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Housing Department
Hong Kong

26 June 2015

**Departmental General Circular No. 5/2015
Procedures in Handling Public Complaints**

(This circular should be re-circulated half yearly)

Introduction

This circular sets out the procedures and guidelines for handling complaints from members of the public direct or through other bureaux/departments or agencies. It supersedes Departmental General Circular No.1/2012, which is hereby cancelled. Reference should also be made to "***A Guide to Complaints Handling and Public Enquiries***" published by the Efficiency Unit in August 2009 that provides operational guidelines and good practices for handling complaints.

Definition of Complaints

2. A **complaint** is defined as an expression of dissatisfaction by the public with departmental policy or services, the way in which a policy is implemented or service is delivered, including staff attitude, irrespective of the complaint channel used. It excludes statutory appeals, objections or petitions to the Chief Executive, staff complaints, complaints about crime and corruption and complaints subject to statutory procedures.

3. Complaints should be distinguished from requests for assistance, services, improvement, information and explanation of the policies and practices of the Department. The following should **not** be classified as complaints—

- (a) a request for services;
(e.g. of changing the refuse collection time, repairing a sudden failure of lift services or fixing a burst pipe)

- (b) a request for information;
(e.g. on criteria for Public Rental Housing (PRH) applications, Home Ownership Scheme flats sale condition)
- (c) a request for improvement;
(e.g. for better natural ventilation in the lift lobbies/common areas or replacing existing fittings/provisions, etc)
- (d) a request for clarification or explanation of policies, procedures or compliance with statutory requirements;
(e.g. on asset test for PRH or safeguarding rational allocation of resources, etc)
- (e) a request for action; and
(e.g. on flat abuse of PRH or reinstating PRH application, etc)
- (f) a request for consideration.
(e.g. on the opinion expressed, etc)

4. However, as delay or failure to respond to a request under the policies and procedures can be a cause for complaint, subject officers should deal with requests expeditiously and helpfully with equal importance as complaints, and should follow the laid down procedures and guidelines in **Annex I**. (Please also refer to para.5 below.)

Avoiding "Unnecessary" Complaints

5. Enhancing the public's understanding of the Department's policies and services is often an effective pre-emptive measure to avoid "unnecessary" complaints from the public in the first place. Division/Section heads should as far as possible ensure that—

- (a) policies, procedures, eligibility criteria and changes to them which affect the public are widely publicised;
- (b) policies and decisions which are likely to give rise to queries and complaints are fully explained;
- (c) approved policies and revised procedures are implemented promptly and in a coordinated manner;

- (d) an updated repository of information/ answers is in place to facilitate staff to respond to commonly asked questions; and
- (e) performance pledges which cannot be met temporarily are duly explained.

Complaint Officers

6. Complaint Officers in Estate Management Division are—

- (a) the Deputy Director and Assistant Directors at Headquarters;
- (b) the Chief Housing Managers/ Chief Managers/ Management at Regional Headquarters;
- (c) the Senior Housing Managers/ Senior Property Services Managers in the districts, and
- (d) Housing Managers/Property Service Managers in charge of the office of estate / shopping centre/ factory/ Customer Service Centre, etc.

7. Complaint Officers in Development and Construction Division, Strategy Division, Corporate Services Division, Director's Office, Housing Authority Headquarters (HAHQs) are the unit/section/sub-division/division heads at professional rank or above of respective offices.

8. All Complaint Officers should supervise the operation of the complaint handling system of their respective office to—

- (a) commit to provide quality service to the community and be open, fair and responsive to public comment;
- (b) ensure that all complaint cases are dealt with promptly in accordance with the laid down procedures and guidelines and within the performance pledge timeframe set out in **Annex I**;
- (c) ensure that appropriate directions are given and priorities properly accorded to commensurate with the nature, urgency and possible impact of the case;
- (d) carry out regular reviews of progress on outstanding complaints;

- (e) approve or seek endorsement of the line-to-take in replying to a complainant, including termination of action on a complaint; and
- (f) prepare and seek endorsement of the departmental line-to-take if the complaint relates to widespread implications on housing policy.

