

Watchdog wants to ensure little is lost in translation

Ombudsman looking into improving government hiring of interpreters for ethnic minority groups

The city's ombudsman will investigate the quality and practices of the government's contracted interpretation services for various ethnic minority groups, as authorities have yet to set unified benchmarks for hiring interpreters.

Ombudsman Winnie Chiu Wai-yin announced the launch of the probe yesterday, saying her office would investigate how the government could improve its arrangements for hiring interpreters for members of the city's ethnic minority groups.

"Hong Kong is a multicultural society committed to forging the inclusion of people of diverse races and languages," she said.

"I hope this investigation can prompt the government to improve its arrangements for engaging interpreters for foreign languages and Chinese dialects, boost its administrative efficiency and strengthen the monitoring of the quality of interpretation services."

According to official guidelines for the promotion of racial equality, all government bureaus and departments as well as public organisations that deliver services to people of various races have a duty to provide those in need with appropriate interpretation services in foreign languages.

The government watchdog pointed out the aim of the policy was to ensure people enjoyed equal access to public services, effective delivery of government services, and support to those of different races and using different languages.

At present, apart from the provision of interpretation services by the Centre for Harmony and Enhancement of Ethnic Minority Residents, commissioned by the Home Affairs Department, other bureaus and departments also procure their own interpretation services in foreign languages and various Chinese dialects, to fit their operational needs.

The Office of the Ombudsman said it was vital for interpreters to attain recognised qualifications and have skills of a certain level to ensure the rights and interests of people only speaking foreign languages or other Chinese dialects were protected. The office said qualified interpreters would also enhance the government's operational efficiency.

"The government has not compiled information about interpreters for foreign languages and Chinese dialects [other than Mandarin and Cantonese] for hiring by bureaus/departments and various public organisations," it said. "The qualification requirements for such interpreters are not uniform across the government."

The office was of the view that "it is time-consuming and resource-intensive for bureaus/departments and related public organisations to source and procure interpretation services from outside on their own".

Mandy Cheuk Man-po, project manager of [*Hong Kong Unison*](#), an NGO that works on upholding the rights of ethnic minority groups, welcomed the probe, saying it could identify various existing

inadequacies.

Cheuk said many members of ethnic minority groups were concerned about interpreters' training standards, such as whether they abided by the confidentiality agreement.

"Since there's a lack of unified standards for interpreters' training and delivery of services, members of ethnic minorities have no way to know whether the interpretation they are receiving is accurate and whether their information will remain confidential," she said. "We hope the investigation will address these concerns."

SOCIETY

Watchdog wants to ensure little is lost in translation

Ombudsman looking into improving government hiring of interpreters for ethnic minority groups

Cannix Yau
cannix.yau@scmp.com

The city's ombudsman will investigate the quality and practices of the government's contracted interpretation services for various ethnic minority groups, as authorities have yet to set unified benchmarks for hiring interpreters.

Ombudsman Winnie Chiu Wai-yin announced the launch of the probe yesterday, saying her office would investigate how the government could improve its arrangements for hiring interpreters for members of the city's ethnic minority groups.

"Hong Kong is a multicultural society committed to forging the inclusion of people of diverse races and languages," she said.

"I hope this investigation can prompt the government to improve its arrangements for engaging interpreters for foreign languages and Chinese dialects, boost its administrative efficiency and strengthen the monitoring of the quality of interpretation services."

According to official guidelines for the promotion of racial equality, all government bureaus and departments as well as public organisations that deliver services to people of various races have a duty to provide those in need with appropriate interpretation services in foreign languages.

The government watchdog pointed out the aim of the policy was to ensure people enjoyed equal access to public services, effective delivery of government services, and support to those of different races and using different languages.

At present, apart from the provision of interpretation services by the Centre for Harmony and Enhancement of Ethnic Minority Residents, commissioned by the Home Affairs Department, other bureaus and

departments also procure their own interpretation services in foreign languages and various Chinese dialects, to fit their operational needs.

The Office of the Ombudsman said it was vital for interpreters to attain recognised qualifications and have skills of a certain level to ensure the rights and interests of people only speaking foreign languages or other Chinese dialects were protected. The office said qualified interpreters would also enhance the government's operational efficiency.

"The government has not compiled information about interpreters for foreign languages and Chinese dialects [other than Mandarin and Cantonese] for hiring by bureaus/departments and various public organisations," it said. "The qualification requirements for such interpreters are not uniform across the government."

The office was of the view that "it is time-consuming and resource-intensive for bureaus/departments and related public organisations to source and procure interpretation services from outside on their own".

Mandy Cheuk Man-po, project manager of Hong Kong Unison, an NGO that works on upholding the rights of ethnic minority groups, welcomed the probe, saying it could identify various existing inadequacies.

Cheuk said many members of ethnic minority groups were concerned about interpreters' training standards, such as whether they abided by the confidentiality agreement.

"Since there's a lack of unified standards for interpreters' training and delivery of services, members of ethnic minorities have no way to know whether the interpretation they are receiving is accurate and whether their information will remain confidential," she said. "We hope the investigation will address these concerns."