, almost double that number of January. The calls came from members of the public who were either infected /close contacts/under compulsory testing orders and in urgent need of isolation or all sorts of assistance; care home workers, senior citizens and their family members who were infected but not arranged hospitalisation or isolation during the institutional outbreaks; as well as employers and employees of various trades and industries who would like to understand the implementation details of the Vaccine Pass, etc. Besides, more and more 1823 staff members were infected or became close contacts, and were therefore put under isolation or quarantine, or required to undergo compulsory testing. At its most serious, about 60% frontline staff were absent from work on one single day, significantly affecting 1823 services. 1823 had been following up constantly with DH on whether individual contact centres with staff infection should be closed and on the definition of close contact employees and testing arrangements. Besides, it needed to adjust from time to time the duty and meal schedules of staff, procuring rapid antigen tests kits and anti-epidemic items, as well as arranging for disinfection of venues. Operation could only be continued with strenuous efforts. At that time, 1823 still tried to maintain email handling service as far as possible. On 14 February, its system began to issue an auto-reply upon receipt of public email indicating that 1823 might take longer time to process public email.

8. In view of the ever-increasing incoming calls and severe manpower shortage, 1823 had to focus its limited manpower on supporting DH's hotline and handling epidemic-related calls. Furthermore, about 80% of 1823's service demand came from phone calls, which often required immediate action. Written requests usually did not involve urgent cases and only accounted for about 20% of 1823's overall service demand. Having considered the priorities, 1823 made a public announcement on 22 February 2022 that starting from 23 February, it would suspend receipt and handling of email directed to the participating departments (including email sent to TD at tdenq@td.gov.hk) as well as enquiries and complaints sent via the 1823 email address, the 1823 mobile application, 1823 online forms and SMS (collectively referred to as “suspension of email handling service”).

9. Meanwhile, TD had notified 1823 on 16 February that it would handle email from the public directed to the Department starting from 25 February. Consequently, 1823 still handled public email to TD on 23 and 24 February. However, TD indicated on 25 February that it could not handle public email sent to its email address due to manpower constraints.

Reasons for TD's Decision Not to Handle Email Itself

10. 1823 emailed and telephoned TD in mid-January and early February, indicating that it had to suspend receiving cases sent via email, and suggesting that TD handle itself the public email sent to its email address. TD replied that it could not arrange manpower for the task.

11. TD explained that it decided not to receive and handle public email sent to its email address during the 1823 suspension of the relevant service for the department due to following factors:

- (1) the Department was already heavily engaged in the daily work of traffic and transport. Since 2002, 1823 had been handling enquiries, complaints and suggestions sent to departmental email box, hotline and fax for TD. TD had not arranged designated staff for handling public email;
- (2) Since January 2022, the epidemic situation had been worsening in Hong Kong, and TD staff had been infected, became close contacts, and required isolation, quarantine or compulsory testing, resulting in manpower shortage and operational challenges. In February 2022, 15.5% of TD's staff members had either been infected with COVID-19, became close contacts or being isolated. After careful consideration in late February, TD deemed that under the deteriorating epidemic situation, the Department had to focus its resources and limited manpower to help combat the disease and provide urgent and essential services to the public;
- (3) apart from maintaining its own public services, TD also needed to complement Government efforts and promptly implemented a series of measures and actions to help control the epidemic as soon as possible. Such actions included:
 - (i) making arrangements for cross-boundary transport to ensure smooth cargo movement through the land ports and stable supply of necessities and fresh food (including testing arrangements at control points for cross-boundary goods vehicle drivers and liaison with Mainland port authorities regarding the drivers' cross-boundary movement);