Handling of Public Complaints

9. Complaint cases are generally addressed to Secretary for Transport and Housing (**STH**)/ Chairman of Housing Authority (**CHA**), Permanent Secretary for Transport and Housing (Housing) (**PS(H)**)/ Director of Housing (**D of H**), Housing Authority (**HA**), Housing Department (**HD**), or respective Complaint Officers.

10. A complaint may be lodged by a member of the public direct or through other government bureaux and departments or agencies, including the offices of the Chief Executive, Chief Secretary of Administration, Financial Secretary, Legislative Council, District Council, The Ombudsman, 1823 Call Centre, statutory bodies (such as the Equal Opportunities Commission, the Office of the Privacy Commissioner for Personal Data and the Consumer Council, etc) and the media, etc.

11. A complaint can be made in various forms and channels, such as writing of postal letter, Complaint Form, facsimile, Internet electronic mail, short message service; or telephone calls to Housing Authority Hotlines, direct telephone calls or face-to-face communication with front-line staff; or more than one ways of the above.

Receipt and Dispatch

12. Complaints received by the offices at STH's Office, HAHQs, and outstations (including estates, shopping centres, factories, Lok Fu Customer Service Centre, Lung Cheung Office Block, Housing Information Centre and HA Hotlines etc) will be dispatched in the following manner:

STH's Office

- (a) cases addressed to **STH/CHA** will be handled by STH's office; or referred to responsible Complaint Officers for direct follow-up action after screening by STH's office;

HAHQs

- (b) cases addressed to **STH/CHA** should be returned to STH's Office as soon as possible;
- (c) cases addressed to **PS(H)/D of H personally** and/or from Members of Legislative/ District Council, other government bureaux/departments or public bodies will be screened by Central Support Unit (CSU) and on the basis of the level of sensitivity and urgency of the matter arising, be referred to responsible Complaint Officers direct;
- (d) cases that are addressed to **PS(H)/D of H, HA, HD or Complaint Officer** from the general public will generally be dispatched to responsible Complaint Officers direct;
- (e) in case of doubt in identifying the Complaint Officer, such as insufficient complaint data or multi-disciplinary complaints, these cases will be screened by Complaints and Enquiries Sub-section (C&ES) before they are referred to the appropriate Complaint Officers. The Complaint Officer will be responsible for handling the complaint, including preparing a co-ordinated draft reply or signing the interim and final replies, as the case may be;

Outstation Offices

- (f) cases addressed to **STH/CHA or PS(H)/D of H personally** and/or from Members of Legislative/District Council, other government bureaux/departments or public bodies should be returned to STH's or PS(H)/D of H's Office respectively as soon as possible; and
- (g) cases addressed to PS(H), D of H, HA, HD or Complaint Officers from the general public should be handled by the respective Complaint Officer thoroughly and independently according to the laid down procedures and guidelines.

13. All complaints received should be registered in the Complaints and Requests Management System (CRMS) and referrals should be made immediately to the Complaint Officers for direct handling. The purpose of CRMS is to record and monitor the progress of every complaint case, generating management information on our complaint handling situation. Complaint Officers should therefore ensure that all complaint cases, including verbal and anonymous cases, are properly entered and updated in the system.

Preparing Draft Replies for STH/CHA or PS(H)/D of H

14. For handling general cases, Complaint Officer should issue replies direct to complainants according to the set timeframe. However, depending on individual circumstances and merits of some cases, the Complaint Officers may be invited to provide draft reply to the offices of **STH/CHA or PS(H)/D of H** for consideration. All replies should be uploaded by the Complaint Officers to the CRMS for record.

Vetting and Signature of Replies

15. In most cases, Complaint Officers will be authorized to provide direct interim and substantive replies to complainants. Procedures of receiving, dispatching, vetting, signing and handling of public complaints according to the addressee of the complaint are summarized in **Annex II**.

16. For complaints against individual staff, the officer signing the reply should be at least one rank above the officer under complaint. For complaints against directorate staff, a more senior directorate staff should be consulted to identify an appropriate officer to issue the reply. In general, the Deputy Director (unless he/she is the subject of complaint) can make a final decision on the matter, but he/she may consult D of H if necessary.

