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Panel on Information Technology and Broadcasting

Meeting on 6 April 2006

Background brief on IT Easy Link Services

Purpose

This paper summarizes members' views on the IT Easy Link Services (the Services) implemented since June 2002.

The scheme

2. The Services is an IT support service jointly launched by the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer¹ and the Hong Kong Computer Society (HKCS) in June 2002 as a pilot project to provide free advisory service to members of the community on general problems which they may encounter in using basic IT applications. The objective is to encourage and assist wider adoption of IT in the community.

3. After undertaking a review with HKCS in 2003, the Administration extended the Services for a year up to June 2004 and a dedicated enquiry service, known as IT Easy Link for Businesses, was set up to provide assistance to small and medium enterprises (SMEs). In 2004, the Services was further extended for another year till June 2005. The operating costs for the Services in 2002-03, 2003-04 and 2004-05 were \$2.5 million, \$4.7 million and \$4.2 million respectively and were funded by the Commerce, Industry and Technology Bureau.

¹ The Office of the Government Chief Information Officer was established on 1 July 2004 by merging the functions of the former Information Technology Services Department and the IT-related division of the Communications and Technology Branch of the Bureau. Prior to this, IT Easy Link was jointly organized by the Commerce, Industry and Technology Bureau, the Information Technology Services Department and HKCS.

4. With a view to formulating the future model for the Services having regard to its objective, scope of service and mode of funding, the HKCS proposed in early 2005 to transform the Services into a self-supporting and self-financing scheme starting from 1 April 2006, with a nine-month transitional period from July 2005 to March 2006. In gist, the proposed initiatives included the setting up of a SME IT Support Centre; seeking sponsorship from the private sector; and exploring cooperative opportunities to further expand the Services to cover disadvantaged groups. The Administration has also highlighted its stance that the Services should eventually transform into a market activity because publicly-funded activities should only seek to fill a gap in the market during the early stage of IT adoption.

Members' major views and concerns

5. The Panel on Information Technology and Broadcasting has monitored the implementation of the IT Easy Link Services since its inception in 2002. There is general support from Panel members as they consider the Services very useful in promoting IT adoption in the community at relatively low costs incurred on the Government. While noting that there is a need for the scheme to evolve over changing times, members have raised a number of concerns on the way forward for the Administration's consideration :

- (a) As running the IT Easy Link Services does not incur substantial costs but can benefit a wide spectrum of the community, members have considered the scheme cost-effective. They have urged the Administration to explore other sources of funding such as commercial sponsorship or greater collaboration with the industry. Some members have also suggested that consideration may be given to suitably reducing the existing level of service (such as shortening the enquiry hours) in order to sustain its continued operation.
- (b) Given the proven success of the IT Easy Link Services, some members have expressed the view that the Administration should build on the success of the scheme and further develop its functionality, rather than embarking on new initiatives the success of which is not yet known.
- (c) Although members appreciate that it is not the Administration's policy intention to provide financial support for the Services on a permanent basis, they have nevertheless urged that funding support should be withdrawn in a gradual manner and in phases over a longer period of, say, one or two years in order to minimize the disruption caused by the cessation of the free advisory service.

Latest position

6. The Administration will update the Panel on the progress of the transformation of the Services into a self-supporting and self-financing scheme at the meeting to be held on 6 April 2006.

Relevant papers

7. A list of relevant papers is at the **Appendix**.

Council Business Division 1
Legislative Council Secretariat
31 March 2006

Appendix

List of relevant papers

Committee	Paper	LC Paper No.
Meeting of Panel on Information Technology and Broadcasting (ITB) on 14 April 2003	✧ Administration's paper : "Extension and expansion of the IT Easy Link services"	CB(1)1381/02-03(05)
	✧ Minutes of meeting	CB(1)1825/02-03
Meeting of Panel on ITB on 10 May 2004	✧ Administration's paper : "Review of the IT Easy Link services "	CB(1)1713/03-04(04)
	✧ Minutes of meeting	CB(1)2108/03-04
Meeting of Panel on ITB on 8 April 2005	✧ Administration's paper : "Review of the IT Easy Link services "	CB(1)1196/04-05(04)
	✧ Background brief on IT Easy Link	CB(1)1185/04-05
	✧ Minutes of meeting	CB(1)1431/04-05