- (ii) coordinating with relevant policy bureaux and departments to set up designated quarantine bus and taxi service for transporting COVID-19 patients to community isolation facilities, and between their residences and designated clinics;
 - (iii) facilitating the universal testing scheme under preparation by making transport plans for the Mainland personnel coming to Hong Kong for sample-taking, and discussing with the local public transport operators of franchised buses, ferries, green minibuses on service adjustments, etc.;
 - (iv) exempting mobile specimen collection stations and related vehicles from relevant regulations while they performed anti-epidemic work in Hong Kong;
 - (v) handling applications for the Anti-epidemic Fund by those in the transportation sector; and
 - (vi) providing field workers to support urgent anti-epidemic work (such as “restriction-testing declaration” operations) and maintain order at testing centres, etc.
- (4) TD fully understood the inconvenience caused to members of the public when they could not contact the Department or 1823 by email. Nevertheless, they could still call 1823 for the information they needed, or refer to the information on the 1823 website, which contained Frequently Asked Questions and the contact details of the participating departments. They could also use other means as set out in **paragraphs 13 to 15** below to raise enquiries/complaints/views to TD, or obtain information on TD’s public services, as well as the online versions of various TD forms. TD believed that the community at large could understand the decision of 1823 and TD to suspend the handling of email directed to TD, given the Government’s clear statement that anti-epidemic work would take priority during the fifth wave of the epidemic.

12. Based on the above consideration and assessment, TD considered that it could hardly take up the workload involved in handling public email sent to its email address, including transferring cases to the staff responsible for the relevant issues for follow-up, monitoring case progress and coordination regarding inter-departmental cases. Eventually, at an internal meeting on 23 February, TD decided not to receive and handle cases sent to its email address from 25 February.

Public Announcement on Email Handling Service Suspension and Other Channels for the Public to Raise Enquiries and Complaints to TD

13. 1823 notified the public of the suspension of email handling service via press release, automatic email replies, its website, mobile application and telephone system. Despite not being able to contact 1823 via email, members of the public could obtain the information they needed by telephone. On 23 February, 1823 further added on its website the contact details of the participating departments to facilitate direct public contacts with those departments. Besides, the website also provided updates on the latest service arrangements, Frequently Asked Questions and links to the websites of the participating departments.

14. Between 25 February and 10 April 2022, TD informed the public via the “Contact Us” page on its website that 1823 had suspended the service of handling enquiries and complaints sent to the TD email address, and reminded them to check the websites of 1823 or TD or to call 1823 to learn about the updates on TD’s services and other related information. Furthermore, the TD webpage laid out clearly the Department’s hotline number, fax number and postal address. Members of the public could learn about TD information via the interactive telephone recording system of its hotline, request application forms via fax and contact the TD headquarters by post.

15. The TD website also listed out the contact telephone numbers of various licensing offices for vehicles and drivers. The telephone numbers of TD offices that provide public services could also be found in the Government Telephone Directory webpage and members of the public can ring up those offices direct. Electronic versions of various forms for different public services and brief introduction to the Department’s public services were also available on the TD website. In addition, TD had continued to receive and handle letters sent to the various TD offices and emails directed to individual TD staff members whose email address was already published in the Government Telephone Directory webpage.

1823 Had Twice Suggested that TD Handle Public Email Sent to Its Email Address

16. In response to the development of the epidemic, 1823 had previously suspended the handling of public email directed to the participating departments. In late December 2020, the complainant had proposed to 1823 that the participating departments should handle public email themselves during 1823’s suspension of the relevant service. On 9 January 2021, 1823 also received the dissatisfaction from another member of the public about the suspension of email handling service and suggesting that the departments should handle public email themselves during 1823’s suspension of the email handling service. In January 2021, 1823 referred the requests to TD but the latter did not respond specifically. Subsequently in April 2021, this Office recommended to EO in relation to another complaint on the same issue that if 1823 would adopt similar work arrangement in the future, it should liaise with the relevant departments and ask them to consider whether to handle public email themselves. On

12 January and 7 February 2022, 1823, as recommended by this Office, suggested to TD again to handle public email itself (refer to the email and telephone communication mentioned in **paragraph 10**).

17. On 22 February 2022, in response to 1823's public announcement that day on the suspension of email handling service starting from 23 February, the complainant emailed the Chief Secretary for Administration's Office and other policy bureaux and departments (including 1823), suggesting that the participating departments should handle public email themselves during 1823's said service suspension. On 1 March, 1823 gave a simple explanation to the complainant on the suspension, and indicated that it had relayed his suggestion (**paragraph 16**) to the participating departments that they consider handling public email themselves.