17. The step-by-step procedures and guidelines for handling complaints addressed to various offices are set out in the following annexes—

- Annex I** - Complaints from the public direct or through other bureaux and departments or agencies *# (Note)*;
- Annex II** - Procedures of receiving, dispatching, vetting, signing and handling of public complaints; and
- Annex III** - Complaints referred by the media.

(Note) : Complaints referred by Office of The Ombudsman should be dealt with in accordance with the Departmental General Circular No. 2/20173/2008 on "Procedures for Handling Ombudsman Cases".

Coordination and Monitoring

18. In the process of handling public complaints, C&ES assumes the roles of—

- (a) coordinating the receipt and dispatch of complaints to responsible Complaint Officers efficiently and properly;
- (b) monitoring the handling process to ensure that prompt and necessary actions are taken in compliance with the laid down procedures; and
- (c) collecting and analysing public complaints information regularly from all estates/offices to present the results to the senior directorate officers of the Department with a view to facilitating the management in the identification of possible problem areas and gaps in the delivery of quality services to our customers.

19. In case of multi-disciplinary complaint that requires inputs from more than one unit/section/sub-division/division, AD/Adm as the departmental Complaint Liaison Officer, may assign one of the Complaint Officers of appropriate ranking to be the co-ordinating Complaint Officer. This co-ordinating Complaint Officer will be responsible for handling the complaint, including preparing a co-ordinated draft reply or signing the interim and final replies, as the case may be.

20. If on receipt of a complaint case, the Complaint Officer considers that he should not be the responsible officer, he should inform C&ES immediately within two working days for the case to be reassigned. If C&ES has difficulty in identifying a Complaint Officer to take up a certain case, C&ES will immediately escalate the complaint to the AD concerned and the AD should sort out the ownership, consulting DDs if necessary, within five working days from date of receipt by HD. C&ES will draw the case to the attention of AD/Adm, the departmental Complaint Liaison Officer, if ownership cannot be sorted out within five working days.

Overdue Cases

21. If a substantive reply cannot be ready by the due date according to the set timeframe, the Complaint Officer is responsible for issuing interim reply or replies to update the complainant the action being taken and the progress of the case. All replies should be uploaded to CRMS by the Complaint Officer for progress monitoring purpose.

22. All overdue cases or cases that cannot be substantively replied for more than two months will be escalated to the concerned ADs by C&ES for their attention and review.

Management Information

23. Public complaints provide feedback on the customers' expectation of the delivery of services by the Department, and will facilitate the identification of possible systemic weaknesses and areas for improvement in our strive for customer satisfaction. All staff should bring to the early attention of the senior management any public complaint that may have implications for their office, reflect possible inconsistencies or gaps in policies and/or have far-reaching implications on the image of the Department, with a view to tackling the problems at source. In case of doubt, the staff should approach the supervising officer of his office for assistance and advice.

24. Once a complaint has been investigated by the Complaint Officer, the case should be reviewed to identify the need for any changes, e.g. in departmental policy or procedures, with a view to preventing the occurrence of similar complaints in the future. The Complaint Officers should analyze the causes of the complaints received by their offices and introduce changes in collaboration with the relevant policy holding unit(s)/section(s) to improve the quality of services to meet the needs of the customers within the available resources.

25. Complaint Officer should also record the investigation result of the complaint as "Substantiated", "Partially Substantiated" or "Unsubstantiated" in CRMS. A monthly report on complaint statistics with the investigation results will be compiled for the final review and endorsement of the senior management.

- (i) "Substantiated" - the investigation reveals that there is evidence to support all the allegations of the complainant;
- (ii) "Partially Substantiated"- the investigation reveals that evidence can be found in only one or some of the aspects of the allegations of the complainant;
- (iii) "Unsubstantiated" – The investigation reveals that no evidence can be found and the allegations of the complainant are proved to be groundless.

