



康樂及文化事務署

Leisure and Cultural Services Department

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5 August 2010

Ms Betty FONG
Clerk to Legislative Council Panel on Home Affairs
Legislative Council Building
8 Jackson Road
Central, Hong Kong
(Attn: Ms Louisa YEUNG)

Dear Ms Fong,

Services and Management of Public Libraries

We thank the Panel for referring the e-mail from Mr CHU King-yuen to us. Our response to his views on the services and management of public libraries is as follows:

(I) Library Automation System

In order to maintain the service quality and efficiency of public libraries, to meet the expectation of users, to cater for the new libraries to be opened in the future, and to provide an integrated library service for Hong Kong as a whole, a joint decision was made by the Provisional Urban Council and the Provisional Regional Council in 1998 to upgrade the Library Automation System (LAS). The project, scheduled for completion in 2004, was examined and approved with an estimated expenditure of \$122,750,000. The contract for the project was signed in November 1999. Later, at a meeting held on 17 December 1999, the Finance Committee of the Legislative Council approved the creation of a non-recurrent commitment to meet the necessary expenses of the project. The upgrading of the LAS in all public libraries was completed in 2002; and by 2006, the

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upgraded LAS was also installed in the eight new libraries (including two mobile libraries) specified in the contract. The LAS introduced by the two Councils was one of the world's largest computerised library systems equipped with both Chinese and English searching capabilities, and it is still widely used by libraries in advanced countries and regions nowadays. The software company which developed the system was established in 1983. Based in the United States, it provides design and support services for computerised library systems in 70 countries around the world. The rumour quoted by Mr Chu that the company closed down as early as 2000 is simply untrue.

As for the complaint (Case No.: OMB2008/4222) lodged with the Office of The Ombudsman, Hong Kong (the Ombudsman's Office) on 12 September 2008 as mentioned in paragraph 6 of Mr Chu's e-mail, our response to the case and our follow-up actions have been presented in detail to the Ombudsman's Office. The Ombudsman's Office completed investigation into the case and replied to Mr Chu in March 2009. The Department noted the recommendations made by the Ombudsman's Office. In the ongoing LAS Replacement Project of the Hong Kong Public Libraries (HKPL), the Department and the supplier will work on a number of functions to be included in the new system so that it can better handle problematic cases with different scenarios. The new system is expected to commence operation within the next two years with a view to further enhancing library services and meeting the community's needs for library services.

(II) Arrangements for the recovery of library fees and charges and the issue of payment receipts

All along, the HKPL places great importance on customer service, and the library staff serve the readers in an understanding and open-minded manner, believing in readers' self-discipline and conscientiousness. In fact, among the some 3.8 million registered readers of the HKPL, rule-breakers are only a minority. Under normal circumstances, readers with overdue payments or library materials will receive timed written notifications from the HKPL and be alerted of the situation by frontline staff at the counter when they check in or check out library materials. The readers, in general, will settle the overdue payments or return the overdue items immediately or shortly afterwards.

The HKPL started working on the formulation, writing, testing, etc. of an arrears recovery programme for the LAS upon the establishment of the Department in 2000. It was after operating procedure testing and coordination that on 1 April 2004 the LAS began to generate "payment notices" to be officially issued to the readers concerned. Meanwhile, recovery actions were taken by phase on readers with outstanding payments. The

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observations made by the Audit Commission in March 2007 on the HKPL's handling of outstanding payments of readers are detailed clearly in its report. Currently, the HKPL issues an "overdue notice", a "final overdue notice", and a "payment notice" at pre-set intervals after the due date of an overdue library item to remind the reader to return the item and/or attend to the related outstanding payment as soon as possible. If the reader fails to return the overdue library item or settle the payment in full within two weeks from the issue of the "final overdue notice" and "payment notice", his borrowing right will be suspended until return of all overdue library items and settlement of the outstanding payment in full. If the outstanding payment remains in arrears after the suspension of the borrowing right, legal action will be taken on a case-by-case basis by our Debt Recovery Team, a team dedicated to recover the arrears from the readers concerned. In addition, at HKPL's user education programmes, readers' attention will be drawn to the importance of timely return of borrowed library materials and the personal liabilities arising from late return.