EO's Response

18. On **paragraph 17** above, EO explained that since the complainant only made a suggestion in his 22 February 2022 email that the participating departments should handle public email themselves in the future should 1823 suspend email handling service, so 1823 did not inform him in its 1 March reply that TD had rejected his suggestion and would not handle public email itself starting from 23 February 2022.

19. EO also explained that since there were other channels for the public in need to reach the departments direct and 1823 understood why TD could not handle public email, so the matter was not escalated to the policy bureau level for deliberation.

20. 1823 records showed that during the suspension of email handling service between 23 February and 10 April, more than 42,000 calls made to TD's hotline 2804 2600 (or 86% of the total number of calls) were neither answered nor transferred to voice mail. With regard to the calls made to 1823, since some callers did not follow the instruction and indicate which department they wished to contact, or the system could not comprehend the callers' instruction, 1823 could not ascertain how many of the incoming calls neither answered nor transferred to voice mail were actually enquiries and complaints concerning TD.

21. Between February 2021 and January 2022 (i.e. before the suspension of email handling service), among the total number of email messages 1823 received through TD's email box, 38.3% were about matters which 1823 has relevant information in its database and were immediately answered by 1823. The remaining 61.7% were referred by 1823 to the TD officers responsible for the matters concerned.

22. EO indicated that 1823 had implemented various measures during the fifth wave of the epidemic to mitigate the impact on its service. For example, in an on-going recruitment exercise between January and June 2022, a total of 376 persons were eventually employed on a full-time, part-time or temporary basis, with a total of 73,000 training hours put in with a view to increasing manpower. Nevertheless, during that

same period, 1823 also lost 328 frontline staff. Between March and May, a total of around 60 officer grade employees of EO and staff of other government departments had been deployed and seconded respectively to provide assistance in answering incoming calls to 1823. In August, 1823 also increased the number of call centres and manpower through outsourcing. In the future, if 1823's workload increases sharply due to epidemic, 1823 will again implement the above contingency measures.

23. In addition to increasing manpower, 1823 further streamlined its work procedures and introduced a newly design mobile application in July, allowing 1823 staff to handle public enquiries and complaints more quickly. 1823 also launched a pilot case response platform, allowing some participating departments to respond directly to the public through the platform without having to go through 1823 staff.

24. Having monitored the development of the epidemic and reviewed its manpower level and workload, the 1823 management decided to resume the handling of cases raised by the public via email.

25. 1823 had reviewed the difficulties it faced during the fifth wave of the epidemic and proposed to DH in May 2022 that the Department answer calls to its COVID-19 Hotline. After repeated discussions, DH agreed to gradually take over the hotline service starting from 18 July. It then fully took over the service on 5 September. 1823 believed that the arrangement could help restore its service to normalcy.

TD's Response

26. TD considered that 1823 had already provided sufficient information to the public on the arrangement of suspension of email handling service, and the arrangements were the same as those in the four previous waves. Also, in view of the time constraint, there was no need to discuss with EO again how to reply to public email during the said service suspension and what information should be provided. Furthermore, members of the public could still make enquiries and complaints to TD direct through various other channels. The email address of the staff members of TD's different divisions had also been provided in the Government Telephone Directory for public access at any time. Given that the entire Government had to focus its resources on the fight against the epidemic, TD did not see the need to elevate the suspension of email handling service to the bureau level for discussion.

27. If there is a need in the future for 1823 to suspend the receipt and handling of emails sent to TD's mailbox again, TD would carefully consider factors such as manpower, workload and continuance of public service before deciding whether it can handle itself the public email sent to its email address. Meanwhile, TD would provide sufficient channels, such as hotline, fax, post or direct contact with staff, for the public to make enquiries and complaints directly to the Department, and endeavour to remind the public that they can check TD's public services and download the public service forms online.

