

Executive Summary

Direct Investigation Report

Effectiveness of 1823 in Handling Complaints and Enquiries

Introduction

1823, established in 2001, is managed by the Efficiency Office (“EO”) under the Innovation, Technology and Industry Bureau. It provides a one-stop service round the clock to answer public enquiries in respect of the services of 23 participating government departments and receive complaints lodged by members of the public against all government services.

2. Between 2018 and 2023, 1823 handled an average of about 1.95 million enquiries and 550,000 complaints each year. As more members of the public use its service, 1823 may be regarded as one of the Government’s major platforms for contact with the public. If 1823 is not operating effectively or the complaints and enquiries it handled are not properly followed through, it will not only impede departments’ daily handling of complaints and enquiries, but also directly impact the public’s impression of and confidence in the Government. Moreover, by collecting public views on its services through 1823, the Government can understand people’s concern and keep tabs on the pulse of community. Hence, the effectiveness of 1823 is conducive to good governance and enhancing the efficiency and quality of public administration.

Our Findings

3. Our investigation reveals that over the past six years, it handled an average of around 1.95 million enquiries annually. In the case of telephone enquiries, 1823 achieved first call resolution at 99%, which is in line with its aim of providing one-stop enquiry service. This Office has also examined the daily operations of 1823, including its handling of calls, cooperation arrangements with participating departments and use of data. We have studied relevant complaint cases as well to understand how 1823 handles cross-departmental cases or cases involving unclear delineation of responsibilities. Consolidating our findings, this Office has the following comments and recommendations.

(I) Unable to Effectively Handle Cross-departmental Complaints and Complaints with Unclear Delineation of Responsibilities

4. According to 1823's existing complaint handling mechanism, departments rejecting a case referred by 1823 are required to give reasons and suggest which department should be assigned the case; where a complaint involving multiple departments and unclear delineation of responsibilities is rejected by two departments, 1823 would activate an escalation mechanism and repeatedly request the rejecting departments to review the case by officers at different ranks.

5. If a case is still unresolved after being escalated to the third level, 1823 would attempt to liaise with the departments, coordinate discussion among them, and suggest the departments to resolve the problem by "one-off" (i.e., without prejudice to the departments' stance on their purview and not to be cited as precedent in similar situation) follow-up, such as "one-off" repair works. Eventually, if departments still refuse to take up and handle the case, 1823 would coordinate a consolidated reply to the complainant and the departments are requested to state the reasons in its reply.

Unable to Compel Timely Follow-up Actions of Departments

6. Between 2018 and 2023, 1823 received an average of about 550,000 complaints each year, including about 7,400 cases processed under the escalation mechanism due to rejection by departments. Of which, about 4,100 cases (56%) took more than 30 days to complete, i.e. beyond the normal time frame for departments to reply, and about 560 cases (7.5%) were not completed even after six months, which is far from satisfactory.

7. Our case studies reveal that cases taking months to complete often involved the departments' delay in reply to 1823, rejection of cases without giving reasons, and repeated disputes over division of labour or responsibilities.

8. This Office is of the view that to ensure timely referral of cases, departments should reply to 1823 within a specified time limit with reasons if they consider that a case is outside their purview or should be handled by another department. If departments fail to do so, 1823 can activate the escalation mechanism outright or request departments to review the case under the mechanism.

Escalation Mechanism Could Not Ensure Direct Communication and Collaboration among Departments

9. The most effective and speedy way to handle cross-departmental complaints is that the departments proactively and directly discuss the problem among themselves, thereby resolving disputes and reaching a consensus on the division of labour as soon as possible. Nevertheless, our case studies reveal that in the process of establishing ownership of a complaint under 1823's escalation mechanism, departments often only reiterated their respective stance that the complaint was outside their purview, and sometimes responded to the views of other departments through 1823. Departments rarely, or never, took the initiative to communicate or liaise directly among themselves regarding the case in order to clarify and reach a consensus on the division of labour.

10. This Office considers 1823's coordination and liaison work not effective in promoting direct communication, clarifying differences and initiating collaboration among departments at an early stage to handle public complaints.

Ability to Coordinate in Cross-departmental Complaints or Complaints with Unclear Delineation of Responsibilities to be Strengthened

11. This Office finds that in the process of clarifying departments' responsibilities and identifying the responsible party in individual cases, 1823 is often stuck in a position of "having responsibility but no authority". 1823 can hardly keep track of the specific duties and remits of all departments, nor is it empowered to command departments to accept a case or follow up on any case. As such, in case of unclear delineation of responsibilities, 1823 can only approach the departments one by one and re-assign the case as instructed or suggested. This process is repeated until a department is willing to take ownership, or "one-off" operation is coordinated with the departments concerned.

12. The data of 1823 show that between 2018 and 2023, a majority (over 50%) of the cases handled under the escalation mechanism involved district problems directly related to people's livelihood and regarded as "long-standing, big and difficult". Regrettably, these livelihood issues which need to be addressed urgently were often dragged on due to unclear delineation of responsibilities. This would also give rise to a perception that government departments are passing the buck. For individual cases, 1823's coordination of "one-off" operation might resolve the problem at hand, but the

departments' fundamental disagreement or misunderstanding about their purview has yet to be fully resolved or clarified. When the same problem occurs again, 1823 has to repeat the entire process of identifying responsible departments, making referrals, and coordination.