Enquiries

26. Any enquiry related to this circular should be addressed to CEO/Adm at 2761 6168, or SPM/C&E at 2761 7188.

(Ivan KB LEE)
for Permanent Secretary
for Transport and Housing (Housing)

**Procedures in Handling Complaints
from Members of the Public Direct
or through other Government Bureaux and Departments or Agencies**

Performance Pledges

The quicker a complaint is handled the better. Wherever possible, frontline staff should try to resolve a complaint on the spot. On receipt of the complaints from members of the public direct or through other Government bureaux and departments or agencies, including but not limited to, the Chief Executive, Chief Secretary of Administration, Financial Secretary, Legislative Council, District Councils, 1823 Call Centre, statutory bodies (such as the Equal Opportunities Commission, Office of the Privacy Commissioner for Personal Data, and the Consumer Council, etc), the Complaint Officer should reply to complainants according to the procedures and timeframes below—

- (a) send an interim reply or acknowledge receipt of the complaint **within 10 days** of receipt for all complaints (by the first contact point of Housing Department);
- (b) collect information and conduct investigation into the complaint;
- (c) send a substantive reply **within 21 days** of receipt of the complaint;
- (d) if a substantive reply cannot be issued within the above timeframe, inform the complainant on or before the substantive reply due date in writing and then provide the complainant an update **on a monthly basis**—
 - (i) of the progress being made; and
 - (ii) the reasons why a longer time is needed to provide a substantive reply and, if possible, the estimated time frame;
- (e) for issues with far-reaching implications that may require a review of policies, procedures, designs and standards, etc, if a substantive reply cannot be provided immediately or even in the foreseeable future, explain in the reply the difficulties encountered and suggest

a feasible date to bring up or review the issue or, at the Complaint Officer's discretion, round up the correspondence by assuring the complainant that appropriate follow-up action will be proceeded as far as practicable. Cases that are unable to be substantively replied to the complainants for more than two months should be brought to the attention of the concerned AD by C&ES.

2. Subject to its operational requirements and the nature of cases, individual division may adjust the pledge to a shorter timeframe within the departmental guidelines if considered appropriate. The above procedures will also apply to the handling of request cases.

3. Complaint and request cases received through different channels such as letters, emails, fax and hotlines, should be recorded in the CRMS in detail. Complaint Officers should follow up the cases and reply to complainants according to the above procedures and timeframes. For detailed guidelines on CRMS operation, Complaint Officers should refer to the User Manual for CRMS uploaded to the CRMS portal.

Cases Related to HA/HD Received by 1823 Call Centre (1823)

4. HA has engaged the 1823 Call Centre of the Efficiency Office Unit as the agent for delivering the hotline services with effect from 1 July 2014. Currently, it operates three departmental hotlines, namely, the HA Hotline (2712 2712), the HA Sales & WSM Hotline (2712 8000) and the Complaint Hotline for Cleansing and Security Workers (2712 0813) and processes cases received from the complaint fax line (2624 5685), internet e-mail (hkha@housingauthority.gov.hk), SMS (Short Message Service) (6163 1823), mobile application (Tell me@1823) and web contact in HA's Homepage. It provides 24-hour personal call answering service and runs an interactive voice response system to give out pre-recorded housing information to callers. Under current practice, 1823 will assign cases related to HA/HD through the CRMS for Complaint Officers' necessary action. Complaint Officers should accept or reject the complaint case within one working day of receipt. In rejecting a case, Complaint Officers should provide justifications to 1823 to facilitate escalation to appropriate offices. Upon acceptance of the case, Complaint Officers should follow the above procedures and the timeframes in handling the cases.

Misdirected Complaints

5. Public complaints referred from Government bureaux and departments falling outside the purview of the Department should be referred to the appropriate Government departments or agencies for action within five working days from the date of receipt by HD. Upon receipt of this kind of misdirected complaints, Complaint Officers should inform the complainant and obtain the consent, as far as practicable, before making referral to other agencies, such as the Link Asset Management Limited, the Incorporated Owners of a Tenants Purchase Scheme estate or a Home Ownership Scheme court. The complainant should also be informed after the misdirected complaint has been referred to the appropriate department/organisation.

Cross-departmental Complaints

6 Complaint Officers should act expeditiously in handling cross-departmental complaints and resolving difficult cross-departmental cases. The guiding principle should be putting the public first and trying to provide assistance as far as possible. AD of the subject should be consulted as soon as possible in order to determine the ownership of the cases within five working days from date of receipt by HD. The Complaint Officer should also coordinate with the Government departments concerned to consider whether a consolidated reply or a reply by the coordinating department should be issued. The complainants should be notified of the arrangements as soon as possible.