As regards receipts, the receipt issued by library staff upon payment is an option open to the reader. Alternatively, payment by Octopus is welcome for settling the replacement charges of library cards as well as overdue fines and reservation fees of library materials. Requests for checking records may be directed to library staff, and the reader can also check his own borrower's record by using any Library Catalogue terminal installed in the libraries or by simply logging onto the HKPL website.

The Ombudsman's Case (Case No.: OMB2002/0534) mentioned by Mr Chu in paragraph 4 of his e-mail is a complaint lodged by a reader against the HKPL about the procedures for handling books returned by borrowers. In its investigation report the Ombudsman's Office has made a number of recommendations, which have been implemented by the HKPL accordingly. The actions taken were accepted by the Ombudsman's Office, and the whole case was confirmed closed.

(III) Meeting arrangements between the Committee on Libraries and various categories of stakeholders

The Committee on Libraries (CoL) was established by the Home Affairs Bureau (HAB) in November 2004 primarily to advise the Secretary for Home Affairs (SHA) on strategies and plans for betterment of Hong Kong's public library facilities and services, with enhanced community cooperation and partnership. In the course of formulating its recommendations, the CoL not only made reference to the successful experiences of overseas library systems, but also proactively reached out to canvass the views of various categories of local library stakeholders, including representatives of non-governmental

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organisations, chambers of commerce, and youth organisations; principals and teacher-librarians of primary and secondary schools; advisors on literary arts; etc. In addition, it met and exchanged views with the representatives of the Government Librarians Association and the Association of Government Cultural Services Assistants at the request of the two associations. Stakeholder groups whom the CoL has met are set out at the Annex.

It was the decision of the CoL as to which stakeholders it was to meet. Since it has not received any requests for meeting from the colleagues of the Clerical Grades, no meetings were arranged with them. In mid-2007, the CoL completed its work and submitted a report for the Government's consideration. Its term has since come to an end.

(IV) The Public Libraries Advisory Committee and "The Strategic Plan of Hong Kong Public Libraries"

The SHA has accepted in principle all the recommendations put forward by the CoL in its Recommendation Report. On 18 June 2007, he briefed the Panel on the key recommendations of the report vide LC Paper No. CB(2)2042/06-07(03).

To take forth the CoL's recommendations, the Department immediately proceeded with the planning and formulation of development strategies of the HKPL for the next ten years. As recommended by the CoL, the HAB set up the Public Libraries Advisory Committee (PLAC) in May 2008 to advise the Government on the overall development strategy of the HKPL. Members of the PLAC are drawn from different sectors of the community, including educational, cultural, youth, information technology, government and business sectors, to ensure a balanced composition.

After more than a year of formulation work, the Department submitted the draft strategic plan of the HKPL for the next ten years to the PLAC in October 2008 for discussion and consultation. The draft received many valuable inputs from members of the PLAC. After thorough discussion and consideration, the PLAC endorsed the "Strategic Plan of Hong Kong Public Libraries 2009-2018" (Strategic Plan) at its third meeting held in February 2009 as a "roadmap" of the HKPL in the coming decade for progressive implementation of the CoL's recommendations. The HAB subsequently submitted the details of the Strategic Plan to the Panel in April 2009 vide LC Paper No. CB(2)1301/08-09(03). The Strategic Plan has also been uploaded to the HKPL webpage for public reference. Although the roadmap for the coming decade has been drawn, the Department still welcomes comments from any sectors, and will update and revise the Strategic Plan in

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the light of the development of society. Members of the public may voice their views on the development of the HKPL anytime.