13. While not disparaging the function of 1823's escalation mechanism in handling cross-departmental cases or cases involving unclear delineation of responsibilities, we consider it worthwhile to explore, in addition to the existing escalation mechanism, how 1823 can play a greater role in assisting the Government to tackle the "long-standing, big and difficult" district problems involving multiple departments and unclear delineation of responsibilities.

14. This Office notes that under the proposals to improve district governance, the Task Force on District Governance ("TFDG") has been set up to steer and coordinate cross-departmental and/or cross-district issues, establish the division of labour and accountability, streamline the workflow, monitor the effectiveness of measures implemented by various policy bureaux/departments ("B/Ds"), and supervise them to formulate improvement measures. The Home and Youth Affairs Bureau and the Home Affairs Department ("HAD") support the work of the Steering Committee on District Governance and TFDG.

15. In our view, 1823 should seize this opportunity to support and facilitate the Government's proposals to improve district governance. For cases about recurring district problems with unclear delineation of responsibilities, 1823 should establish a mechanism and draw up guidelines to standardise and regularise the procedures for escalating to the District Officers of HAD or TFDG in a systematic, proper and timely manner, with a view to resolving cases and district problems which are cross-departmental and involving unclear delineation of responsibilities more effectively through the high-level structure of the Government.

(II) Insufficient Call Handling Capacity to Cope with Service Demand

16. Between 2018 and 2023, 1823 only managed to answer between 61% and 74% of calls within 12 seconds, persistently falling short of its performance pledge to "answer at least 80% of calls within 12 seconds".

17. Furthermore, this Office notes that in the statistics compiled by EO, the volume of calls handled by 1823 included calls redirected to voicemail by the telephone

system; in that sense, 1823 was able to handle about 68% of calls each year between 2018 and 2023. Yet, if the calls redirected to voicemail were excluded, 1823 was actually able to answer only about 42% of calls, i.e. an average of about 2.57 million calls each year are not answered by staff immediately.

18. This Office considers that for a call centre dedicated to handling public enquiries and complaints, 1823's falling short of its own pledge in answering calls persistently between 2018 and 2023 goes against public expectations. While 1823 has improved the performance in call handling in 2023, and completed the upgrade of telephone system in late December 2023, we urge 1823 to proactively monitor and conduct timely review of the system to further enhance its call answering rate.

(III) Room for improvement in crisis response capacity

19. To support the Government's anti-epidemic measures, 1823 had been engaged to answer several COVID-related hotlines since January 2020. During the fifth wave of epidemic in February and March 2022, the volume of calls received by 1823 soared more than two times from a normal average of 380,000 calls per month. Meanwhile, the operations of 1823 were further disrupted because many frontline staff could not report for duty due to infection or compulsory testing. 1823 introduced various contingency measures in response to the situation that its service could not cope with public demand during the fifth wave.

20. This Office notes that some of the contingency measures of 1823 required the cooperation or coordination of participating departments, which might not be forthcoming.

21. This Office recognises that it is unrealistic to expect public services, including 1823 service, to be maintained at the normal level at all times in extreme situations. Nevertheless, EO should learn from the COVID experience and prepare contingency plans. In our view, EO should discuss with all participating departments and formulate backup plans and contingency measures as soon as possible, and incorporate them into the cooperation agreements. In the event of unexpected and urgent situations in future, both parties can take contingency measures promptly based on the agreement.

(IV) Room of Improvement in Other Areas of Daily Operations

Further Application of Artificial Intelligence on Handling Enquiries

22. In December 2019, 1823 launched the text and voice versions of Chatbot, using artificial intelligence to analyse questions input with natural language by members of the public and answer their enquiries.

23. Currently, the Chatbot of 1823 in text and voice versions can only handle a few subjects, while most enquiries about other subjects are still processed by staff upon answering telephone calls or reading text messages. This Office urges 1823 to regularly compile and analyse statistics on public enquiries, and gradually provide more information by the Chatbot based on the subjects or government services of public concern.

Facilitating the Public to Check Case Progress

24. Currently, members of the public can check the case progress and the departments' replies on 1823 mobile application only if their enquiries and complaints have been made thereon, while others have to call or write to 1823 for case progress. This Office considers that EO should provide further convenience for the public and facilitate them to check case progress themselves on an e-platform, thereby reducing the workload of 1823 staff and releasing more time and manpower to handle enquiries and complaints.

Encouraging Departments to Reply to the Public via Case Response Platform

25. 1823 launched the Case Response Platform for participating departments in July 2022. For cases that meet the criteria for automatic reply (e.g. where members of the public have left their contact details), participating departments can use the platform to reply to the public automatically via the 1823 system.

26. In our view, 1823 should require participating departments to always use the platform to reply to the public if they choose to reply via 1823, and consider opening up the Case Response Platform to all departments. This arrangement will streamline the complaint handling process of 1823. Given the automatic update of case progress by the system in parallel, it will also minimise omission of update by staff.