7. Besides handling enquiries and complaints on behalf of HA/HD, 1823 also has a role to play in dealing with cross departmental cases/ cases with unknown jurisdiction. 1823 will assign such cases through email to C&ES. Upon receiving such cases, C&ES shall assign the cases to relevant Complaint Officers. Complaint Officers should accept or reject the complaint cases within two working days of receipt. Having accepted the case, Complaint Officers should send an interim reply and substantive reply to the complainant within 10 days and 21 days of receipt respectively, and inform C&ES and 1823 accordingly. If Complaint Officers reject the case, reasons should be provided and supporting information such as assessment of the case, the probable responsible departments or site maps, should also be forwarded to 1823 and C&ES as far as possible as supporting reference that the location/matter concerned is out of HA/HD's purview. 1823 will then re-assign the case to other departments.

Written Complaints

Issuing of Interim Replies

8. The first interim reply, which serves as an acknowledgement of receipt, is usually issued by the Complaint Officer **within 10 days** of receipt by the first contact point of the Department. However, for the avoidance of lapse of time in the dispatching process, co-ordinating parties such as C&ES of HAHQs may issue the first interim reply when considered necessary. Upon receiving a complaint, the Complaint Officer should make sure an interim reply has been served.

9. If a substantive reply cannot be ready according to the set timeframe listed in paragraph 1 (a) and (c), the Complaint Officer is responsible for taking follow up action in paragraph 1 (d) until a substantive reply is offered or in paragraph 1 (e) as appropriate. Interim and substantive replies to cases should be uploaded to CRMS for progress monitoring and analysis.

Replies to Complainants

10. In their response to public complaints, Complaint Officers should adopt a customer-oriented approach with a view to solving the problems. They should be polite and composed in dealing with members of the public. Replies to the complainants should be in the same language which the complainants use. As a matter of good customer practice, replies should be conveyed in simple and easily understood terms, technical and professional jargons which are not commonly used by the general public should be avoided as far as possible.

11. Depending on individual circumstances and merits of a complaint, replies to the complainants should include the following content when appropriate—

- (a) circumstances giving rise to the complaint;
- (b) the investigation of complaint and the outcome as measured against established policies, operational guidelines, and approved procedures;
- (c) reasons for the decision;
- (d) action taken or to be taken;
- (e) improvement measures planned with timeframe for implementation;

- (f) suggestions proposed for consideration;
- (g) apologies in deserving cases; and
- (h) name and telephone number of contact officer if further clarification is necessary.

Verbal Complaints

12. Verbal complaints should be accorded equal weight as written complaints. Officers handling verbal complaints should follow the same procedures and performance pledges as required for written complaints. Verbal complaints should be recorded in the CRMS.

13. Direct dialogues between the Complaint Officers or their staff and the complainants are conducive to removing misunderstanding and resolving conflicts that are often the cause of complaints.

14. In handling verbal complaints, Complaint Officers and their staff must apply their own discretion sensibly and reasonably in a courteous and helpful attitude. Some practical guidelines are provided below for reference. For instance, they should—

- (a) reject a request for information that is (i) unrelated to the complaint; (ii) classified or premature to be released for general public consumption; and (iii) not in compliance with Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance and the Code on Access to Information;
- (b) refuse to provide any personal secretarial service (e.g take dictation over the telephone, etc). The complainant may be required to send in the request in writing or to call the HA Hotline (2712 2712) direct for assistance if the case details are too complicated to be summarized by the Complaint Officers and their staff;
- (c) not incur any public resources in terms of photocopying/distributing complainant's personal correspondence. All complainants should be responsible for the expense in making their complaints;
- (d) be under no obligation to continue any tele-conversation with a complainant if he continues to use foul, abusive or harassing language, after proper advance warning, and

- (e) remain composed, not to lose temper or enter into argument with the complainant.

