**Legislative Council Panel on
Information Technology and Broadcasting**

**Web Access by People with Disabilities**

**Purpose**

This paper briefs Members on Government's initiatives to facilitate access to websites by people with disabilities.

**Efforts to Revamp Government websites**

2. In early 1999, the Home Affairs Bureau (HAB) and Information Services Department (ISD), with the assistance of Information Technology and Broadcasting Bureau (ITBB) and Information Technology Services Department (ITSD), conducted a review of the Guidelines for Setting Up Home Pages (the Guidelines) which were issued by ISD to Government departments in 1997. The revised Guidelines were issued in July 1999 with emphasis on the importance of enhancing accessibility of Government websites. The Hong Kong Blind Union (HKBU) also prepared in November 1999 a succinct list of tips on how to make websites more accessible to the visually-impaired.

3. HAB, Health and Welfare Bureau, ITBB, ITSD and ISD joined a pilot scheme to revamp their websites in late 1999. Two approaches were adopted. ISD revamped the Government Information Centre website by including special features such as descriptive text for diagrams and hyperlinks through image map to make it more accessible to the visually-impaired. The other four bureaux/departments adopted the approach of providing additional text-only versions of their websites. The aim of the pilot scheme was to draw up prototypes for adoption by other bureaux/departments. With the feedback from the HKBU, the revamped websites came into operation in early 2000.

4.		A seminar was held in May 2000 for webmasters of all Government websites to promote awareness and understanding of usability and accessibility of websites to people with disabilities.	After considering the feedback from the webmasters in the seminar, it was decided that the revamping exercise should be extended to all Government bureaux/departments, with the target of revamping at least half of all Government websites by the end of 2001 and the remainder by the end of 2002.	The time-frame took into account the limited supply of personnel in Hong Kong with specialised experience required for the project.	It also allowed time for bureaux/departments and service providers to learn the skills, as quality might suffer if all bureaux/departments were required to complete the exercise simultaneously within a short period.	Moreover, some documents, e.g. statistical tables, would have to be re-organised before they could become fully accessible to people with disabilities.	The target was announced in the HAB's 2000 Policy Objective Booklet on "The Rights of the Individual".

5.		To meet the target, the following advice and assistance were provided to bureaux/departments: -

	(a)	the Guidelines issued to bureaux/departments, which were further revised in November 2000 with suggestions from the HKBU incorporated, provided more guidance on how to improve websites to facilitate access by people with disabilities;

	(b)	a seminar was held in December 2000 for webmasters to enhance their understanding of auxiliary technologies and design considerations to facilitate access to websites by people with disabilities; and

	(c)	a capital account commitment at $4.5 million was created to provide funds to those bureaux/departments which need financial assistance for their revamping work.

**Present Position**

6.      Recent returns from bureaux/departments indicate that 25 bureaux/departments have already revamped their websites.  Sixty-seven bureaux/departments will complete the exercise within 2001 and four departments in 2002.   HAB is liaising with the four departments for advancing their completion dates so that the exercise could be completed by end 2001.

**Publishing the Guidelines to Public Bodies and Subvented Organisations**

7.      To further our efforts on promulgating the Guidelines on web accessibility, we have recently issued the Guidelines to public bodies and Government subvented organisations.   They have been requested to consider these Guidelines and enhance their web accessibility and to submit a return to Government by end April 2001 on their target dates for enhancing their websites to cater for the needs of different user groups (including people with disabilities).   The Government will provide further assistance, e.g. by arranging seminars and workshops, if considered necessary, to the organisations concerned.

**Promotional and Educational Activities**

8.      The Government has also organised a seminar in January 2001 for the IT industry in order to enhance the awareness of the industry on the issue of web accessibility.   Speakers of the seminars included representatives from the Hong Kong Blind Union, the Equal Opportunities Commission, the universities and the Government.   We have also included, in our 'Digital 21" website (www.digital21.gov.hk), a section on the "Tips for improving accessibility of web pages", which places special emphasis on the needs of users who have impaired vision or hearing.   We are also in close liaison with industry associations like the Webmasters (Hong Kong) Association with a view to formulating web accessibility guidelines which could be adopted by the private sector.

**Public Computer Facilities**

9.      To provide the community more opportunity to access computer facilities and to use the Internet, we have installed over 2,200 computer facilities at convenient locations including community centres, post offices and public libraries around the territory for public use free-of-charge.   In addition, 28 computers with special design facilities were installed at dedicated community cyberpoints to cater for the needs of the blind and the visually impaired.   These special facilities include screen enlarging software, voice synthesizer software, power braille hardware and large-size flat LCD monitor to facilitate usage by the blind and the visually impaired.   We will review the need to further increase these facilities in the light of operational experience and actual utilisation.

**International Practices**

10.      Our internal web accessibility guidelines are developed based on the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines of the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C)[1], with input from the HKBU to make them more easily understandable to non-technical people.   The governments of economies which are advanced in IT, including Australia, Canada, the UK and the US have also published web accessibility guidelines, either by making direct reference to the W3C guidelines (Australia and Canada), or by adopting them with suitable modifications to fit the local environment (the UK, the US and Hong Kong).

**Bobby Test**

11.      On 13 December 2000, the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) issued a press release concerning a survey on the accessibility of websites to people with disabilities.   It found that out of 163 websites of Government bureaux/departments and public bodies, 130 did not pass the

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[1]   The W3C is an international organisation developing interoperable web technologies, including specifications, guidelines, software, and tools.

"Bobby test"[2].   The Government has discussed with the EOC to understand more of their survey and put forth the following views -

    (a)    the Bobby test, based on an automated software tool, has its limitations.   For example, the Test treats all image objects without text tags as errors and it generates a checklist of potential errors which require further human analysis;

    (b)    some of the websites considered by the EOC to be not "Bobby" approved are considered acceptable to the HKBU;

    (c)    the EOC tested only the homepage (i.e. the first page) of each website.   The text-only versions of the websites, which had been included specifically to meet the needs of the visually-impaired, were not tested at all.   The text-only versions of the bureaux/departments which participated in the pilot scheme, when subjected to the Bobby test, passed the test successfully; and

    (d)    some of the Government websites were considered to be not "Bobby" approved solely because they did not contain text tags to the "dots" and "lines" for decorative graphics.   The provision of text tags in these cases would in fact confuse rather than enlighten web surfers who were visually-impaired.

12.    The EOC accepts that the Bobby test has its limitations and even in countries which are advanced in IT, only a small proportion of their websites have passed the test.

13.    Nevertheless, with a view to maximising the effectiveness of the revamping exercise, the Government has reached consensus with the EOC that -

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[2]   The Bobby Test is a software test on web accessibility developed by the Centre for Applied Special Technology, an educational and non-profit making organisation that uses technology to expand opportunities for all people, including those with disabilities.

(a) for the revamped Government websites, the Government would in future invite feedback from not only HKBU, but also other non-government organisations representing people with disabilities; and

(b) the EOC would attend future meetings of the Inter-departmental Committee which co-ordinates the revamping exercise and provide input where appropriate.

14. We will keep Members informed of the progress of the subject.

**Home Affairs Bureau**
**Information Technology and Broadcasting Bureau**
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