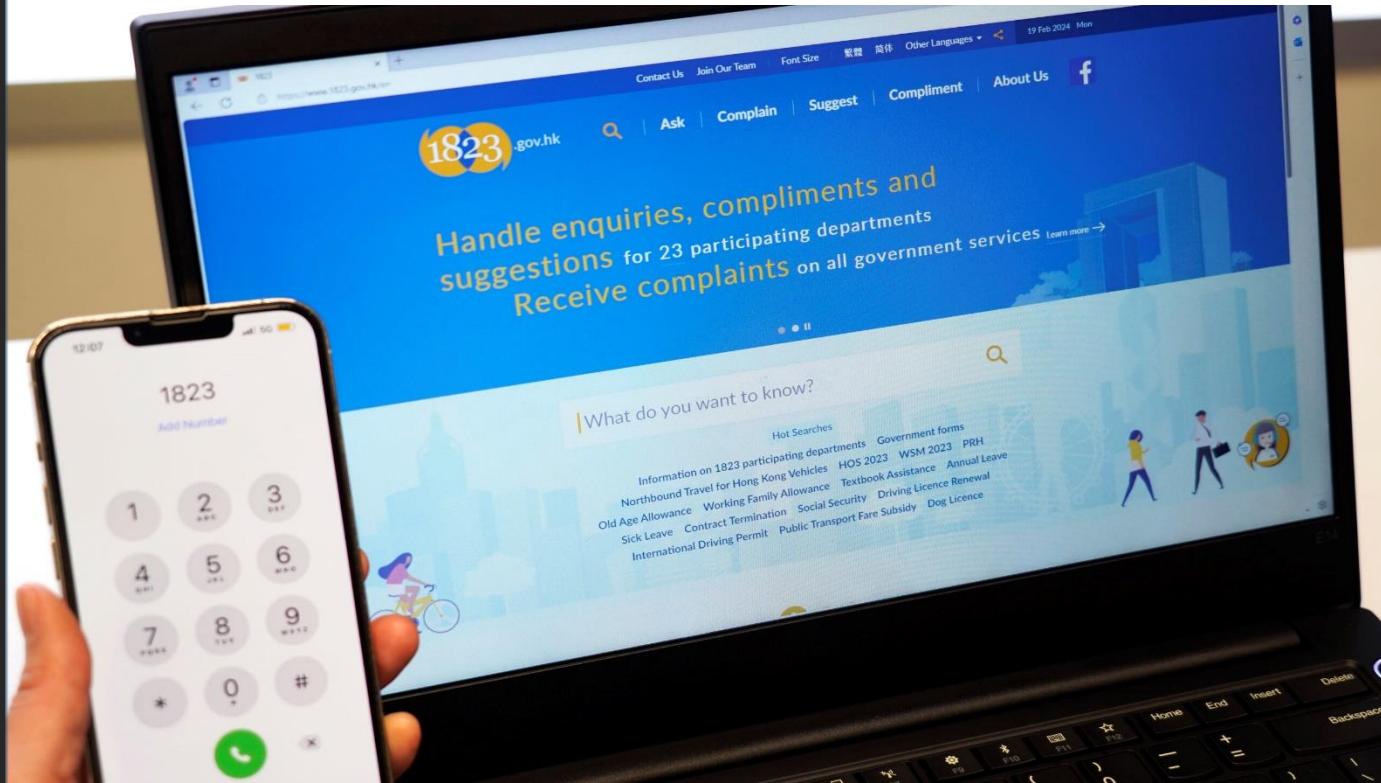


香港申訴專員公署
Office of The Ombudsman, Hong Kong



主動調查報告
Direct Investigation Report

1823 處理投訴及查詢的成效
Effectiveness of 1823 in Handling Complaints and Enquiries

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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

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I

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

1.1 Established over 20 years ago, 1823 provides a round-the-clock one-stop service to answer public enquiries in respect of the services of 23 participating departments and receive complaints lodged by members of the public against all government services.

1.2 Between January and May 2022, this Office received quite a number of complaints against 1823 for failing to answer phone calls and suspending the handling of written enquiries and complaints, which resulted in a lack of avenue for the public to seek help. In response to a question by a Legislative Council Member on 15 June 2022, the Government admitted that impacted by the fifth wave of COVID-19, 1823's system capacity was overwhelmed by the volume of calls occasionally. Particularly between March and May 2022, 63% of calls were busied out by the system, where the callers could neither talk to 1823 staff nor leave a voice message. Meanwhile, the way 1823 handles and follows up on complaints involving multiple departments is often called into question.

1.3 To date, 1823 has established itself as the major contact point for the public to raise enquiries and complaints with the Government. If 1823 is not operating effectively or its service is intermittently disrupted, it will not only cause inconvenience to the public, but also impede departments' day-to-day handling of public enquiries and complaints. 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 effective operation of 1823 is conducive to good governance and enhancing the efficiency and quality of public administration.

1.4 Against this background, The Ombudsman declared on 26 July 2022 a direct investigation against the Efficiency Office (“EO”), which manages 1823, pursuant to section 7(1)(a)(ii) of The Ombudsman Ordinance, Cap. 397.

SCOPE OF INVESTIGATION

1.5 The scope of this direct investigation covers:

- 1823's scope and role in handling complaints and enquiries;
- 1823's mechanism and restrictions in handling complaints and enquiries;
- 1823's analysis and use of data obtained from case handling; and
- any areas for improvement.

PROCESS OF INVESTIGATION

1.6 On 28 July 2022, we publicly announced the launch of this direct investigation and invited the public to submit views on this topic. In the course of investigation, we visited the 1823 Call Centre to understand more about its workflow of handling calls from the public. We also scrutinised 1823's case files regarding cross-departmental complaints it handled, and our own case files regarding complaints against 1823. Moreover, statistical data related to 1823 service and agreements signed between 1823 and participating departments were examined.

1.7 On 6 December 2023, we issued a draft report to EO for comments, and received its reply on 7 February 2024. On 18 December 2023, our draft report was also sent to the Task Force on District Governance ("TFDG") and the Home Affairs Department ("HAD") for consideration. Upon considering and incorporating relevant comments as appropriate, we finalised this report on 5 March 2024.

2

OVERVIEW OF 1823

ROLE AND SERVICE SCOPE

2.1 1823, formerly known as the Integrated Call Centre, was set up in 2001 by the then Efficiency Unit under the Chief Secretary for Administration's Office. In 2018, the Efficiency Unit was subordinated to the Innovation and Technology Bureau ("ITB") (currently known as the Innovation, Technology and Industry Bureau) and renamed EO.

2.2 EO remarked that 1823 was initially established as a cross-departmental call centre to handle public enquiries and complaints about environment and hygiene issues. For members of the public, 1823 provides a single point of contact to make enquiries and complaints without having to clarify the government structure or division of labour, and one-stop service round the clock. For departments, 1823 provides an effective shared platform for general handling of non-emergency enquiries and complaints, allowing departments to focus on their core services. Based on their own considerations, departments may decide whether to engage 1823 to handle enquiries. If they opt to become participating departments, 1823 will sign cooperation agreements with them.

2.3 Since its establishment, 1823 has adjusted its functions from time to time in the light of government policies and actual operations. For instance, in response to the 2008 Policy Address that required departments to optimise their complaint handling mechanisms, 1823 expanded its scope of service in 2009 to receive public complaints against all bureaux and departments (i.e. both participating and non-participating departments). 1823 also supports their short-term hotlines set up for major government projects and initiatives at the request of individual department. At present, 1823's scope of service mainly covers:

- (1) handling enquiries, compliments and suggestions for participating departments according to the specified scope;

- (2) receiving complaints about government services (including requests for government services¹); and
- (3) supporting short-term hotlines set up for major government projects and initiatives.

2.4 1823 has signed a cooperation agreement with each of the 23 participating departments to delineate the mode of cooperation between the two parties, including 1823's scope of service, the procedures for updating the Knowledge Base, the responsibilities in respect of handling public calls and cases by each party and target processing time, and 1823's arrangements for data storage and provision of management statistical reports. The departmental hotlines and/or fax numbers and email addresses currently handled by 1823 have encompassed the majority of government services closely related to people's livelihood. The 23 participating departments are listed in **Table 1**:

Table 1: 23 participating departments having signed cooperation agreements with 1823

Participating departments			
1.	Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (“AFCD”)	13.	Labour Department (“LD”)
2.	Architectural Services Department (“ArchSD”)	14.	Land Registry (“LR”)
3.	Buildings Department (“BD”)	15.	Government Rent and Premium Unit, Lands Department (“LandsD”) @
4.	Civil Engineering and Development Department (“CEDD”)	16.	Leisure and Cultural Services Department (“LCSD”)
5.	Companies Registry (“CR”)	17.	Marine Department (“MD”)
6.	Drainage Services Department (“DSD”)	18.	GovHK, Office of the Government Chief Information Officer (“OGCIO”) @

¹ Examples of requests for government services include requesting the authorities to handle water seepage in buildings, illegal parking, driver misbehaviour, noise nuisance, etc.

Participating departments			
7.	Electrical and Mechanical Services Department (“EMSD”)	19.	Rating and Valuation Department (“RVD”)
8.	Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (“FEHD”)	20.	Social Welfare Department (“SWD”)
9.	Greening, Landscape and Tree Management Section, Development Bureau (“DEVB”) [@]	21.	Tobacco and Alcohol Control Office, Department of Health (“DH”) [@]
10.	Highways Department (“HyD”)	22.	Transport Department (“TD”)
11.	Housing Department (“HD”)	23.	Working Family and Student Financial Assistance Agency (“WFSFAA”)
12.	Hongkong Post		

[@] 1823 only covers specific scopes of service provided by these departments.

SERVICE CHANNELS

2.5 Currently, 1823 service is available via various channels. 1823 provides frequently asked information (“FAQs”) about services of participating departments through its website and the Chatbot for self-access by the public. The public can also contact 1823 directly by phone (1823), email (tellme@1823.gov.hk), fax (2760 1823), mail (Tsuen Wan PO Box 1823), short message service (“SMS”) (6163 1823, text only), online forms (www.1823.gov.hk) and mobile application (Tellme@1823). Moreover, telephone calls and messages by email and/or fax from the public to participating departments are redirected/forwarded automatically to 1823 for handling on behalf of departments.

USAGE OF 1823 SERVICE CHANNELS

2.6 Between 2018 and 2022, the view counts of online FAQs ranged from approximately 2.6 million to 4.6 million each year, accounting for more than 30% of the total usage of 1823 service. During the same period, the number of voice contacts

(including calls to 1823 and the hotlines of participating departments) and written contacts (by email and fax, mail, SMS, mobile application and online forms) from the public received by 1823 was on the rise, from 4.22 million in 2018 to over 7.18 million in 2022 (see **Table 2**).

Table 2: Usage of 1823 service channels (2018–2023)
(Rounded to the nearest thousand)

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
(a) Usage of FAQs online (% of total)	2,600,000 (38%)	2,700,000 (34%)	4,600,000 (47%)	3,800,000 (42%)	3,700,000 (34%)	3,750,000 (51%)
(b) Voice contacts received (% of total)	3,702,000 (54%)	4,502,000 (57%)	4,744,000 (48%)	4,649,000 (51%)	6,472,000 (59%)	2,807,000 (38%)
(c) Written contacts received (% of total)	519,000 (8%)	701,000 (9%)	498,000 (5%)	640,000 (7%)	712,000 (7%)	820,000 (11%)
Total of (b)+(c)	4,221,000	5,203,000	5,242,000	5,289,000	7,184,000	3,627,000
Total of (a)+(b)+(c)	6,821,000	7,903,000	9,842,000	9,089,000	10,884,000	7,377,000

2.7 According to the latest data from 1823, there have been significant changes in the public's habits of using 1823 service after the epidemic. In 2023, the number of voice contacts greatly decreased from an average of 5.29 million per year during the epidemic to 2.8 million, which was also significantly lower than the range of 3.7 million to 4.5 million before the epidemic. Meanwhile, the view counts of online FAQs and the number of written contacts increased to 3.75 million and 820,000 respectively. Overall, the percentage of voice contacts dropped to 38%.

PERFORMANCE IN HANDLING COMPLAINTS AND ENQUIRIES

Performance Indicators

2.8 According to 1823 website, the following five indicators are used to evaluate its performance in handling complaints and enquiries:

- (1) call abandoned rate of less than 10%;
- (2) at least 80% of calls are answered within 12 seconds;
- (3) at least 95% of enquiries are resolved on the first call;
- (4) 70% of complaints are assigned within 3 hours; and
- (5) customer satisfaction rating is 4 or above on a 5-point scale.

Achievement of Targets

2.9 The data of EO show that between 2018 and 2023, 1823 met the targets under four performance indicators, namely (1), (3), (4) and (5), but failed to meet target (2) all along (see **Table 3**). In 2023, 1823 service improved upon resumption of normalcy.