Anonymous Complaints

15. Depending on the gravity of the allegations made, anonymous complaints should be treated the same way as signed complaints. They should also be treated as a feedback for review and as appropriate, properly investigated and considered. Since a direct reply to the complainant may not be possible, if an issue of public concern is involved in the anonymous complaint, the Complaint Officer should report to a higher level for appropriate action. The Complaint Officer should also consider the need to publicize the progress of investigation and the outcome of the complaint case through appropriate communication channels. Anonymous complaints should be recorded in CRMS.

“One-person one-letter” Complaints

16. In handling submissions from members of the public, irrespective of the number of letters received, direct and individual replies should be given as far as possible. If a representative(s) of the “one-person one-letter” exercise can be identified, a direct reply to the representative(s) should be sufficient.

17. In cases where issues of common interest are concerned, direct replies to individuals or repeated enquiries from concerned groups can be supplemented by notices put up at appropriate places for public information, if considered necessary.

Complaint Against Staff

18. Whenever feasible, for complaints against individual staff, staff being complained should not be assigned as the Complaint Officer of the case or reply direct to the complainant. In general, the Complaint Officer who is delegated with the investigatory functions and assigned for signing the reply should be at least one rank higher than the officer being complained against and not lower than professional rank in his Division/Section.

19. All complaints will be dealt with in confidence and the identity of the complainant should normally be kept confidential. However, it is understood that sometimes a fair and impartial investigation cannot be pursued without the complainant's identity being divulged. Complainants' identity will not be revealed, as far as possible, to anyone other than those involved in investigating the complaint.

20. Complaint Officers are reminded that it is of utmost importance to be fair and impartial in investigating this type of sensitive cases. Regardless of whether these complaints are found to be substantiated or unsubstantiated, Complaint Officers should remind those officers being complained against, especially front-line staff, not to prejudice against any complainant identified. External service providers and their staff should also be asked to observe all these guidelines when handling complaints.

21. Complaint Officers should consider if referrals to Staff Management Sub-section to follow up the case is necessary if irregularity or misconduct on the staff being complained against is identified. When handling cases with implications on criminal allegations, Complaint Officers should refer to the relevant circulars such as Departmental Staff Circular No. 6/2008 on "Conflict of Interest and Acceptance of Advantages and Entertainment" and Departmental Staff Circular No. 2/2009 on "Reporting of Criminal Proceedings and Crime" for reference. Referrals to relevant law enforcement agencies can be considered by the Complaint Officers as appropriate.

Confidentiality

22. Complaints against staff should be graded "Restricted (Staff)". Other complaints should be given a security grading appropriate to their seriousness and sensitivity. Only those staff who need the information to investigate and respond to a complaint should have access to the particulars of the complaint. Complaint Officers should also ensure that the staff being complained against should not be given any copies of the replies. However, the staff being complained against may be separately informed of the result of the investigation, if necessary. This applies equally to service providers and their staff.

Complaints Register

23. Complaint Officers should enter details of the complaints including the case particulars, investigation progress and results, replies to the complainants into the CRMS promptly for record purpose.

24. For replies to the Legislative Council, reference should be made to Secretariat Confidential Circular No.2/20192/96, a copy of which is kept in the Confidential Registry.

Review Procedures

25. Complaint Officers shall use their best endeavours to provide quality service to the community and to settle complaints by conciliation if they arise from misunderstanding or miscommunication. If the complainant is not satisfied with the content of the reply and the action taken or to be taken, the complaint should be reviewed by an officer one rank above the original Complaint Officer and the written reply should be signed by an officer one rank above the officer who signed the previous reply.

26. If the complainant is still not satisfied with the second reply, the complaint should be reviewed by an officer at directorate rank or at least one rank above the previous review officer. The third reply should normally be signed by an officer one rank above the officer who signed the second reply. The reviewing officer of the third reply can also assign the issuing officer of the second reply or another appropriate officer to sign the third reply, but it should be stated clearly in the reply that the case has been reviewed by a more senior officer. For handling complaint against an outstation office, the Complaint Officer should be at least one rank higher than the head of that office. In the replies to the complainants, it should also be stated clearly that the case has been reviewed by a more senior officer, where necessary. Please see paragraph 29 below for termination of repeated complaint cases.