Concerning the area of work of the PLAC as opposed to that of the District Facilities Management Committees (DFMCs) under the District Councils (DCs), the PLAC advises the Government mainly on the role, functions, and management of the Hong Kong Central Library as well as the overall development strategy of the HKPL. It does not make any recommendations on the daily operation and management of district libraries as the 18 DCs have already been involved in the management of these libraries. It is believed that the DCs can effectively provide suggestions and supervise the work of district libraries through their respective DFMCs and related working groups. We will fully consult the DCs on all policy and daily management matters of district libraries.

(V) Arrangements for Librarians to man readers' advisory desks

Apart from managing the operations of libraries, Librarians and Assistant Librarians provide proactive services to readers and answer their enquiries at various service points. Some of them may also help out at library service counters during lunchtime and peak hours, rendering assistance to frontline staff in providing library services and answering readers' enquiries. Unless engaged in duties such as handling emergencies in the libraries, providing staff training, conducting library tours and other extension activities etc., in general Librarians and Assistant Librarians man the readers' advisory desks according to the duty roster.

Every library regularly submits statistics of readers' enquiries and related data to the Administration Unit of the HKPL. Such submissions include the numbers of in-person and telephone enquiries from readers received by all library service counter staff, and also consolidated statistics of readers' enquiries received by other means such as post, fax, and e-mail.

At each district, the Senior Librarian concerned conducts operation meetings with library staff and inspects libraries under his purview on a regular and as-needed basis in order to strengthen communications for operations and to provide suitable working guidelines and advice to the subordinates. Librarians at all ranks will continue to be committed to serving the community and providing quality library services to members of the public.

(VI) Procedures for handling loss reports of library materials

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The first court case mentioned in paragraph 19 of Mr Chu's e-mail actually took place in 2004. It involved a reader who repeatedly abused the mechanism of making loss reports of library materials. He made false reports of book losses and attempted to take possession of library materials with the payment of fines. In another case, a student appealed to the High Court on 13 May 2010 against the allegation of defacing and stealing library materials. His appeal was allowed in the end. Though both cases are related to personal conduct of readers, the second case has no connection in nature with the first one, which involved false reports of book losses.

Mr Chu suggested that the HKPL should write to those readers who have paid for their lost library materials under the prevailing mechanism between 2000 and 2004 to notify them that, within seven years upon receipt of the written notification, they may apply for reimbursement for the lost and paid library materials they have returned to the HKPL under the new mechanism effective from 2005. The Department is of the opinion that the existing Libraries Regulation already provides for return of library materials borrowed by readers to the HKPL. Even if a reader reports loss of a library material and pays for its replacement cost, ownership of the item reported lost is still vested with the HKPL. In the case that the item reported lost is found by the reader, it should be returned to the HKPL immediately. The library staff handling these cases will assist the readers concerned with the reimbursement.

(VII) Arrangements of new library opening hours

To address the growing public demand for library services, the Chief Executive (CE) announced in the Summit on District Administration in May 2008 the Government's decision to allocate additional resources to extend the opening hours of 33 major and district public libraries by increasing their weekly opening hours from 61 or 62 hours to about 70 hours. As an initiative to implement CE's plan, the Department has extended and aligned the weekly opening hours of its 33 major and district libraries to 71 hours from 1 April 2009 to provide seven-day-a-week library services to the public.

Under the current arrangements, the major and district libraries in the urban area open until 8:00 pm on all weekdays to allow more patrons to visit the libraries after work, and on Saturdays to encourage more members of the public, families in particular, to use library services. Besides, these libraries open one hour early, i.e. at 9:00 am, for six days a week for the convenience of users living in the neighbourhood, particularly retirees and housewives. In the New Territories region, all major and district libraries now open on

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their original closure days from 12:00 noon to 8:00 pm, enabling the public to enjoy library services seven days a week.

To ensure the continuous provision of quality services by the libraries, the morning session on either Monday or Thursday is closed to the public for thorough cleansing, regular maintenance of computer systems, and servicing of building services installations. In the past, such works were carried out on a closure day or after the libraries closed at 5:00 pm on Saturdays. As the libraries are now open seven days a week, there will be difficulties in carrying out these essential maintenance works properly without this morning session. This arrangement is considered the most efficient and effective deployment of resources after balancing the needs of the public and those for maintaining quality library services.