Table 3: Performance of 1823 service (2018–2023)

Indicator	Performance					
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
(1) Call abandoned rate (<10%)	9%	7%	10%	9%	9%	7%
(2) Call answered within 12 seconds (≥80%)	67%	68%	62%	71%	61%	74%
(3) Enquiry resolution by first call (≥95%)	99%	99%	99%	99%	99%	99%

Indicator	Performance					
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
(4) Complaint assigned within 3 hours ($\geq 70\%$)	97%	97%	97%	97%	97%	97%
(5) Customer satisfaction (≥ 4)	4.52	4.54	4.53	4.54	4.52	4.56

ANCILLARY TOOLS FOR HANDLING COMPLAINTS AND ENQUIRIES

Knowledge Base and Computer System

2.10 Under the cooperation agreements between 1823 and participating departments, departments should provide the content of the Knowledge Base for 1823 to answer public enquiries. Departments, as owners of the Knowledge Base, should ensure that it is up-to-date and accurate, and notify 1823 of any new services as early as possible for 1823 to make corresponding arrangements. In general, participating departments will take the initiative to update the Knowledge Base, and 1823 will also remind participating departments to review and properly update its content where necessary.

2.11 1823 will present the information provided by departments in text and formats (such as bullet points, tables, flowcharts, etc.) easily comprehensible from a layman's perspective, and let departments verify the content. After verification, the content of the Knowledge Base is saved in 1823's computer system. 1823 staff can use keywords to search the Knowledge Base for relevant subjects (e.g. domestic helper) on their computers, and immediately answer general enquiries and handle complaints based on relevant content.

2.12 Moreover, 1823's computer system also saves, manages and consolidates information on all enquiries, complaints, compliments and suggestions received by 1823 through different channels. For cases referred to departments for action, the system will calculate the deadline for reply based on the date of receipt and send timely reminders to departments. The system also enables 1823 to forward replies from departments to the public by various means (including email, fax and SMS).

Online Platform for Participating Departments

2.13 To facilitate case handling, 1823 has developed an online platform separately for use by staff of participating departments, through which department staff can review the details of all cases referred by 1823, update the case progress, and send replies to 1823. When departments operate through the online platform, case information will be updated to 1823's computer system in parallel.

Case Response Platform for Departments

2.14 To reduce manual work, 1823 phased in the Case Response Platform for participating departments between mid-July and mid-November 2022. If a case meets the criteria for automatic reply (e.g. the case has not been rejected by department more than twice; member of the public has provided email address, fax number or phone number with SMS function) and the department opts to reply via 1823, the department can reply to the public directly on 1823's Case Response Platform, regardless of whether it has used the online platform mentioned in **paragraph 2.13**. The reply will be shown as being issued by 1823, thus reducing the steps of 1823 staff receiving the department's reply and then forwarding it to the public.

2.15 The Case Response Platform can be used by all participating departments from 14 November 2022. Since its launch to 31 December 2023, departments replied to the public via 1823 in more than 418,000 cases, of which 47% were replied directly via the Case Response Platform.

Telephone System

2.16 The telephone system of 1823 for public hotline service is connected to the computer system by computer telephony integration technology, and utilises voice recognition technology to identify which department a call is involved and route it to the 1823 staff answering the hotline concerned. Moreover, the system can handle multiple inbound calls concurrently and place calls that cannot be picked up immediately in the wait queue or redirect them to voicemail. The telephone system can handle up to 437 voice contacts at any one time, including calls in conversation, calls in waiting and voicemail recording in progress. Apart from answering calls from the public, 1823 staff also use the telephone system's lines to make outbound calls to departments or call back the public. In late December 2023, 1823 completed an

upgrade of the telephone system to enhance its flexibility for expanding system capacity and introduced an intelligent Interactive Voice Response System. The artificial intelligence (“AI”) technology enable callers to use voice input (skipping the key press) to select options they need and obtain simple information.

2.17 When 1823 receives a large volume of calls at the same time and all staff responsible for answering calls are occupied, some of the calls that cannot be picked up immediately will be placed in the queue. If the waiting time is too long, the system will redirect the call to voicemail to avoid keeping the caller waiting. As call volume permits, staff will call back those who have left their contact details in the same order of their voice messages. If voicemail system is also fully occupied, the system will ask the caller to call again later and then disconnect the call.

2.18 1823 monitors the usage of telephone lines and takes measures in times of high usage, such as limiting the waiting time of inbound calls to prevent callers to 1823 from not getting connected due to busy lines.

Frequently Asked Information

2.19 For subjects frequently asked by the public about the services of the 23 participating departments, 1823 provides relevant information on its Interactive Voice Response System, website and mobile application for self-access by the public. The keywords and headings of FAQs are used to prioritise the ranking of relevant subjects in the search results, making it easier for the public to obtain relevant information.

E-forms for Common Complaints

2.20 For common complaints, dedicated forms are available on 1823 website and mobile application, on which the public can select the subjects of their complaints and follow the instructions to input the information required by departments for complaint handling. It not only saves the departments from having to seek supplementary information from the public, but also enables 1823 system to process the structured data directly, thus reducing the manual input of information by 1823 staff.

Chatbot

2.21 In December 2019, 1823 launched the text and voice versions of Chatbot, using AI technology to analyse questions input with natural language by members of the public and automatically provide pre-set replies to answer their enquiries.

2.22 The text version of Chatbot is available on 1823 website and mobile application. As at December 2023, the text version of Chatbot provides information regarding application for international driving permit, old age allowance, dog licence, electrical worker registration, rates and Government rent, building works and building projects, keeping a pet, handling wild animals and insects, and safety of electricity and electrical appliances. When receiving enquiries on other areas, the Chatbot will conduct a keyword-based search and provide the public with the relevant FAQs and hyperlinks to departmental websites. The Chatbot service allows the public to obtain relevant information before submitting cases on 1823 website or mobile application. If their questions are answered, they will not need to submit cases and the workload of 1823 staff will be reduced. 1823 is in the process of expanding the service scope of the Chatbot to cover all participating departments.

2.23 The voice version of Chatbot is available on 1823's telephone system to answer enquiries on application for international driving permit and to record the cases of public lighting repairs. After confirming the subject of calls, the telephone system will provide callers with the option of Chatbot service to handle enquiries or reports immediately when staff are unable to answer their calls.

2.24 Since its launch to December 2023, the Chatbot handled more than 71,000 enquiries and reports.

ONGOING IMPROVEMENT MEASURES

2.25 EO pointed out that as the Government's internal management consultant, it has been continuously improving the operations of 1823 over the years with an array of improvement measures introduced in response to actual needs. Some of the improvement measures implemented by 1823 in recent years are as follows:

Workflow and Technology

- (i) Using keyword identification to rank text messages automatically, and voice recognition technology to analyse voice messages. The computer system then prioritises and assigns urgent cases for staff to handle.

- (ii) Introducing the Geographic Information System, which enables members of the public (through mobile application or e-forms) and 1823 staff to indicate locations on a map for more efficient communication among the public, 1823 and departments.
- (iii) When referring a case, the computer system uses automatic algorithm based on the case's category, nature, the department's division of labour, etc. to identify the responsible staff in a department, thereby saving 1823 staff from searching such information manually.
- (iv) Revamping 1823 mobile application. Apart from adding dedicated forms for common complaints (see **para. 2.20**), 1823 can also reply to the public regarding the cases via the mobile application.
- (v) Implementing Robotic Process Automation to handle certain internal tasks (such as preparation of case summaries), thus allowing staff to focus on handling voice and written contacts from the public.
- (vi) Analysing public enquiries continuously to update and improve the Knowledge Base, so that staff can provide information to the public and handle cases more effectively.
- (vii) Based on the content of public enquiries, making recommendations to participating departments for improving information of departmental projects, forms, workflow, etc.

Staffing

- (viii) Streamlining recruitment procedures, adjusting entry requirements and introducing different types of staff (including general part-time, evening part-time, short-term contractual, summer part-time, dedicated night-time, etc.) to speed up the recruitment process and expand manpower.

- (ix) Introducing training in phases, under which new recruits will master the knowledge for answering calls in a particular area first, and proceed with the rest of training after they have become familiar with the job, so as to facilitate their adaptation to the working environment and to reduce staff turnover during the training period.
- (x) Setting up a dedicated team for more complicated types of cases (e.g. cases rejected by departments) to ensure proper handling.

Others

- (xi) Introducing the “users pay” principle to charge departments a fee according to the number of cases handled by 1823, thus encouraging departments to consider carefully before the launch of new projects, and to explore ways facilitating the public’s understanding and use of relevant services to minimise enquiries.

2.26 In 2024, 1823 will further leverage technology to improve its service, including expanding the use of AI Chatbot service to provide written replies to common enquiries within its service scope. Also, it is conducting an internal pilot project of using generative AI technology to assist staff in drafting written responses to public enquiries.

2.27 In addition, the e-Government audit coordinated by OGCIO and participated by 1823 has been completed. 1823 is currently implementing the audit consultant’s recommendations on utilising advanced information technology to further enhance its service, such as automatic speech-to-text technology to transcribe voicemail messages from the public, and the Interactive Voice Response System to disseminate information by SMS.

3

1823'S HANDLING OF COMPLAINTS AND ENQUIRIES

MECHANISM FOR HANDLING ENQUIRIES

3.1 1823 handles **enquiries** according to the following principles:

- (1) Enquiries regarding participating departments: answer based on content of the Knowledge Base; if no information is available in the Knowledge Base, record details of enquiries and refer to relevant departments for handling. Enquiry cases are referred in the same way as complaint cases (see **paras. 3.2 and 3.3**).
- (2) Enquiries regarding non-participating departments: provide contact details of relevant departments for the public to make enquiries directly. 1823 will not refer their enquiries.

MECHANISM FOR HANDLING COMPLAINTS

3.2 For public **complaints** about Government services (including requests for government services), 1823 staff will note down the details and refer the complaints to relevant bureaux or departments for action. Upon referral, 1823 will monitor the case progress in accordance with the department's performance pledges until the department replies to the complainant. Upon receipt of a referral, departments can update 1823 on the case progress by the following means:

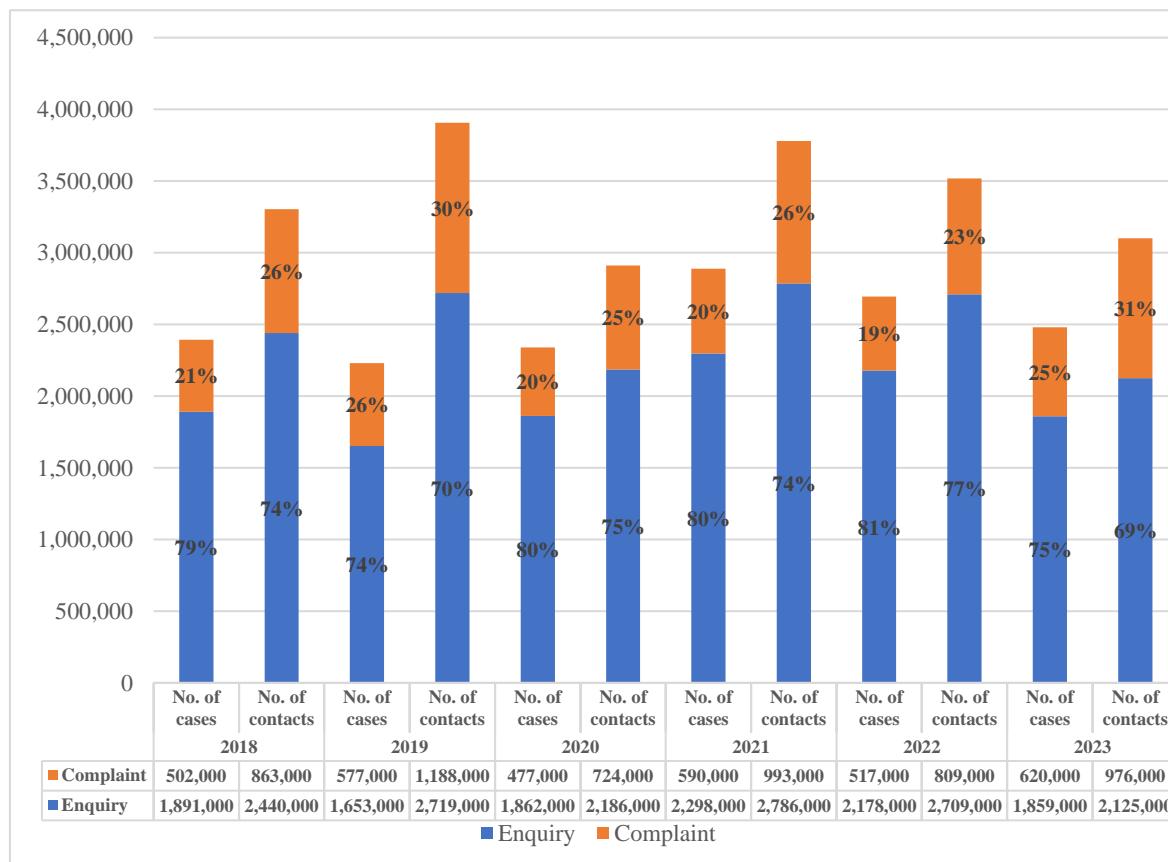
- (1) email;
- (2) the online platform developed by 1823 (see **para. 2.13**); or
- (3) direct transfer of data about case progress from the department's own complaint management system to 1823's computer system via application interface (see **para. 2.12**).

3.3 Generally speaking, upon receipt of a referral from 1823, departments may reply directly to the complainant. If the complainant is unwilling to provide personal data to the department or the department requests 1823 to reply to a member of the public on its behalf, 1823 will forward the department's reply to the complainant; if the complainant requests a direct reply from the department, 1823 will relay the request to the department for a direct reply to the complainant.