27. Complaint Officers should ensure that their staff and external service providers understand the review procedures and can explain to complainants when necessary.

Repeated Complaints

28. Repeated complaints filed by the same person on the same subject should be treated as one complaint, unless there is a material change in the substance or circumstance. When a repeated complaint is about the way the original complaint was handled, it should be recorded and treated as a new complaint. A repeated complaint against the outcome of an investigation should be treated as a new complaint only when there is a change in substance or circumstance.

29. In the case of persistent complaints, where the complaint is repetitive and contains no new circumstances or information that would justify reopening the case, Complaint Officer may escalate the complaint to the concerned AD for a decision on whether the correspondence should be discontinued. Termination of correspondence on a complaint should only be taken if a substantive reply of the case has been issued and the AD concerned is satisfied that the complaint has been handled properly and in accordance with complaint handling procedures, and that further correspondence will constitute a waste of public resources. The AD concerned may also bring up the case to higher levels for consideration if deemed necessary.

30. In such termination cases, the subject officer can issue a standard reply to the complainant stating like: ***"This acknowledges receipt of your letter dated (). Your case has been reviewed at a senior level in this Department. It is considered that we have already fully addressed the issues raised in your letter in our previous reply. Please refer to our reply to you dated ()."***

Role of External Service Providers

31. If Complaint Officers refer the complaint to the external service providers for direct handling and reply, he should ensure that the external service providers also follow the same set of service standards in handling public complaints. The ultimate responsibility of the complaint should always rest with the Complaint Officer who must monitor the whole handling procedure closely:

Procedures of Receiving, Dispatching, Vetting, Signing and Handling of Public Complaints

Addressee	Dispatch to	Reply Letter		
		Handling	Vetting	Signature*
STH/CHA	STH/CHA's office	Depending on the instruction of STH's Office, Complaint Officers to issue interim/substantive replies direct to the complainants or to submit draft reply to STH's Office	Vetted by D2 rank or above	Signed by STH/CHA or his office, or Complaint Officer, or officer at professional rank or above for STH/CHA, or PS(H)/D of H as advised by STH's Office
PS(H)/D of H personally and/or from Members of Legislative/ District Council, other government bureaux/ departments or public bodies	PS(H)/D of H's Office (Attn: Central Support Unit/CSU)	Depending on the instruction of CSU, Complaint Officers to submit draft reply to PS(H)/D of H's Office or to issue interim/substantive replies to complainants	Vetted by D2 rank or above	Personally by PS(H)/D of H or his office, or Complaint Officer, or officer at professional rank or above for PS(H)/D of H
PS(H)/ D of H	Responsible Complaint Officers direct or through C&ES	Complaint Officers to send out interim/substantive replies direct to complainants	Vetted by Complaint Officer	Signed by Complaint Officer, or officer at professional rank or above for PS(H)/D of H as appropriate
Complaint Officers	Responsible Complaint Officers direct or through C&ES	Complaint Officers to send out interim/substantive replies direct to complainants	Vetted by Complaint Officer	Signed by Complaint Officer under his own post title or for D of H. The Complaint Officer may also delegate to an officer at least at assistant professional rank to sign

**In addition to the guidelines set out below, for complaints against individual staff, the staff signing the reply should be at least one rank above the officer under complaint.*

Annex III

Procedures in Handling Complaints Referred by the Media

The public may choose to express their complaints to the media who would refer such cases to the Department for response. On receipt of complaints from the media, the following steps should be taken—

- (a) the News Section, Information & Community Relations Sub-division should refer the complaint to the Complaint Officer for investigation;
- (b) the Complaint Officer, after investigation, should prepare and send a draft reply to the News Section within **seven** working days on receipt of complaint from the News Section. Alternatively, verbal reply can be arranged, where appropriate;
- (c) the News Section should, after editing and consulting the Complaint Officer again as necessary, send the reply to the newspaper/magazine concerned within **10** working days after receiving the complaint;
- (d) the Complaint Officer should keep his senior officers informed of such case if necessary, and
- (e) the News Section should submit case statistics to C&ES for compilation of the complaint statistics monthly report.