We understand that the cleansing, repair, and maintenance works carried out on Monday or Thursday mornings in major and district libraries may cause inconvenience to some readers. In this connection, arrangements have been made for at least one other library in the same or nearby district to remain open during these morning sessions to provide library services to the public.

The new pattern of opening hours is aimed at better meeting the needs of the public at large as far as possible and is considered the most cost-effective model of opening hours. The DCs in all the districts have been consulted on the new opening hours scheme prior to its implementation and have expressed unanimous support for the arrangement.

Regarding Mr Chu's views on the new library opening hours raised in a number of e-mails to the Department in 2009, we replied by e-mail on 21 July and 21 August 2009 to explain in detail the rationale behind the arrangements of the new opening hours and the reasons for not adopting his suggestions. Afterwards Mr Chu e-mailed on 25 August 2009 again to restate his views and suggestions about the new library opening hours. Since the new pattern of opening hours currently in force has met the needs of most users, the Department presently has no plans to change or further extend the library opening hours. Therefore, in accordance with the established practice in handling public suggestions, we have recorded his views for future reference in library service reviews. Mr Chu was informed of this by e-mail on 4 September 2009. The response we made in three replies to the views in question is attached to Mr Chu's e-mail and is therefore not repeated in this letter.

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We hope that the above will provide the Panel with a clearer and fuller understanding of the issues brought up by Mr Chu and facilitate the Panel's evaluation of his subjective statements. Please contact Mrs Tinny SUN, Chief Librarian (Operations and Technical Processing), on 2601 7333 for further enquiries.

Yours sincerely,



(LEE Yuk-man)

for Director of Leisure and Cultural Services

Encl.

c.c.

Secretary for Home Affairs
(Attn: Miss Alice PANG)

Annex

List of Stakeholders Met by the Committee on Libraries**Non-governmental Organisations**

Caritas Hong Kong
Hong Kong Young Women's Christian Association
The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups
The Boys' & Girls' Clubs Association of Hong Kong
Helping Hand

Primary Schools

Maryknoll Fathers' School
T.W.G.Hs. Hong Kong & Kowloon Merchants Association Limited School (P.M.)
NT Women & Juveniles Welfare Association Ltd. Leung Sing Tak Primary School
Tai Kok Tsui Catholic Primary School (Hoi Fan Road)
Hennessy Road Government Primary School (AM)
S.K.H. Tak Tin Lee Shiu Keung Primary School
S.K.H. Yautong Kei Hin Primary School

Secondary Schools

St Paul's Co-educational College
St Paul's Convent School
Hong Kong Chinese & Women's Club College
S.K.H. Lui Ming Choi Secondary School
Pui Ching Secondary School
Lok Sin Tong Leung Chik Wai Memorial School
S.K.H. Lam Kau Mow Secondary School
Fukien Secondary School
Fanling Lutheran Secondary School
Fung Kai Liu Man Shek Tong Secondary School
Ling Liang Church M H Lau Secondary School
Kit Sam Lam Bing Yim Secondary School
Ju Ching Chu Secondary School (Tuen Mun)
Tang Shiu Kin Victoria Government Secondary School

Chambers of Commerce

The Chinese General Chamber of Commerce

Federation of Hong Kong Industries
Federation of International SME
The Hong Kong Chamber of Small & Medium Business Ltd
Hong Kong General Chamber of Commerce
HK Small & Medium Enterprises Association Limited
Junior Chamber International Hong Kong

Youth Organisations

Alliance of Hong Kong Youth Groups
Hong Kong United Youth Association

Advisors on Literary Arts

Hong Kong Arts Development Council Advisors on Literary Arts
Leisure & Cultural Services Department Advisors on Literary Arts

Library Staff

Government Librarians Association
Association of Government Cultural Services Assistants