VOLUME OF ENQUIRIES AND COMPLAINTS HANDLED

3.4 Each year between 2018 and 2023, 1823 handled an average of about 2.50 million contacts involving about 1.95 million enquiries; and about 930,000 contacts involving about 550,000 complaints (including requests for government services) (see fig. 1²).

**Figure 1: Volume of enquiries and complaints handled by 1823 (2018–2023)
(Rounded to the nearest thousand)**



² Each enquiry or complaint case might involve more than one voice or written contact (by means of email and fax, mail, SMS, mobile application and online e-form) to be handled by 1823.

REFERRAL OF CASES TO DEPARTMENTS

3.5 Since 1823 was able to resolve most enquiries on the first call (see **para. 2.9**), the percentage of enquiry cases referred to departments for further action was relatively low every year. Data show that each year between 2018 and 2023, an average of around 21,000 enquiry cases were referred to departments for reply, representing around 1.1% of all enquiry cases handled by 1823. Meanwhile, 1823 referred all complaint cases to relevant departments for follow-up action.

MONITORING PROGRESS OF CASE RESPONSE

3.6 For enquiries and complaints referred to departments for handling, 1823 would monitor the case progress. According to existing mechanism, if departments fail to reply to the public and notify 1823 of case update within the pledged or specified time frame, 1823 system would send an automatic reminder to departments. Separately, in the monthly reports issued to participating departments, 1823 would also remind them to follow up on outstanding cases until a reply is issued to the public and the case progress is updated.

PROCESS FOR HANDLING COMPLAINTS WITH UNCLEAR DELINEATION OF RESPONSIBILITIES

3.7 According to the existing complaint handling mechanism of 1823, departments rejecting a case referred by 1823 are required to give reasons and suggest which department the case should be referred to; where a cross-departmental complaint with unclear delineation of responsibilities is rejected by all relevant departments, 1823 would endeavour to liaise and clarify the responsibilities among departments, with a view to assigning the case to the lead department for proper handling. 1823 has a dedicated complaint team handling cross-departmental cases rejected by departments.

3.8 Upon rejection of a case by two departments, 1823's computer system would activate automatically the escalation mechanism, which comprises three levels:

- Level 1: Within two working days upon rejection by two departments, 1823 would request the **Case Officers** of the departments to review the case.
- Level 2: If departments still reject the case after review by the Case Officers, the dedicated complaint team would escalate the case to the **Liaison Officers**³ of the departments within two working days upon the second rejection. Tree cases are escalated to the Tree Management Office (“TMO”) under DEVB in parallel.
- Level 3: If the Liaison Officers of all departments refuse to take ownership, the dedicated complaint team would further escalate the case within two working days to the **Complaint Officer** (see **note 3**) of the departments. Tree cases are escalated to the Head of TMO in parallel.

3.9 When no consensus is reached among departments after a case is escalated to Level 3, 1823 would attempt to liaise with their Complaint Officers, coordinate discussion among departments, and suggest that departments 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 decide not to take further action, 1823 would coordinate a consolidated reply to the complainant and the departments are requested to state the reasons in its reply.

3.10 The data of 1823 show that each year between 2018 and 2023, an average of around 1.4% (7,400) of all cases referred to departments were rejected and subsequently handled under the escalation mechanism; of which, an average of around

³ EO stated that departments designate suitable staff of their own choice to act as Liaison Officer and Complaint Officer at Levels 2 and 3. 1823 suggests that the Complaint Officer should ideally be at the directorate rank. The following are examples from various departments for reference: FEHD’s Liaison Officers hold the rank of Executive Officer (General), and its Complaint Officers hold the rank of District Environmental Hygiene Superintendent and/or Chief Executive Officer (Complaints Management); LandsD’s Liaison Officers hold the rank of District Secretary (urban areas only)/District Administrative Assistant (Lands) (New Territories only), and its Complaint Officers hold the rank of District Lands Officer; TD’s Liaison Officers hold the rank of Assistant Secretary (Administration), and its Complaint Officers hold the rank of District Chief Traffic Engineer; HyD’s Liaison Officers hold the rank of Engineer (Public Relations)/Senior Engineer (Public Relations), and its Complaint Officers hold the rank of District Chief Engineer and Assistant Director (Technical).

6.5% (480 cases) were escalated to the Complaint Officer (i.e. Level 3) (see **Table 4**). Regarding the processing time of such cases, each year an average of around 38% (2,800 cases) took one to three months to complete, around 10% (770 cases) took three to six months to complete, and around 7.5% (560 cases) were still not completed after six months (see **Table 5**).

Table 4: Number of complaint cases handled under escalation mechanism by 1823 (2018–2023)

	No. of complaint cases (% of all cases handled under escalation mechanism)					
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Cases rejected by first two departments (a)	6,654 (100%)	7,847 (100%)	5,677 (100%)	6,967 (100%)	7,766 (100%)	9,273 (100%)
Cases handled after review by Case Officer (Level 1)	5,564 (84%)	6,022 (77%)	4,496 (79%)	5,631 (81%)	6,544 (84%)	7,224 (78%)
Cases handled after escalated to Liaison Officer (Level 2)	661 (10%)	1,242 (16%)	767 (14%)	868 (12%)	838 (11%)	1,469 (16%)
Cases handled after escalated to Complaint Officer (Level 3)	429 (6%)	583 (7%)	414 (7%)	468 (7%)	384 (5%)	580 (6%)

Table 5: Processing time of complaint cases handled under escalation mechanism by 1823 (2018–2023)

Processing time	No. of complaint cases					
	% of all cases handled under escalation mechanism (i.e. item (a) in Table 4))					
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023 [@]
Completed within 30 days	2,949 (44%)	3,095 (39%)	2,215 (39%)	2,915 (42%)	3,314 (42%)	4,569 (49%)
Completed in 31 to 90 days	2,437 (37%)	3,144 (40%)	2,182 (38%)	2,560 (37%)	3,203 (41%)	3,363 (36%)
Completed in 91 to 180 days	728 (11%)	916 (12%)	764 (14%)	798 (11%)	804 (11%)	591 (6%)
Not completed after 180 days	540 (8%)	692 (9%)	516 (9%)	694 (10%)	445 (6%)	443 (5%)

[@] Including 307 cases in progress

3.11 EO stated that complaint cases required to be handled under the escalation mechanism were mostly about:

- (i) Street obstruction
- (ii) Tree management
- (iii) Drainage management
- (iv) Road repairs
- (v) Rubbish and clean-up

Complaints about these five subjects made up more than 50% of all cases handled under the escalation mechanism. Between 2018 and 2023, the number of cases handled by 1823 under the escalation mechanism regarding these five subjects are given in **Table 6**.

Table 6: Top five subjects of complaints handled under escalation mechanism by 1823 (2018–2023)

Subject of complaint	No. of cases					
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Street obstruction	845	1,465	790	907	1,182	1,390
Tree management	1,534	1,053	739	772	1,023	1,427
Drainage management	841	992	953	1,134	881	1,422
Road repairs	427	446	300	361	438	841
Rubbish and clean-up	358	374	381	384	367	669
Total (% of all cases handled under escalation mechanism)	4,005 (60%)	4,330 (55%)	3,163 (56%)	3,558 (51%)	3,891 (50%)	5,749 (62%)

3.12 Moreover, 1823 often found it difficult to identify the lead department or ascertain where the responsibility falls when facing with complaints about the following issues:

- (1) public recreational facilities without records of construction or takeover (such as damaged chairs or pavilions);
- (2) public facilities not installed by government departments (such as maintenance of drainage in rural villages); and
- (3) public roads not managed and maintained by TD or HyD (such as repairs to road surface and maintenance of traffic signs).

For cases relating to repair/maintenance works of facilities or roads that are not taken up by departments under the escalation mechanism, 1823 would suggest that the Complaint Officers of the departments concerned (e.g. HAD or other works departments) consider “one-off” repair/maintenance works. 1823 would also suggest

that the departments coordinate or hold inter-departmental meeting or joint site inspection to resolve the problem. If the departments eventually decide not to provide a solution for a particular case, 1823 will coordinate a consolidated reply to the complainant.

3.13 According to EO, the percentage of cases with unclear delineation of responsibilities is generally low at around 1% of the complaints received by 1823 each year. The trickiest challenge faced by 1823 in handling cases with unclear delineation of responsibilities is that multiple departments might involve in the issues of a certain area, where the demarcation of work is so delicate that 1823 could hardly derive from the complaint lodged by the public the key information to determine which department is responsible for the matter. Take complaints about tree management as example: the responsible department for trees within 10 m of the roadside differs from that for trees outside that area respectively; trees with a trunk diameter less than 95 mm are not handled under the established mechanism for tree complaints; in some cases, it is difficult to define who is responsible for management of the slope on which the tree is grown. In addition, the Case Officers of departments often hold divergent views on whether their departments should take ownership based on different findings of site inspections or different understanding of the division of work. Delayed replies from departments also add to the difficulty of 1823 in handling cases with unclear delineation of responsibilities⁴.

3.14 Nevertheless, according to EO, most cases with unclear delineation of responsibilities could be resolved under the escalation mechanism. In 2022, out of the 384 cases escalated to the Complaint Officers (Level 3) due to unclear delineation of responsibilities, 97 cases remained unresolved at that level. Following 1823's attempt to coordinate liaison between the departments concerned, a "one-off" follow-up action was eventually taken in 85 of these cases. For the remaining 12 cases involving repairs to non-government roads (7 cases), design and maintenance of non-government drains (3 cases) and requests for installation of streetlights on non-government roads (2 cases), the departments, after discussion, decided not to follow up and replied to the complainants through 1823. In 2023, 58 cases were not followed up by departments after having escalated to the Complaint Officers (Level 3), of which 31 cases involved repairs to non-government roads, and 27 cases involved requests for installation of additional facilities/poor maintenance of facilities.

⁴ This Office previously completed a direct investigation into handling of complaints involving trees on Government land and made eight improvement recommendations, of which five targeting cases with disputes over responsibilities among departments or cross-departmental cases.

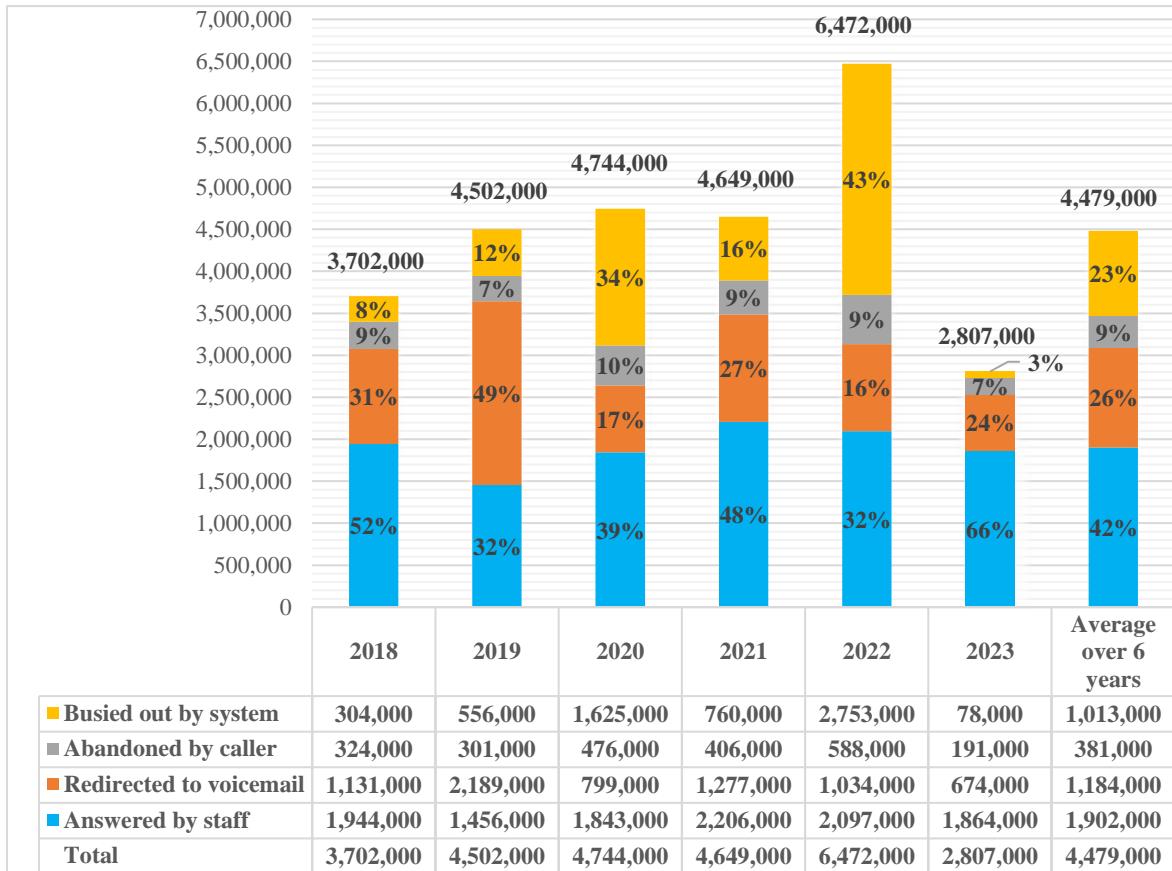
4

PERFORMANCE IN ANSWERING CALLS AND EXTRA SUPPORT FOR GOVERNMENT HOTLINES

4.1 In recent years, the usage of 1823 service, including online FAQs, voice contacts and written contacts, was on the rise and reached over 10.8 million times in 2022. In 2023, 1823 service was used 7.38 million times, of which nearly 40% were voice contacts (see **Table 2** in **para. 2.6**). As such, the efficiency in answering and handling calls is still integral to 1823 service.