Our Comments

28. In view of the surge in enquiries and the pressure of shortage in manpower brought about by the epidemic (**paragraphs 7 and 8**), we considered that 1823 had no alternative but to implement the suspension of email handling service from 23 February 2022. In fact, EO had tried to recruit more staff and redeploy manpower during the relevant period (**paragraph 22**), but the problem of manpower shortage still could not be solved. On the other hand, TD found it difficult to deploy staff to receive and handle email messages sent to its email address because of manpower constraints and its engagement in providing support to fight the epidemic (**paragraph 11(1) to (3)**). As can be seen from **paragraph 21**, about 40% of email enquiries sent to TD were directly handled by 1823 in the past. With insufficient manpower, TD could hardly reply and follow up on all public email itself.

29. According to TD and EO, during the suspension of email handling service, members of the public who wished to make enquiries to TD could still call 1823, the TD hotline or the offices of TD's various divisions, or they could write to the TD headquarters/various offices, email individual officers or check the TD website for the information/forms they needed (**paragraphs 13 to 15**). Since members of the public were not able to enquire of TD by email to its departmental address and would avoid visiting TD offices in person during the epidemic, we believe that most of them would choose to contact the Department by phone. However, 1823 had to focus its resources on supporting the DH hotline and handling COVID-19-related calls. Consequently, most telephone enquiries about TD had to wait a long time or even be left unanswered (**paragraph 20**). Besides, those who chose to make enquiries through the general enquiry email probably would not know which TD officer was responsible for the matter involved, and therefore would not send emails or make phone calls to contact individual staff members directly. Enquiries by post usually takes a longer time and we believe this is not the enquiry channel most people would choose.

30. That said, at the peak of pandemic, all government departments faced the problem of manpower shortage. When the Government announced the special work arrangement for employees from 25 January, it also pointed out that individual departments might temporarily reduce the provision of some public services and asked for the community's understanding. We considered that with a tight manpower supply and substantial increase in workload, TD and 1823 had made every effort to provide feasible channels for the public to make enquiries at that time.

31. Before and during the suspension of email handling service, 1823 and TD had informed the public of the arrangement of service suspension and the alternative channels for making enquiries to TD through website messages, press releases and replies to enquirers (**paragraph 13 to 15**). Nevertheless, we are of the view that 1823 and TD should revise the computer-generated auto replies. For instance, when the complainant learned that 1823 would not handle email directed to TD and thus chose to send a message to TD's email address, he still received an auto-reply from 1823

(**paragraph 4**). If both 1823 and TD could not handle public email directed to TD, they should specify in the auto-reply the alternative channels for TD's enquiries, so that the public would not be confused or even think that there was no way to seek help after receiving the auto-reply.

32. Besides, having read the complainant's email dated 22 February 2022 (**paragraph 17**), we confirmed that he was requesting the participating departments to handle public email on their own during the suspension period of 1823 in relation to the impending suspension of emails, and not as EO claimed that he was making a recommendation for the future (**paragraph 18**). We considered that if 1823 had informed him clearly in its reply of 1 March that TD and some other departments had declined the request, the complainant would not have misunderstood that TD would handle his email of 6 April.

Our Concluding Remarks and Recommendation

33. In light of the analysis in **paragraphs 28 to 32**, we consider that the complaint against EO and TD **unsubstantiated**, but there are **other inadequacies found** on both EO and TD in that they had failed to provide clear and accurate information to the enquirer (**paragraph 31**), while EO had not informed the complainant that TD and some other departments had rejected the suggestion (**paragraph 32**).

34. We recommended that TD and EO instruct 1823 to provide clear and accurate information and replies to enquirers to avoid misunderstanding.

35. TD and EO accepted our recommendation. EO also explained that the 1823 computer system can only issue a generic reply to all email messages sent there and cannot compose different auto-replies for individual departments (such as TD). In the future, if 1823 has to suspend email handling service and TD cannot handle public email itself, they would discuss suspension of public email transferral to 1823 and issuance of auto-replies by the TD email system to inform the public of the alternative channels to contact TD and obtain service information.

36. By the way, this Office is conducting a direct investigation to examine the effectiveness of 1823 in handling public complaints and enquiries. Upon completion of the investigation, we will publish a report to explain our findings, comments and recommendations.

Office of The Ombudsman
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