(V) *Need to Clarify Functions of 1823 with Departments*

27. 1823's one-stop service for making complaints or enquiries is intended for the public. As far as departments are concerned, 1823 service assists with handling enquiries related to their powers and services, as well as referring complaints against them. In principle, 1823 is not responsible for handling on their behalf enquiries and complaints departments received directly from the public involving other departments.

28. Our case studies reveal that while a department received a complainant's report not through 1823, when it intended to refer the report to the Police it passed the case to 1823 for referral on its behalf. Even though it was not within the scope of 1823 service to receive or refer crime reports for enforcement by the Police, 1823 acted as requested.

29. This Office considers that EO needs to explain 1823's duties and scope of service to B/Ds, and request B/Ds to directly refer public enquiries, complaints and relevant information among themselves. This will not only improve the overall efficiency of the Government's handling of public enquiries and complaints, but also ensure the use of 1823 resources on its own functions.

30. Separately, under the cooperation agreements between 1823 and participating departments, departments are required to provide the content of the Knowledge Base for 1823 to answer public enquiries, and notify 1823 of the details of any new services as early as possible. EO pointed out that on some occasions 1823 was unable to cope with a sudden surge in telephone enquiries because participating departments had not notified 1823 in a timely manner, or at all, of their newly launched services or arrangements and updated the Knowledge Base. This Office considers that 1823 may consider requesting participating departments to submit forecast plans on a regular basis for preparation accordingly, and remind departments from time to time of the importance of updating the Knowledge Base.

(VI) *EO should Make Better Use of Experience and Information from Cases Handled by 1823 to Promote Improvement of Government Services and Enhance Standard of Public Administration*

31. Apart from managing 1823, EO also serves as the Government's consultant to advise B/Ds on business process re-engineering, restructuring, performance evaluation, knowledge management and change management. This

Office considers that EO can consolidate the data collected from enquiries and complaints handled by 1823 for B/Ds to analyse the performance of public services and the concerns and needs of the community, with a view to improving public services.

32. Meanwhile, cross-departmental cases often involve disputes over accountability and division of labour, in which systemic issues cannot be ruled out. With the relevant data compiled by EO, B/Ds can conduct comprehensive analysis together with their own data, which can help the Government examine district problems from a holistic and macro perspective, clarify the roles and functions of departments, rationalise their division of labour and workflow, and formulate a long-term strategy to enhance the coordination and integration of policies and services across different sectors.

33. This Office also notes EO's remarks that when handling COVID-related hotlines, 1823 proactively liaised with the department concerned to ensure that anti-epidemic information was clear and comprehensible, thereby reducing unnecessary complaints and enquiries. Its efforts are commendable. EO should analyse public enquiries and complaints regularly from the perspective of whether government information is clear and comprehensible (such as whether numerous enquiries have arisen from misunderstanding of government information within a short period of time) and advise relevant departments.

Recommendations

34. In the light of the above, The Ombudsman makes 13 recommendations to EO:

Strengthening the Ability to Handle Cross-departmental Complaints with Unclear Delineation of Responsibilities

- (1) stringently enforce the requirement that departments reply within a specified time limit with reasons if they consider that a case is 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;

- (2) 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 TFDG in a systematic, proper and timely manner;

Strengthening Collaboration and Communication between 1823 and Departments

- (3) discuss with all participating departments on backup plans and contingency measures regarding unexpected and emergency situations that may cause serious disruption to 1823 service, standardise and regularise the plans by incorporating into the cooperation agreements, thereby providing the public with clear information and reasonable channels to make enquiries and complaints to government departments;
- (4) explain 1823's duties and scope of service to B/Ds, and request B/Ds to directly refer public enquiries, complaints and relevant information among themselves, thereby ensuring the use of 1823 resources on its own functions, as well as improving the overall efficiency of the Government's handling of public enquiries and complaints;
- (5) 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;

Enhancing the Operating Efficiency of 1823

- (6) proactively monitor and conduct timely review of the newly upgraded telephone system with a view to further enhancing 1823's call answering rate;
- (7) expand the application of artificial intelligence on enquiry handling by 1823, and gradually provide more information by the Chatbot;
- (8) study the launch of an e-platform for public to check progress of cases lodged with 1823;

- (9) strictly require all participating departments to always use the Case Response Platform to reply to the public if they choose to reply via 1823;
- (10) consider opening up the Case Response Platform to all departments;

Optimising the Use of Data

- (11) further consolidate the data collected from enquiries and complaints handled by 1823 for B/Ds to capture the data required and conduct comprehensive analysis, with a view to improving government services;
- (12) conduct systemic analysis of cross-departmental cases and consolidate relevant data, submit reports to 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; and
- (13) analyse public enquiries and complaints regularly from the perspective of whether government information is clear and comprehensible (such as whether numerous enquiries have arisen from misunderstanding of government information within a short period of time) and advise relevant departments.

Office of The Ombudsman

March 2024

We will post the case summary of selected investigation reports on social media from time to time. Follow us on Facebook and Instagram to get the latest updates.



Facebook.com/Ombudsman.HK



Instagram.com/Ombudsman_HK