4.2 The data of 1823 show that each year between 2018 and 2023, 1823 was able to handle 48% to 90% of all calls received (including calls answered and redirected to voicemail). The average over six years was around 68%, which means that 1823 failed to handle around 31% (1.4 million) of all calls received each year (see **fig. 2**). EO explained that in terms of the daily operations of call centres, the industry generally classifies voice messages processed as calls handled. From the user's perspective, some have told 1823 that they would prefer leaving a voice message quickly to waiting when the lines are busy. Therefore, 1823 calculates the volume of calls handled by adding up calls answered and voice messages processed.

Figure 2: Handling of inbound calls by 1823 (2018–2023)
(Rounded to the nearest thousand)



HANDLING CALLS FOR PARTICIPATING DEPARTMENTS

4.3 One of 1823’s performance pledges is “to answer at least 80% of calls within 12 seconds” (see **para. 2.8**), which is also stipulated in the cooperation agreements with departments. However, as shown in **paragraph 2.9** and **Table 3**, between 2018 and 2023, 1823 often could not meet this target in answering calls for participating departments.

4.4 Take 2018 and 2019 as an example. In 2018, 1823 only met the above target in answering calls for two participating departments; for the rest, it mostly answered less than 70% of calls within 12 seconds, including three departments at lower than 60%. Between 2020 and 2022, 1823 prioritised the handling of calls to COVID-related hotlines, thus impeding its performance in answering calls for participating departments. The percentage of answering calls within 12 seconds dropped below 70% across the board, including the lowest at 11%. With the resumption to normalcy in 2023, 1823’s performance improved substantially. Overall, it managed to answer 74% of calls within 12 seconds and handle 90% of calls received.

4.5 EO explained that the achievement of the above-mentioned performance pledge is influenced by various factors, such as the volume of voice and written contacts, any sudden surge in calls (such as a large number of enquiries received during epidemic outbreaks, or numerous reports of fallen trees and flooding received during typhoons), and the complexity of enquiries or complaints. 1823 monitors the volume of calls received continuously. In the event of a sudden surge in unanswered calls triggered by emergency incidents (such as the passage of super typhoons Hato in 2017 and Mangkhut in 2018) or an unexpectedly high volume of calls exceeding the estimation of departments, some unanswered calls will be redirected to voicemail. As permitted by the volume of calls received, staff will call back those who have left their contact details in the same order as their voice messages as soon as possible. 1823 will take various counter-measures, such as prioritising the handling of voice contacts over written contacts, and increasing manpower by inviting staff to work overtime, reschedule leave and rest days, etc. Additionally, 1823 will explore more recruitment channels and design different work patterns to attract more people to join the 1823 team. Given the high staff turnover, 1823 will also make efforts to expedite the integration of new recruits by various means, including adjusting the training courses and the duties of new recruits. On the technology front, 1823 will further leverage new technologies, including expanding its AI Chatbot to answer FAQs within its service scope, conducting a pilot project of using generative AI technology to assist staff in drafting responses to written enquiries from the public, and using the telephone system to send requested information directly to callers via SMS, thereby enhancing capability and efficiency of case handling.

Information Provided by Participating Departments Inadequate to Answer Certain Public Enquiries

4.6 According to EO's information, on some occasions 1823 was unable to answer certain telephone enquiries immediately because participating departments had not notified it in a timely manner, or at all, of the newly launched services or arrangements nor updated the Knowledge Base. Some incidents are given below.

Incident 1: Failing to give notice of new arrangement

4.7 On 3 and 8 April 2020, the Government issued two press releases regarding the anti-epidemic requirements for cross-boundary goods vehicle drivers. It was announced that testing for drivers of cross-boundary goods vehicle from Hong Kong would be centralised by the Mainland authorities at the site of ports, the

Government would bear the testing cost, and TD would inform the transport industry of the specific arrangements of testing in due course. However, 1823 was not notified by TD of such arrangements, nor was the Knowledge Base updated. Having learned about the above press releases, 1823 urged TD to provide relevant details for updating the Knowledge Base. In the week between 3 and 9 April 2020, 1823 received nearly 6,400 enquiry calls redirected from TD's hotline, representing an increase of 23% over the previous week.

Incident 2: Giving notice of new arrangement only after implementation

4.8 Between 3 pm to 5:30 pm on 14 May 2021, 1823 received around 4,000 enquiry calls redirected from the hotline of the Student Finance Office. It was not until 3:40 pm on that day did the Student Finance Office inform 1823 that it had sent SMS notifications to over 45,000 continuing applicants who had been issued with an access code to open the pre-filled e-form but had not yet submitted their application, reminding them to apply for student financial assistance for the 2021/22 school year promptly if they wished to do so. 1823 then gave the Student Finance Office feedback on the unsatisfactory situation, suggesting that it give 1823 prior notice of any similar arrangements in future and consider sending out SMS notifications in batches, so that 1823 could update the Knowledge Base beforehand and arrange for manpower to handle the expected increase in inbound calls.

Incident 3: Inadequate information in Knowledge Base

4.9 At around 9pm on 17 September 2021, the media reported that the Labour and Welfare Bureau had announced on its social media page the suspension of booking on the system of the Penny's Bay Quarantine Centre. 1823 had no relevant information and thus contacted LD after becoming aware of the report. LD provided 1823 with the line-to-take at about 10:10 pm that evening for answering public enquiries.

Incident 4: Department failing to give timely response to 1823

4.10 In some of the compulsory testing notices issued by DH in January 2022, some dates on which members of the public were required to undergo testing were marked with an asterisk, indicating that testing was not required on those dates if the confirmed cases on the premises involved the Delta variant. Since the public was unsure whether the premises with dates asterisked had confirmed cases of the Delta variant, many callers asked 1823 whether they needed to undergo testing on those dates.

4.11 1823 contacted DH by phone and email for three consecutive days from 24 to 26 January, urging DH to provide a line-to-take as soon as possible. On 28 January, DH provided 1823 with a line-to-take suggesting that the public undergo testing first.

EXTRA SUPPORT FOR GOVERNMENT HOTLINES

4.12 EO stated that 1823, as the Government's main contact centre, would support the hotline service for major government initiatives under the broad principles of social responsibility and serving the public. Whenever the Government Secretariat, individual bureaux or departments so request, 1823 would endeavour to assist as far as circumstances permit, regardless of whether the department concerned is a participating department or not.

4.13 To decide whether 1823 will support a particular project, EO will examine the capacity of 1823 at that time, taking into account such factors as the expected volume of inbound calls, the nature of enquiries, the length of the project, and the availability of venues, manpower and computer facilities. If circumstances do not permit, 1823 will not undertake new projects rashly. In fact, due to the above considerations, 1823 declined in 2021 to answer the hotline for the Consumption Voucher Scheme of the Financial Services and the Treasury Bureau ("FSTB") (a non-participating department) and the hotline for the new legislation on regulating tenancy of sub-divided units of RVD (a participating department).

4.14 In general, government hotlines requiring extra support of 1823 were short-term in nature with specific duration, such as the hotline regarding Universal Accessibility Projects in 2012 and the hotline regarding the export control of powdered formulae for infants and young children (commonly known as the "Milk Formula Restriction") in 2013. These specialised hotline services usually lasted for a few days to a few months.

4.15 Between January 2016 and September 2022, 1823 provided extra support for a total of 10 government hotlines, including the election hotlines provided on election days of the Legislative Council and the District Council, where calls not

answered by staff of the Registration and Electoral Office were redirected to 1823⁵; the hotline for the Caring and Sharing Scheme of the Working Family Allowance Office⁶; the hotline of the Immigration Department set up for students awaiting visas for studying in the United Kingdom; the hotline for the Trade Single Window of the Customs and Excise Department. According to EO, the overall performance of 1823 was not affected by the extra support provided to these hotlines.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 EPIDEMIC ON 1823 SERVICE

4.16 EO stated that when Hong Kong was impacted by COVID-19 between 2020 and 2022, 1823 actively supported the Government's anti-epidemic measures. Apart from answering the hotlines for participating departments, 1823 provided extra support for seven COVID-related hotlines listed in **Table 7**. Some of these seven hotlines required a longer period of support from 1823 due to the continuation of epidemic.

Table 7: Extra support for COVID-related hotlines provided by 1823

	Hotline	Owner departments	Support began on	Support ended on
(1)	COVID-19 Hotline	DH	25 Jan 2020*	4 Sep 2022
(2)	CuMask+™ Hotline	ITB [#] and Innovation and Technology Commission	5 May 2020	30 Nov 2020
(3)	Cash Payout Scheme Hotline (\$10,000 Payout Scheme)	FSTB	8 Jun 2020	31 Dec 2020
(4)	Universal Community Testing Programme Hotline	ITB [#]	25 Aug 2020	14 Oct 2020

⁵ Including the 2016 Legislative Council New Territories East geographical constituency by-election; 2016 Legislative Council election; 2016 Election Committee subsector election; 2018 Legislative Council by-election; 2019 District Council election; and 2021 Legislative Council election.

⁶ The hotline for the Caring and Sharing Scheme was a special project of the Working Family Allowance Office (a participating department) outside the originally agreed scope supported by 1823.

	Hotline	Owner departments	Support began on	Support ended on
(5)	Return2hk and Come2hk Scheme Hotlines	Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau, DH and OGCIO	11 Nov 2020 (Return2hk) 15 Sep 2021 (Come2hk)	20 Jan 2023
(6)	COVID-19 Vaccination Programme Hotline	Civil Service Bureau, Food and Health Bureau [@] , DH and OGCIO	23 Feb 2021	18 May 2023
(7)	Hong Kong Health Code Hotline	OGCIO	2 Dec 2021	31 Mar 2023

* From 25 January 2020 to 4 February 2021 and from 18 July to 4 September 2022, only calls unanswered by DH staff were redirected to 1823. From 5 February 2021 to 17 July 2022, all calls to the relevant hotline were answered directly by 1823.

Currently known as the Innovation, Technology and Industry Bureau.

[@] Currently known as the Health Bureau.

4.17 When 1823 agreed to support DH's COVID-19 Hotline in early 2020, the initial setup was for DH staff to answer the calls first, and only unanswered calls were redirected to 1823. Except during a surge of epidemic, 1823 only handled hundreds of calls to the COVID-19 Hotline each day. Subsequently, in view of a shortage of DH staff to carry out various anti-epidemic tasks, the then Chief Secretary for Administration requested in December 2020 that all departments deploy manpower to fully assist DH in the fight against epidemic. After discussion, 1823 started to answer all calls to the COVID-19 Hotline on behalf of DH from 4 February 2021. Since then and up to the onset of the fifth wave in early 2022 (i.e. from February 2021 to January 2022), the volume of COVID-related calls (including calls to the COVID-19 Hotline) received by 1823 ranged from 46,000 to 149,000 per month, of which an average of 5.8% were unanswered (including calls abandoned by the callers and busied out by the system) per month; the volume of non-COVID calls ranged from 210,000 to 450,000 per month, of which 13% to 44% were not answered immediately. During the same period, 1823 received a total volume of calls from 280,000 to 504,000 per month. According to EO, 1823 was still barely able to cope with the workload at that time.

4.18 In early 2022, Hong Kong was hard hit by the sudden and extremely severe fifth wave of the epidemic. At its peak in February and March 2022, 1823 received a

substantial volume of public enquiries about COVID-19 and the total volume of calls soared to 990,000 and 1,030,000 respectively, representing an increase more than twofold from the normal level of 380,000 per month. At the same time, 1823's call handling capacity was further affected as many frontline staff were unable to report for duty due to infection, isolation, quarantine or compulsory testing. Although the epidemic started to ease after April 2022, the volume of calls received by 1823 between April and June 2022 remained high at 580,000 to 800,000 per month, due to various new/updated anti-epidemic and immigration measures introduced by the Government and the rebound of confirmed cases from early June 2022 onwards.

4.19 After the onset of the fifth wave of epidemic, this Office received numerous complaints against 1823 for not answering calls from the public between January and May 2022. Regarding the inadequacy of 1823 service to cope with public demand during the fifth wave, EO stated that 1823 had introduced various contingency measures, including:

- increased manpower by continuous recruitment, internal redeployment of staff including those of officer grade, and secondment of staff from other government departments to answer calls from the public, as well as increased the number of call centres and manpower through outsourcing on a trial basis;
- suspended the processing of written contacts from 23 February to 10 April 2022;
- analysed public calls and proactively liaised with DH to ensure that anti-epidemic information was clear and comprehensible, thereby reducing unnecessary complaints and enquiries; for instance, 1823 suggested in February 2022 that DH revise the hyperlinks and wording on the COVID-19 thematic website to facilitate the public's search for and viewing of compulsory testing notices;
- proposed in May 2022 to hand back the COVID-19 Hotline to DH for answering and suggested that DH consider outsourcing the service. After repeated discussions, DH gradually resumed answering the COVID-19 Hotline from 18 July and answered all calls from 5 September;

- launched in July 2022 a newly designed mobile application (see **para. 2.25**) and the Case Response Platform (see **para. 2.14**) to further streamline the workflow.

4.20 The 1823 service for non-COVID hotlines gradually improved with the percentage of calls busied out by the system dropping from a peak of 87% in March to 28% in July, and further down to 6% in August.

4.21 Drawing on the experience of the fifth wave of epidemic, EO pointed out that with regard to the handling of written contacts, 1823 has suggested to six departments for which 1823 handles email on their behalf (namely FEHD, TD, HyD, LCSD, OGCIO and HD) that in the event of suspension of processing cases lodged in written form due to urgent or exceptional situations, 1823 will confirm with the six departments whether they will handle such cases themselves. If the departments agree to do so, they should suspend forwarding email to 1823 and the message that emails are handled by 1823 should be deleted from their websites. If the departments will not handle the cases themselves, in addition to suspension of forwarding email to 1823 and deletion of the above-mentioned message from websites, they have to indicate in the auto-reply what other channels are available for the public to contact them directly, so that the public can have continuous access to departmental information and services during the exceptional period.

4.22 As regards the handling of voice contacts, an unprecedented impact on 1823 service was caused by its support for DH's COVID-related hotlines during the fifth wave of epidemic in 2022. EO remarked that 1823 service was seriously disrupted during the epidemic, but its performance largely improved in 2023, i.e., the first year after resumption to normalcy. Although the impact on 1823 during the fifth wave of epidemic was indeed rare, 1823 would discuss backup plans with all participating departments. In the event that 1823 service was seriously disrupted by emergency situations and was not expected to resume normal shortly, 1823 would suggest that participating departments answer their own hotlines. However, the effective implementation of backup plans still depends on the corresponding deployment of staff, facilities and venues of departments, etc. at that time.

5

1823'S ANALYSIS AND APPLICATION OF DATA FROM COMPLAINTS AND ENQUIRIES

REPORTING TO PARTICIPATING DEPARTMENTS

5.1 1823 issues monthly reports to all participating departments, covering the volume of voice and written contacts handled by 1823 on their behalf, the percentage of calls answered within 12 seconds, the average call handling time, and the customer satisfaction rating. In the monthly reports, 1823 breaks down the statistics of complaints into categories and/or districts to facilitate further analysis and action by departments. Upon referral of complaints, 1823 also passes the copies of all complaint records by electronic means to departments for their comprehensive analysis of complaints received via 1823 and directly from the public.

5.2 This Office notes that the following four performance indicators of 1823 are stipulated in the agreements signed between 1823 and participating departments:

- (1) call abandoned rate of less than 10%;
- (2) at least 80% of calls are answered within 12 seconds;
- (3) at least 90% of voice messages are followed up within 3 hours; and
- (4) more than 90% of enquiries are resolved on the first call.

Apart from item (3), all participating departments require 1823 to give an account of the other three performance indicators in the monthly reports (see **Table 8**).

Table 8: Monthly reporting of statistics on performance indicators by 1823 to participating departments

Participating department	Performance indicators stipulated in agreement (see para. 5.2)			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
AFCD	✓	✓		✓
ArchSD	✓	✓		✓
BD	✓	✓		✓
Slope Safety Hotline, CEDD	✓	✓		✓
CR	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tobacco and Alcohol Control Office, DH	✓	✓		✓
DSD	✓	✓		✓
EMSD*				✓
FEHD	✓	✓		✓
Greening, Landscape and Tree Management Section, DEVB	✓	✓		
HD	✓	✓		✓
Hongkong Post	✓	✓	✓	✓
HyD	✓	✓		✓
Hotline of Government Rent and Premium Unit, LandsD	✓	✓		✓
LCSD	✓	✓		✓
LD	✓	✓		✓
LR	✓	✓		✓
MD	✓	✓		✓
GovHK, OGCIO	✓	✓	✓	✓
RVD	✓	✓		✓
WFSFAA	Student Finance Office	✓	✓	
	Working Family Allowance Office	✓	✓	✓
SWD	✓	✓	✓	✓
TD	✓	✓		✓

* 1823 is engaged by EMSD to answer its general enquiry hotline directly.

5.3 Furthermore, as requested by individual departments, 1823 would compile extra statistical data for departments to conduct more thorough analysis, for example:

- (1) The monthly report to TD sets out the number of complaints against various public transport operators, with a breakdown into service frequencies, routes, etc.
- (2) As requested by the then Food and Health Bureau, information of complaints about environmental hygiene blackspots in various districts was provided in relation to the “Keep Clean 2015@Hong Kong: Our Home” Campaign.
- (3) During the 2019 social incidents, a breakdown of the complaint cases relating to “Lennon Walls” by the locations involved was provided to FEHD as requested.

5.4 EO remarked that analysis of service data and related complaint information can help departments grasp the public’s views on the service in question, which form the basis for adjusting and improving service. Given that EO is the Government’s internal management consultant, its different sections would analyse the relevant data of 1823 for individual projects, such as the Streamlining of Government Services Programme, and make improvement recommendations to departments. However, EO considered that 1823, as one of the channels for the government departments to receive complaints, is not in possession of all data about the enquiries and complaints of departments. Departments are familiar with their own scope of work and operations, so it would be more effective for them to consolidate and analyse their own operational data together with the complaint data collected from 1823 (see **paras. 5.1 and 5.3**) and other channels. That will be more conducive to helping departments identify opportunities for enhancing efficiency and service quality.

5.5 Looking ahead, to facilitate data analysis by departments, 1823 will discuss with participating departments whether the format and structure of data need to be adjusted. 1823 will also attempt to analyse complaint information on individual subjects with a view to providing departments with useful data to identify opportunities for enhancing efficiency and service quality.

ADVISING DEPARTMENTS AND MAKING SUGGESTIONS TO IMPROVE INFORMATION DISSEMINATION

5.6 EO said that apart from monitoring the volume of calls, 1823 also monitors the content of public enquiries and takes the initiative to advise departments and make suggestions to improve information dissemination. For example, in respect of the extra support for seven COVID-related hotlines by 1823, apart from notifying DH of the problem that the volume of calls received far exceeded the volume of calls answered and requesting DH to increase manpower, 1823 also analysed the content of calls and proactively suggested that DH improve the telephone system and the dissemination of information (see **para. 4.19**). It hoped to address the issues at the source to ensure that clear, comprehensible information was available and the public could obtain the services they needed in a timely manner, thereby reducing unnecessary complaints and enquiries.

UPLOADING DATA TO DATA.GOV.HK

5.7 At present, apart from publishing the data of performance indicators as at the previous month on its website, 1823 also uploads the data of cases handled to the DATA.GOV.HK portal developed and supported by OGCIO for public access. The data uploaded to the portal include the volume of calls received per month, the volume of abandoned calls, the percentage of calls answered within 12 seconds, the average call handling time, the written contacts received from the public by different means, the traffic volume of 1823's FAQs webpage, the number of enquiries/complaints/suggestions/compliments handled by 1823 through different channels, the percentage of enquiries resolved on the first call, the percentage of cases involving multiple departments, and the percentage of cases assigned to departments within three hours.

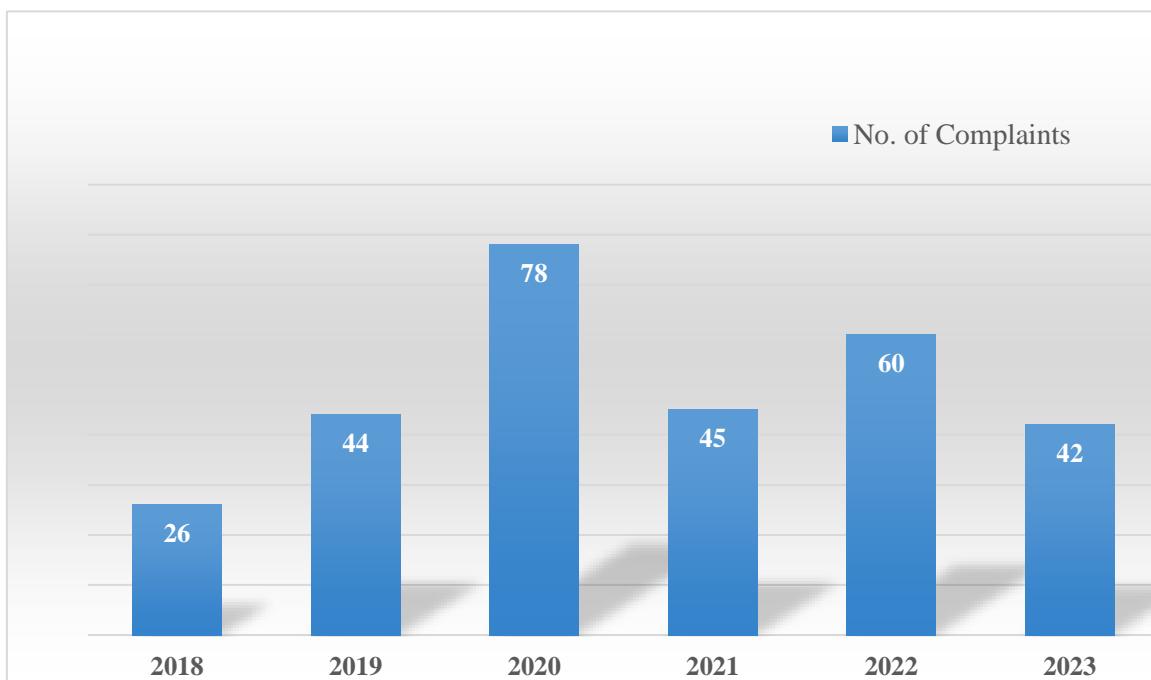
6

SELECTED CASES AND INTEGRATED HOTLINE SERVICE OF GOVERNMENTS IN OTHER REGIONS

SELECTED CASES

6.1 This Office has received public complaints against 1823 from time to time. The number of these cases between 2018 and 2023 is given in **figure 3**. In this direct investigation, apart from examining complaints against 1823 we received, we have also scrutinised 1823's case files regarding complaints it received from the public to learn more about its daily operations and case referrals, especially cross-departmental cases with unclear delineation of responsibilities.

Figure 3: Number of complaints against 1823 received by this Office (2018–2023)



Case 1

6.2 In mid-March 2021, 1823 received a public complaint about a construction site encroaching on an adjacent pavement and causing obstruction. Since the location provided by the complainant was the same as a site under HD in an earlier case received by 1823, the complaint was referred to HD. Yet, HD replied that the matter was not related to its construction site. Having examined information on the Geospatial Portals, 1823 referred the case to the Water Supplies Department (“WSD”), which replied that it had handed the site back to LandsD. 1823 then referred the case to LandsD, which alleged that the site was managed by HyD.

6.3 In late April 2021, 1823 activated the escalation mechanism, requesting the Case Officers of the three departments to review the case. WSD reiterated that the site had been handed back to LandsD, LandsD alleged that the site was currently used by WSD for storage of construction materials, and HD did not reply.

6.4 In early May, 1823 escalated the case to the Liaison Officers of departments for review. HD and WSD reiterated that the case was outside their purview, and LandsD repeated that the site was managed by HyD. 1823 referred the case to HyD, but HyD said that the construction site belonged to HD.

6.5 In mid-May, 1823 requested the Complaint Officers of departments to review the case. Finally, after clarification made by HyD to HD, HD confirmed that the construction site belonged to its public housing development project. When putting up hoardings around the site in March, its contractor had placed barricades on the pavement to enclose the works area. The barricades were removed upon completion of the works in early May.

6.6 Under the existing mechanism, 1823 refers complaints to the appropriate departments based on details provided by the public, content of the Knowledge Base provided by participating departments, information available on departmental websites, and understanding of the subject matter by 1823 staff, but 1823 is not empowered to command departments to accept a case. In this incident, 1823 had correctly referred the case to the responsible department, i.e. HD, at the outset, but HD rejected the case, such that 1823 needed to identify the responsible party and refer the case again. After repeated referrals and clarification of the problem or responsibility through other departments, the case finally returned to HD for handling after dragging on for a considerable period.

Case 2

6.7 On 5 May 2020, the complainant complained to 1823 that a huge amount of construction waste was dumped on the pavement and the bus stop near a road. 1823 referred the case to FEHD, LandsD and HyD concurrently.

6.8 Our investigation revealed that the three departments held divergent views on whether the articles placed at the site were “construction materials” or “construction and demolition materials”. FEHD and HyD regarded them as construction materials to be tackled by LandsD by posting a statutory notice under the Land (Miscellaneous Provisions) Ordinance and removing any unclaimed articles upon expiry of the statutory notice; LandsD asserted that the articles were construction and demolition materials (i.e. any substance generated by construction and demolition works) to be removed by HyD right away under the established mechanism, and posting of statutory notice by LandsD beforehand was unnecessary.

6.9 In early July, 1823 called HyD and LandsD to enquire whether LandsD could first post a statutory notice to demand the occupier to cease occupation, and HyD could remove unclaimed construction materials upon expiry of the statutory notice. LandsD notified 1823 that it agreed to post a statutory notice to facilitate HyD’s clearance operation. On the other hand, HyD notified 1823 that it would not carry out clearance operation because illegal hawking had been found at the site during its inspection, and the case should be referred to FEHD. 1823 then re-assigned the case to FEHD.

6.10 On 13 July, 1823 escalated the case to the Liaison Officers of departments for review. HyD reiterated that the construction materials at the site were outside its purview; FEHD replied that no illegal hawkers were found at the site during its inspection, and considered it a case of illegal occupation of Government land and should be tackled by responsible departments. On 19 August, 1823 escalated the case to the Complaint Officers of departments, and suggested that HAD coordinate a joint operation with departments to resolve the problem.

6.11 In late August, HyD informed 1823 that it would assist with removing the construction materials if LandsD took enforcement action. Upon learning from 1823 that HyD would participate in the joint operation, LandsD contacted FEHD. After discussion, the three departments agreed to conduct a joint operation on 3 September.

Eventually, the problem was resolved nearly four months after the complainant lodged his complaint.

6.12 This case reflected that despite 1823’s efforts to liaise and clarify the responsibility among departments, a complaint often could not be handled promptly and effectively if departments merely focused on asserting that the case came within the purview of other departments, rather than acting from a perspective of problem solving.

6.13 The most effective and speediest 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. In this case, 1823’s escalation mechanism could not effectively facilitate direct and genuine communication of departments.

Case 3

6.14 In August 2021, the complainant lodged a complaint via 1823 about the illegal parking of bicycles at an uncovered Public Transport Interchange (“PTI”). 1823 referred his complaint to HAD, which further referred the case, via 1823, to TD and LandsD, requesting them to confirm the management responsibility for the PTI.

6.15 LandsD pointed out that since the site was a PTI, it should be managed by TD; TD contended that the site in question was on unleased Government land and therefore was outside its purview. As the management responsibility remained in dispute, no action was taken to clear the illegally parked bicycles.

6.16 On 1 December, the complainant complained to 1823 again about the illegal parking problem. In the same month, 1823 escalated the case to the Liaison Officers and Complaint Officers of departments in succession, requesting them to review the case. It also suggested that HAD coordinate a joint operation with departments to resolve the problem. However, both TD and LandsD insisted on their original views (see **para. 6.15**).

6.17 Our investigation revealed that before the complainant lodged his complaint with 1823, the departments had divergent views on the responsibility regarding the illegal parking of bicycles at the PTI in question as early as September 2020. However, the departments did not initiate any discussion to clarify their purview, nor did they attempt to reach a consensus on the division of labour. The issue

of who should be responsible for removing the illegally parked bicycles remained in stalemate.

6.18 Following our investigation, LandsD conducted a one-off joint operation with relevant departments in late January 2022 to resolve the illegal parking problem for the moment. Nevertheless, no consensus had been reached as to which department should be responsible for the problem. Eventually, acting on our recommendation, LandsD, TD and other relevant departments held a senior inter-departmental meeting to discuss the matter. Later on the issue was further followed up by the then Steering Committee on District Administration⁷. The departments reached a consensus on the division of labour in handling illegal parking of bicycles at uncovered PTIs on unleased Government land.

6.19 This case indicated that when unclear delineation of responsibilities was involved and each department insisted on its own views, 1823's current practice of escalating the case to officers at different ranks for review might not be sufficient to settle the dispute, nor could it promote cross-departmental collaboration to resolve the problem completely. On the other hand, high-level discussion can facilitate comprehensive review and thorough clarification of purview and division of work; when similar complaints are received in future, 1823 can deal with them expeditiously for the benefit of the public.

Case 4

6.20 In September 2022, a complainant reported directly to FEHD that a bakery premises operated without a licence. FEHD's investigation did not find any unlicensed operation of food business. In November 2022, the complainant made another report to FEHD, alleging that the premises had posted on social media some images suspected of breaching the laws, which were not enforced by FEHD. After obtaining the

⁷ Set up by the Government in 2007, the Steering Committee on District Administration was chaired by the Permanent Secretary for Home and Youth Affairs (formerly the Permanent Secretary for Home Affairs), and comprised the heads of departments with important responsibilities in district administration. The Steering Committee provided a platform for directorate officers to jointly liaise and resolve district problems involving multiple departments.

In May 2023, the Chief Executive announced the proposals to improve governance at the district level, under which TFDG, led by the Deputy Chief Secretary for Administration, was set up to replace the Steering Committee on District Administration. TFDG coordinates and steers the district work of various bureaux and departments, and coordinates and rationalises the handling of district problems that require cross-departmental or cross-district collaboration.

complainant's consent, FEHD referred his report to the Police. Yet, FEHD did so by passing the case to 1823 and requesting the latter to refer the complainant's report to the Police. 1823 made the referral as requested by FEHD and approached the complainant for further details about his report.

6.21 1823 is set up to provide the public with a single point of contact, such that they can make enquiries and complaints without having to clarify the structure and division of labour within the Government. This Office believes that departments can directly refer cases and relevant information to the responsible department within the Government. When departments receive complaints directly from the public which are outside their purview and the public explicitly request the complaints to be referred to a particular department, if they simply pass such cases to 1823, it would not only delay the case handling, but also cause ineffective utilisation of 1823 resources for proper performance of its own duties.

Case 5

6.22 The complainant contacted 1823 with an enquiry about LandsD, but 1823 replied that the enquiry was outside its scope of service. The complainant was dissatisfied that 1823's reply was at odds with the information on its website.

6.23 While 1823 handles enquiries for 23 government departments, some of them engage 1823 to handle only a certain scope of enquiries. In the case of LandsD, 1823 only handles enquiries about Government rent and premium for the Government Rent and Premium Unit of LandsD, but it was not so stated on 1823 website. After review, the website information has been updated to clearly specify the scope of enquiries 1823 handles on behalf of LandsD.

6.24 This case indicated that EO should clearly explain the scope of 1823 service to the public.

Case 6

6.25 Since late February 2022, 1823 had suspended handling public emails addressed to departments, including TD, to focus on supporting DH hotlines and answering COVID-related calls. In April, the complainant sent an email to TD, which was still redirected to 1823 by the TD system. As a result, the complainant received an auto-reply from the 1823 system, indicating that the handling of email enquiries and

complaints had been suspended. The complainant was dissatisfied that 1823 failed to work out with TD proper arrangements for handling public emails.

6.26 Our investigation revealed that before the suspension of email handling, 1823 had suggested that TD itself handle the public email addressed to it, but TD replied that it was unable to do so. In view of the surge in enquiries and staff constraints (many 1823 frontline staff were under isolation or quarantine due to infection or close contact with patients) brought about by the fifth wave of epidemic, we considered 1823 to have no alternative but to suspend handling emails.

6.27 1823 and TD had announced via website, press release, etc., the suspension of email handling and the alternative channels for enquiries with TD. Nevertheless, we are of the view that 1823 and TD should revise the computer-generated auto-reply accordingly to provide other channels for enquiries with TD, rather than simply stating that 1823 had suspended handling public email. This Office notes that 1823 has discussed and reached a consensus with TD: in the event that 1823 has to suspend handling emails again in future, TD, regardless of whether it will handle public emails itself, will stop redirecting public emails to 1823 and remove from its website the message about its emails being handled by 1823. If TD decides to handle public emails itself, it will reply to the public directly; otherwise, TD will revise the auto-reply to inform the public of the suspension of handling emails (and written contacts by other means), and the alternative channels for enquiries with TD.

GOVERNMENT HOTLINE SERVICE IN OTHER REGIONS

6.28 The Governments in other regions have also set up one-stop non-emergency hotlines and/or online platforms similar to 1823, which operate round the clock to handle public enquiries, complaints and requests for government services, among others. In this direct investigation, this Office has referenced the service in the following regions.

Guangzhou Municipality

6.29 The Guangzhou Municipal Government has set up the Guangzhou 12345 Government Service Hotline⁸ (“12345 Hotline”), a public service platform operating

⁸ Details are available on the Guangzhou Municipal People’s Government Website – User Guide for Guangzhou 12345 Government Service Hotline.

round the clock. All departments under the Municipal Government, the District Governments and public administrative agencies would follow up on matters assigned by the Hotline. The public can make enquiries, obtain assistance, complain, report and comment regarding the administration or public services within the administrative region of Guangzhou Municipality via the 12345 Hotline. They can also check the case progress through the Hotline's online platform using their case numbers and telephone numbers, and rate their satisfaction after receiving the replies upon case completion. Meanwhile, the 12345 Hotline's website publishes the cases handled by the Hotline and data, and a knowledge base encompassing different categories of public services for public information. The call centre also analyses relevant data and examines cases to facilitate the Government's accurate implementation of policies.

6.30 In handling cases with unclear delineation of responsibilities, according to the Administrative Measures for Guangdong Province 12345 Government Service Hotline (“the Administrative Measures”), the 12345 Hotline has in place a system imposing accountability on the first agency being assigned a case. Under which, the 12345 Hotline will prepare a work order based on the type of subject matter and assign it to an agency for handling. The agency assigned the work order should take the lead in coordinating the work of relevant agencies, which are required to cooperate proactively. If the agency assigned the work order considers the subject matter outside its scope of duties, it should apply for returning the work order within two working days upon receipt, with reasons and justification. If the return is approved after review, the 12345 Hotline management office will re-assign the work order; otherwise, it will be returned to the original agency to continue follow-up work, with the time limit for completion calculated from the day of its first receiving the work order. If the assigned agency considers the case outside the scope of the Administrative Measures, it should explain to the public in accordance with the Administrative Measures why the case is not pursued. For matters involving multiple agencies or disputes over remits or applicable laws, the 12345 Hotline management office will summon relevant departments to coordinate and confirm which one should be assigned the case. The assigned agency is required to handle the case accordingly and not allowed to return the work order.

Taipei City

6.31 The Taipei City Government has set up the 1999 Hotline⁹, which is supervised by the Government's Research, Development and Evaluation Commission

⁹ Website: <https://1999.gov.taipei>

(“RDEC”). The 1999 Hotline provides multilingual and sign language video services. Apart from answering general enquiries, it also provides referral service when handling enquiries (i.e. if an enquiry involves administrative professional judgement or discretion, the hotline staff will transfer the call to the relevant agency or responsible person).

6.32 Moreover, according to the statistics of the 1999 Call Centre, the 1999 Hotline’s average handling time for public calls is three minutes. To prevent calls from overrunning and affecting other callers’ opportunity to use the 1999 Hotline service instantly, the Taipei City Government has set the maximum call duration for the 1999 Hotline at 10 minutes. When the service time is about to run out, the hotline staff will ask the callers to leave their contact telephone numbers for calling them back later if they still need other services. For cases referred to relevant agencies for handling, the agencies will upload the results to the system, which will notify the public by SMS or email. The public can also check case status online or by phone.

6.33 The Taipei City Government has promulgated an Implementation Plan to stipulate how government agencies can provide services speedily, accurately and effectively. The Implementation Plan specifies the time limit for agencies to update information with the 1999 Hotline, the follow-up items and schedule for handling cases assigned by the 1999 Hotline, and how to cooperate with the 1999 Hotline. For example, all agencies should designate officers to receive calls transferred by the 1999 Hotline, assist in updating information and carry out administrative liaison. If a case involves unclear delineation of responsibilities, RDEC will assign the case after deciding which agency should be responsible. If the assigned agency considers the case outside its purview, it should transfer it to the responsible agency in accordance with the provisions of the Key Points for Enhancing Horizontal Liaison and Handling Demarcation Disputes among Agencies under Taipei City Government. The Implementation Plan also stipulates that RDEC will regularly compile and submit reports on major inadequacies (including failure to update information on time, late processing of cases, shirking of duties and rejection of cases, etc.) and the handling situation of hotline service for review. Agencies will receive internal rewards for excellent handling of hotline service, and penalties for poor performance in accordance with the severity.

Singapore

6.34 The Singapore Government has developed the OneService mobile application¹⁰ for members of the public to register an account and then submit requests for municipal services. Requests will be sent to the responsible agency for further action. Members of the public will receive the follow-up results through the mobile application, which is managed by the Municipal Services Office (“MSO”) under the then Ministry of Communications and Information. MSO, set up for the purpose of improving and coordinating municipal issues across the Government, works with public agencies and town councils to improve municipal services, and continually reviews and refines work processes to manage and address public feedback on municipal issues more effectively and resolve problems quickly. It also takes the lead in coordinating public agencies and town councils to develop systemic solutions to address complex issues that cut across different public agencies and town councils.

South Korea

6.35 In South Korea, apart from the Government Integrated Call Centre (110), the Government has set up the e-People Platform¹¹ for the public to submit petitions, lodge complaints and make suggestions to the Government without having to know or figure out which department they should contact. More than 900 government organisations have participated in the Platform. Through the Platform, the public’s cases are forwarded to the appropriate departments for one-stop follow-up, and the public will be notified of the outcomes. Members of the public can also check the case progress on the Platform. Furthermore, the Platform’s system will monitor public views and identify frequent or fast-growing petitions, and then send such information to relevant organisations for complaint prevention work. The Platform will also analyse the petitions and release the data to the public. The public can search the statistics of cases by various criteria, such as district, location, responsible agency, time period, gender and age of the petitioner, etc.

New York City

6.36 The 311 Customer Service Centre¹² (“311 Centre”), established by the New York City Government, is a 24-hour public service platform comprising a

¹⁰ Details are available on the website of OneService App.

¹¹ Website: www.epeople.go.kr

¹² Website: <https://portal.311.nyc.gov>

telephone number, a website and a mobile application. The 311 Centre provides multilingual service to answer more than 2,000 types of public enquiries related to New York City services and programmes, and accepts requests for more than 500 types of City services. Members of the public who submit requests online to the 311 Centre will be provided with relevant information upfront, including the responsible department, processing procedures and time frames, as well as other available channels for assistance. Taking report of neighbourhood noise as an example, the webpage shows that the Police will respond within eight hours in general, and may take action if the noise is still present when they arrive. If repeated complaints are made within eight hours, the Police may only respond once. The public may also consider contacting the property owner or the tenant association. Requests from the public are sent to the responsible agencies/departments for action in real time, and a request number is given for online tracking of the progress.

6.37 Meanwhile, the 311 Centre's website publishes, with the personal data of the public concealed, real-time information on the requests received but still being processed (including the date and time of submission, request number, progress, type, details, location, date and time of latest update, and the number of days before the next update), as well as information on the requests that have been closed within the past five days. The public can filter and browse the information of these requests by location, date or type of request. The 311 Centre will also collate and analyse the relevant data, and publish monthly and yearly reports on enquiries and requests on the website, including analysis reports on the top ten types of enquiries and requests. The public can access relevant information on the 311 Centre's website in the following ways:

- filter by year and month for data of different types of enquiries;
- filter by year, month, responsible agency, type of request, location, etc. for data of service requests; and
- filter by year, month, responsible agency and type of request for data of service requests in different districts on a map, such as the data in different districts involving a responsible agency for a particular type of request.

COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

OVERALL COMMENTS

7.1 As more members of the public use its service, 1823 is indeed at the forefront of the Government and one of the Government's major platforms for contact with the public. Whether complaints and enquiries handled via 1823 are properly followed through has a direct impact on 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 effective operation of 1823 is conducive to good governance and enhancing the efficiency and quality of public administration.

7.2 At present, 1823 handles enquiries for 23 departments, encompassing the majority of government services closely related to people's livelihood. Given that it handled an average of about 1.95 million enquiries each year between 2018 and 2023, and achieved 99% enquiry resolution by first call in the case of telephone enquiries (see **paras. 2.9 and 3.4**), this Office considers 1823 efficient in handling public enquiries in line with its aim of providing one-stop enquiry service. 1823 has from time to time supported short-term hotlines set up for major government projects and initiatives; during the COVID-19 epidemic. 1823 also supported the Government's anti-epidemic measures by answering several COVID-related hotlines (see **paras. 4.12–4.16**). In addition, 1823 has taken the initiative to improve service (see **para. 2.25**) and advise departments on ways to handle enquiries more effectively (see **paras. 4.6–4.11**). Its proactive attitude is commendable.

7.3 Regarding complaint handling, this Office has to point out that the onus to actually handle the substance of complaints is on the departments concerned, including to give timely and proper replies. 1823's role is to refer complaints lodged by the public to relevant bureaux or departments, thereby saving the public from the hassle of clarifying their division of labour. 1823 would also monitor the progress of departments until substantive replies are issued to the public.

7.4 For cross-departmental complaints not taken up by any departments, 1823 would either re-assign the cases to another department as suggested/requested by the rejecting department, or identify the responsible department itself for re-assignment. This process is repeated until a department is willing to take ownership, or the problem is resolved by “one-off” operation after coordination with the departments concerned (see **para. 3.9**).

7.5 This Office conducted a direct investigation in 2008 to examine the daily operations of 1823. Our 2008 investigation noted that in respect of cross-departmental complaints, 1823, limited by its terms of reference, was from time to time unable to effectively establish the ownership and facilitate departments to resolve unclear delineation of responsibilities. Our direct investigation this time reveals that 1823 occasionally has difficulty handling cases involving multiple departments and unclear delineation of responsibilities, and there is room for improvement in handling of calls, cooperation arrangements with participating departments, daily operations and use of data. Consolidating our findings, this Office has the following observations and comments.

(I) UNABLE TO EFFECTIVELY HANDLE CROSS-DEPARTMENTAL COMPLAINTS AND COMPLAINTS WITH UNCLEAR DELINEATION OF RESPONSIBILITIES

7.6 Between 2018 and 2023, 1823 received an average of about 550,000 complaints each year (see **fig. 1** in **para. 3.4**), including about 7,400 or 1.4% of cases processed under the escalation mechanism due to rejection by departments (see **para. 3.10**). Although the proportion of escalation due to rejection was not high, these cases took up more resources of 1823 than other cases. If these cases are not handled properly, they might affect the public’s confidence in and impression of the Government. Besides, many cases involved social problems which were regarded as “long-standing, big and difficult”. As such, effective handling of cross-departmental complaints with unclear delineation of responsibilities would not only enhance 1823’s overall efficiency, but also facilitate the Government’s resolution of social problems. Our comments on the handling of cross-departmental complaints and cases with unclear delineation of responsibilities by 1823 are as follows.

(i) Unable to Compel Timely Follow-up Actions of Departments

7.7 Under the existing complaint handling mechanism of 1823, upon rejection of a case by two departments, 1823 would activate the three-level escalation mechanism to request the rejecting departments to review the case by officers at different ranks (see **para. 3.8**).

7.8 As shown in **Table 4** in **paragraph 3.10**, each year between 2018 and 2023, some 7,400 cases with unclear delineation of responsibilities were processed under the escalation mechanism. 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 (see **Table 5** in **para. 3.10**). Having examined the statistics of 1823, this Office notes that an average of 5,913 cases were taken up by departments after review by the Case Officers (i.e. Level 1) each year, of which 3,176 and 2,814 cases were completed within 30 days and in one to three months respectively. In other words, nearly 50% of the cases completed at Level 1 took longer than 30 days, which is far from satisfactory. Our case studies reveal that cases taking months to complete often involved the departments' delay in reply to 1823 and repeated disputes over division of labour or responsibilities.

7.9 In practice, after referral of cases, 1823 had to await the replies from departments before taking further action. This Office notes that 1823 would issue a reminder if replies from departments are overdue. However, as 1823 is not empowered to command departments to take any action or to reply within a specified time limit, it is inevitably in a passive position in monitoring the case progress.

7.10 Our case studies also reveal that some rejecting departments simply notified 1823 that the case fell outside their purview without explaining the reasons; some departments did not provide any justification for the re-assignment request. As such, 1823 needed time to review the information to identify the responsible party and re-assign the case, and the department requested to take over also needed time to examine the case. The overall progress of case handling was thus affected.

7.11 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. When departments fail to do so, 1823 should follow up on the departments. 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.

(ii) Escalation Mechanism Could Not Ensure Direct Communication and Collaboration among Departments

7.12 This Office considers that the most effective and speediest 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. In this regard, the Government issued the General Circular No. 24/2016 – Complaints Handling Mechanism to set out the principles and points to note in handling cross-departmental complaints, including:

- Bureaux/departments (“B/Ds”) should establish clear procedures to coordinate the investigation of complaints that cross internal or external boundaries.
- B/Ds involved should liaise among themselves to identify a lead party to coordinate the response.
- The guiding principle should be putting the public first. Demarcation disputes among B/Ds should come second.
- If it is impossible to agree on which B/D is to coordinate the response, staff members from the receiving party should escalate the complaint to senior management, such as the Complaints Liaison Officer.
- Where necessary, the relevant B/Ds should intervene quickly to resolve difficult cross-departmental cases.
- After action has been taken to resolve a complaint requiring cross-departmental coordination, B/Ds should review and agree on the demarcation of work in case there are grey areas.
- The onus is on the receiving party or the B/D responsible for coordinating the complaint (if it is not the one receiving the complaint in the first place) to ensure that the complaint is handled within the specified time limits. All contributing parties should provide input to the coordinating B/D within a reasonable time frame to enable the latter to reply to the complainant in a timely manner.

7.13 It can be seen that the Government itself advocates for B/Ds always putting the public first when dealing with cases involving disputes over purview and division of labour, with the overarching goal of resolving complaints expeditiously and properly; B/Ds should also review afterwards to avoid time-consuming disputes over purview or division of labour in future.

7.14 Nevertheless, this Office notes 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. Although 1823 would often remind departments to conduct site inspection jointly or to resolve the dispute by meeting, departments rarely, or never, took the initiative to communicate or liaise directly among themselves regarding the cases. **Case 2 in chapter 6** of this report is a case in point, in which a problem about depositing of construction materials was handled by LandsD, HyD and FEHD under the coordination of 1823, but responses among the departments were entirely relayed via 1823. In our view, if LandsD, HyD and other relevant departments had held a joint departmental meeting at an early stage to figure out a solution, the problem should have been resolved more swiftly.

7.15 A similar situation is revealed in **case 3 in chapter 6** of this report. This Office found that before the complainant lodged his complaint with 1823 in August 2021, the departments had held divergent views on the responsibility regarding the illegal parking of bicycles at the PTI as early as September 2020. However, the departments did not initiate any discussion to clarify their purview, nor did they attempt to reach a consensus on the division of labour. The issue of who should be responsible for removing the illegally parked bicycles at the PTI was not addressed (see **para. 6.17**). In the course of handling the complaint by 1823 under the escalation mechanism, LandsD and TD still reiterated their respective stance that the site in question was outside their purview instead of exploring feasible ways to fully settle the dispute. Even after 1823 proactively suggested that HAD coordinate a joint operation with departments to address the problem, the matter remained in stalemate. It was not until our intervention that LandsD conducted a "one-off" joint operation with relevant departments at the site in late January 2022 (see **para. 6.18**).

7.16 This Office considers that simply relying on 1823's coordination and liaison is not effective in promoting direct communication, clarifying differences and initiating collaboration among departments at an early stage to handle public complaints.

It goes against the Government's principle of handling cross-departmental complaints (see **para. 7.12**).

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

7.17 Under the existing mechanism, 1823 refers complaints to the responsible party mainly based on content of the Knowledge Base provided by participating departments, information available on departmental websites, understanding of the subject matter by 1823 staff and their experience in handling similar complaints. However, 1823 can hardly keep track of the specific duties and remits of all departments, nor is it empowered to command departments to accept or follow up on a 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; in the absence of instruction or suggestion from departments, 1823 has to do its own research. This repetitive process is not only time-consuming and impeding the efficiency of 1823, but also unsatisfactory as the public would be informed that their complaints are rejected by departments time and again. Adding to their dismay, the matter under complaint is not dealt with in the interim. **Cases 1 to 3 in chapter 6** of this report highlight this problem.

7.18 For cases involving multiple departments and unclear delineation of responsibilities, the role of 1823 is in fact not merely referring complaints and monitoring the progress of the departments' replies to the public. Instead, it plays the role of facilitator and coordinator, even to the extent of clarifying the departments' responsibilities and identifying the lead party in individual cases. This Office finds that in the process of coordination or clarification, 1823 is often stuck in a position of "having responsibility but not authority". Under the existing mechanism, cases are escalated to officers at different ranks of the departments for review. Where necessary, 1823 will attempt to coordinate the liaison among departments and suggest that departments resolve the problem by "one-off" follow-up (such as "one-off" repair works). Eventually, if departments still refuse to take up and handle the case, 1823 will coordinate a consolidated reply to the complainant (see **paras. 3.8 and 3.9**).

7.19 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, including street obstruction, tree management, drainage management, road repairs, and rubbish and clean-up (see **Table 6 in para. 3.11**).

Regrettably, these livelihood issues which need to be addressed urgently were often dragged on due to unclear delineation of responsibilities (see **para. 3.10**). This would also give rise to a perception that government departments are passing the buck.

7.20 District problems are regarded as “long-standing, big and difficult” because they occur frequently in various districts, and unclear delineation are often caused by the fact that the responsibilities for dealing with them cut across multiple departments. Our past investigations into cases about this type of problems (such as street obstruction) revealed that each department might consider the problem to be the collective responsibility of multiple departments. As it turned out, none of them were willing to take ownership and seriously explore a thorough solution. Worse still, departments might tend to procrastinate and await 1823’s coordination for taking “one-off” joint operation. This Office reckons that for individual cases, such 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.

7.21 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.

7.22 In this regard, our direct investigation titled “Government’s Regulation of Illegal Occupation or Obstruction of Streets by Goods and Miscellaneous Articles” pointed out that in case of dispute over responsibilities, 1823, despite its effort to liaise, could hardly be more familiar with the work of the departments than the departments themselves. Nor does it have any power to instruct any departments to take up cases. Hence, 1823 could only collate explanations from the departments and request their officers at different ranks to review the cases. This was inevitably inefficient and cumbersome. Simply relying on the existing practice of escalating cases with unclear delineation of responsibilities for review by officers at different ranks of departments might not be sufficient to resolve disputes among departments in a timely manner and facilitate inter-departmental collaboration. In the direct investigation aforesaid, our recommendations to HAD for combating street obstruction included to supervise District Offices’ more active performance of their role in coordinating district affairs and

problem-solving among departments, and encourage other departments to make good use of their coordinating role¹³. HAD should decisively escalate irregularities or disputes over responsibilities that could not be resolved at the district level to the then Steering Committee on District Administration (see **note 7 in para. 6.18**) for early consensus building through high-level negotiation. We also recommended that the Steering Committee on District Administration favourably consider establishing a standing mechanism at the central level to regularly review completed cases requiring a longer processing time in various districts, with a view to ascertaining whether systemic issues are involved and making improvement where necessary.

7.23 Separately, our direct investigation titled “Handling of Complaints Involving Trees on Government Land” made similar points. We urged TMO¹⁴ to step in more proactively in complaint cases involving disputes over responsibilities, instead of awaiting 1823’s escalation of cases to a certain level before intervening, lest a problematic tree become an environmental nuisance or even a safety hazard due to delayed handling. In this connection, our specific recommendations to TMO under DEVB were as follows:

- for tree complaint cases involving disputes over responsibilities among departments, consider using the overall handling time of the case as a criterion for intervention, so as to reduce the risk of a problematic tree becoming an environmental nuisance or even a safety hazard due to delayed handling;
- conduct systemic analysis on completed complaint cases involving disputes over responsibilities, collate information about departments’ common differences in opinions and misunderstanding and conduct exchanges and sharing with the departments regularly; review and update the content of the Technical Circular as appropriate in a timely manner by including the guiding principles from its decisions in previous cases for the departments to follow;

¹³ Each District Office is headed by a District Officer, who represents the Government at the district level and chairs the District Management Committee comprising representatives of major departments in the district. The District Management Committee serves as a forum for inter-departmental discussion to examine and address district problems. Over the past, District Officers have all along played the role of supervising public services in the districts and coordinating the departments to resolve district problems.

¹⁴ TMO formulates comprehensive tree management strategies and measures for Hong Kong, and coordinates and supervises the handling of tree complaints by departments at the central level.

- supervise departments' strict compliance with the requirements of the inter-departmental mechanism in handling complaint referrals, i.e. they should raise a request to 1823 for further referral within the specified time frame and provide sufficient information if they disagree to take up a case. TMO should also monitor the departments' compliance to ensure timely referral of complaint cases;
- instruct departments to conduct joint inspections promptly in case of disputes over tree maintenance responsibilities, such that responsibilities can be clarified as soon as possible; and
- review and enhance the categories of data included in 1823's monthly reports for more rigorous monitoring of departments' performance in handling tree complaints and the operation of the inter-departmental mechanism.

7.24 EO's data show that street obstruction and tree management were the two categories with the most complaints handled under the escalation mechanism in 2022, both exceeding 1,000 cases (see **Table 6** in **para. 3.11**). Based on our recommendations in the two direct investigations cited above, this Office considers that EO should proactively escalate cross-departmental complaints about street obstruction to HAD/the local District Officers, as well as collate the details and data of these cases for submission to TFDG (see **note 7** in **para. 6.18**), thereby assisting HAD and TFDG with implementing the recommendations in **paragraph 7.22** to expedite the handling of street obstruction cases. This Office notes that 1823 has proactively escalated cross-departmental complaints involving trees on Government land to DEVB at its request for TMO to perform duties more effectively.

7.25 This Office notes that under the proposals to improve governance at the district level, TFDG is 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 B/Ds, and supervise them to formulate improvement measures. TFDG replaces the former Steering Committee on District Administration and District Matters Co-ordination Task Force to better coordinate and complement the district work among departments. TFDG will consider various district problems from a more holistic and macro

perspective, so as to devise appropriate corresponding measures expeditiously. Under the proposals to improve district governance, the Home and Youth Affairs Bureau and HAD support the work of the Steering Committee on District Governance (“SCDG”) and TFDG. In our view, 1823 should seize this opportunity to support and facilitate the Government’s proposals to improve district governance. Regarding the other three of the five subjects listed in **paragraph 3.12** and recurring district problems with unclear delineation of responsibilities, it should proactively escalate such cases to the local District Officers or TFDG, with a view to resolving cross-departmental cases and district problems with unclear delineation of responsibilities more effectively through the high-level structure of the Government. It will also assist HAD in supporting the work of SCDG and TFDG more effectively, and enable TFDG to come to grips with cross-departmental and/or cross-district issues for speedy formulation of proper corresponding measures. Noting that the first meeting of TFDG was convened in July 2023, i.e. it has only been in operation for half a year so far, this Office considers that 1823 should establish a mechanism and draw up guidelines to standardise and regularise the procedures for escalating cases to the local District Officers or TFDG in a systematic and timely manner.

7.26 **Chapter 6** of this report gives examples of call centres similar to 1823 set up by the Governments in other regions to handle public enquiries and complaints about government services. Some of the call centres are vested with certain powers for effective handling of cases with unclear delineation of responsibilities. For example, the 12345 Hotline of Guangzhou Municipality has a system imposing accountability on the first agency being assigned a case by the Hotline, requiring it to take the lead in coordinating the work of relevant agencies. If considering the case outside its scope of duties, the agency can return the case with reasons and justification; the 12345 Hotline has the power to review the return of case and instruct the agency to continue handling it (see **para. 6.30**). As another example, the Taipei City Government has promulgated an Implementation Plan that stipulates all agencies are required to cooperate with the work of the 1999 Hotline (see **para. 6.33**).

7.27 This Office considers that identifying the responsible party or coordinating the work of departments in cross-departmental complaints with unclear delineation of responsibilities forms an integral part of the one-stop service provided by 1823 for the public. In the long run, the Government should draw on the practices in other regions and explore whether it need to devise a mechanism to resolve disputes over unclear delineation of responsibilities, thereby enabling 1823 to perform duties more effectively and comprehensively.

(II) INSUFFICIENT CALL HANDLING CAPACITY TO COPE WITH SERVICE DEMAND

7.28 The usage of 1823 service was on the rise between 2018 and 2022, but it dropped by 30% in 2023. Telephone contacts accounted for around 40% of the usage of 1823 service (see **Table 2** in **para. 2.6**). As such, 1823's call handling capacity is closely related to the level of service it is able to provide to the public.

7.29 The data of 1823 show that between 2018 and 2022, it only managed to answer between 61% and 71% of calls within 12 seconds, falling short of its performance pledge to "answer at least 80% of calls within 12 seconds" (see **Table 3** in **para. 2.9**). Apparently, 1823's call handling capacity was below the performance pledge over the years. In 2023, 1823 improved the rate of answering calls within 12 seconds to 74%.

7.30 Regarding 1823's call handling capacity, apart from not meeting the pledge in respect of the answering time over the years, another point of concern is the actual volume of calls answered by 1823. As mentioned in **paragraph 4.2**, 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.

7.31 EO indicated that as permitted by the volume of calls received, 1823 staff will call back those who have left their contact details in the same order as their voice messages (see **para. 2.17**). EO has explained to us why it calculated the volume of calls handled by this method (see **para. 4.2**). Nevertheless, given 1823's role of providing one-stop service round the clock, this Office believes that callers usually expect to talk with a staff member every time to make enquiries or complaints immediately. Moreover, they might call 1823 again if there is a delay in reply after leaving a message, thus further increasing the load on its telephone system.

7.32 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. We note that

1823 has improved the performance in call handling in 2023, and completed the upgrade of telephone system in late December 2023. We expect that improvement to the other areas of daily operations as mentioned in **paragraphs 7.33 to 7.38** will reduce the need for the public to make telephone enquiries and enhance the efficiency of 1823, thus further improving its call answering rate.

(III) ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT IN CRISIS RESPONSE CAPACITY

7.33 In 2022, Hong Kong was hard hit by the sudden and extremely severe fifth wave of the epidemic. In January 2020, 1823 started to support DH's COVID-19 hotline to answer calls that were not answered by DH staff and redirected to 1823; from February 2021 onwards, all calls to the COVID-19 hotline were answered by 1823 on behalf of DH (see **para. 4.17**). In the interim, the volume of calls from the public soared, and the operations of 1823 were seriously disrupted because many 1823 staff could not report for duty due to infection, isolation or quarantine. At that time, 1823 suspended the handling of all written contacts to focus on answering COVID-related calls (see **paras. 4.17–4.19**), but it still could not improve the situation that a large volume of calls were busied out by the system. As shown in **paragraph 4.2** and **figure 2**, 1823 received in 2022 a total of 6,472,000 calls, of which more than 50% or 3,341,000 calls were busied out by the system and not handled.

7.34 This Office notes that some of the contingency measures of 1823 required the cooperation or coordination of participating departments, which might not be forthcoming. **Case 6 in chapter 6** of this report is a case in point. Upon onset of the fifth wave of epidemic, 1823 requested TD to handle itself public emails addressed to TD. However, TD indicated that it was unable to do so and its system continued to forward emails to 1823. The auto-reply sent by 1823 upon receipt of public email was not revised accordingly to inform the public of alternative channels for making enquiries. We note that 1823 has subsequently made arrangements with TD to handle similar situations in future to avoid recurrence (see **para. 6.27**).

7.35 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, the Government should learn from the COVID experience and draw up crisis response plans well in advance to maximise the ability to cope with extreme situations. Regarding 1823 service, EO undertook to discuss backup plans with all participating departments (see **para. 4.22**). In our view, EO should discuss

with all participating departments on backup plans and contingency measures as soon as possible, and standardise and regularise such plans by incorporating into the cooperation agreements. In the event that 1823 service is seriously disrupted by unexpected and urgent situations in future, both parties can take contingency measures promptly based on the agreement. The public should be provided with clear information and reasonable channels to make enquiries and complaints with government departments, such that they are not left without recourse.

(IV) ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT IN OTHER AREAS OF DAILY OPERATIONS

(i) Further Application of AI on Handling Enquiries

7.36 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 (see **paras. 2.22 and 2.23**). The AI technologies powering chatbots have matured after years of development, and public acceptance of chatbots has increased. 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.

(ii) Facilitating the Public to Check Case Progress

7.37 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 (see **para. 2.25**), while others have to call or write to 1823 for case progress. This Office considers that EO should draw on the practices of government hotlines in other regions (e.g. Guangzhou Municipality's 12345 Hotline and New York City's 311 Centre) (see **paras. 6.29 and 6.36**) and facilitate the public 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.

(iii) Encouraging Departments to Reply to the Public via Case Response Platform

7.38 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, instead of issuing the replies to 1823 staff for forwarding (see **para. 2.14**). 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

7.39 1823 was set up to provide a single point of contact for the public to make complaints or enquiries without having to clarify the structure and division of labour within the Government. The one-stop service 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.

7.40 In **case 4 in chapter 6** of this report, when FEHD received a complainant's report not through 1823 and 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 by FEHD. This Office considers that EO needs to explain 1823's duties and scope of service to B/Ds. Moreover, if it is found that it is common for departments to request 1823 to act on their behalf in referring enquiries or complaints they received to relevant departments, and the efficiency of 1823 in handling other enquiries or complaints is affected, EO should 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.

7.41 Separately, 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 (see **paras. 4.6–4.11**). 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

7.42 This Office notes that the government call centres in various regions would optimise the use of data collected from daily operations to facilitate the improvement of governance and evaluate departments' performance in handling public requests. These centres also publish analytical data and reports on public requests to enhance the transparency of government services (see **paras. 6.35 and 6.37**).

7.43 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 believes that the data collected from 1823's enquiry and complaint handling are useful for EO's more effective delivery of consultation service. Currently, big data technologies are well developed and widely used for data analysis. 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. This Office notes the Chief Executive's announcement in the 2023 Policy Address that the Government will set up the Digital Policy Office by merging the existing OGCIO and EO. In the Policy Statement on Facilitating Data Flow and Safeguarding Data Security in Hong Kong published in December 2023, it was mentioned that the Digital Policy Office, led by the Commissioner for Digital Policy, will advocate, coordinate and promote data-driven innovation of public services and develop more digital government initiatives that bring convenience to the public, facilitate conduct of businesses and enhance city management. This is in line with our view above.

7.44 Between 2018 and 2023, 1823 handled an average of about 550,000 complaints (including requests for government services) each year, of which about 7,400 cases were processed under the escalation mechanism due to rejection by departments (see **para. 3.10**). The number is not small. While each case might relate to different departments, problems and districts, it cannot be ruled out that systemic issues are

involved in the disputes over responsibilities and division of labour. This Office considers that 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.

7.45 As mentioned in **paragraphs 6.18 and 7.25**, under the proposals to improve governance at the district level, the Government has set up TFDG led by the Deputy Chief Secretary for Administration to direct and coordinate the work of B/Ds at the district level and to implement relevant policy measures, as well as to coordinate and resolve cross-departmental and/or cross-district issues. This Office considers that TFDG is a proper platform for EO to submit relevant analytical reports.

7.46 Moreover, this Office notes EO's remarks that when handling COVID-related hotlines, 1823 analysed calls received from the public and proactively liaised with DH to ensure that anti-epidemic information was clear and comprehensible, thereby reducing unnecessary complaints and enquiries (see **para. 4.19**). Its efforts are commendable. Given that 1823 handles a vast volume of public enquiries and complaints, it is definitely an effective channel to find out whether government information is understood by the public accurately. This Office urges EO to 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

7.47 Overall, this Office recommends that 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 by 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 (see **para. 7.11**);

- (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 (see **para. 7.25**);

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 (see **para. 7.35**);
- (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 (see **para. 7.40**);
- (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 (see **para. 7.41**);

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 (see **para. 7.32**);

- (7) expand the application of artificial intelligence on enquiry handling by 1823, and gradually provide more information by the Chatbot (see **para. 7.36**);
- (8) study the launch of an e-platform for the public to check progress of cases lodged with 1823 (see **para. 7.37**);
- (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 (see **para. 7.38**);
- (10) consider opening up the Case Response Platform to all departments (see **para. 7.38**);

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 (see **para. 7.43**);
- (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 (see **paras. 7.44 and 7.45**); 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 (see **para. 7.46**).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

7.48 The Ombudsman thanks EO for its cooperation in the course of this investigation, and members of the public who submitted their opinions on this topic.

Office of The Ombudsman

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