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Panel on Information Technology and Broadcasting

Meeting on 12 April 2010

Background brief on digital inclusion

Purpose

This paper summarizes the views and concerns expressed by the Panel on Information Technology and Broadcasting (the Panel) in previous discussions on issues relating to digital inclusion in Hong Kong.

Background

2. Digital 21 Strategy provides a blueprint for the development of information and communication technology (ICT)¹ in Hong Kong. Building a digitally inclusive, knowledge-based society is one of the five key action areas promulgated by the Government in its latest version of the 2008 Digital 21 Strategy. One of the Government's priority work focus in this action area is to provide Internet connections to needy groups in the community, thereby bridging the digital divide of the under-privileged groups. A Task Force on Digital Inclusion (the Task Force) was established in July 2008 under the Digital 21 Strategy Advisory Committee to advise the Government on the formulation of relevant strategies and initiatives on digital inclusion to improve access to ICT facilities and connectivity, ICT skills, and facilitate the development of useful content for the needy groups. The Task Force agreed that priority should be given to three needy groups, namely the elderly, low-income families with children and people with disabilities and/or chronic illness. A number of digital inclusion initiatives were commissioned with the advice and support of the Task Force through tripartite collaboration between the community, the business sector and the Government. These initiatives include:

- (a) the District Cyber Centres (DCC) pilot scheme to enable young people from poor families and other needy members of the community to access and use ICT and online services helping them integrate into the information society;

¹ ICT refers to all technologies and applications that involve information processing and/or exchange over communication networks, including the internet.

- (b) the one-year territory-wide Internet education campaign to educate Internet users, especially young students, on the appropriate and safe use of the Internet;
- (c) the dedicated portal for the elderly providing one-stop information and service to address the interests and needs of the elderly;
- (d) the Central Fund for Personal Computer set up by the Social Welfare Department to assist people with disabilities to acquire personal computer facilities for self-employment or receiving supported employment service at home;
- (e) the Computer Recycling Programme coordinated by the Education Bureau and the Environment Protection Department to provide refurbished computer with one-year free Internet access service to needy students of primary and secondary schools;
- (f) installing public computers with Internet connection at various places including public libraries and youth and social centres for free public access;
- (g) the Digital Solidarity Fund administered by the Hong Kong Council of Social Service to sponsor digital inclusion projects by non-government organizations (NGOs) for different needy groups;
- (h) a sponsored programme providing a two-year free Internet broadband access service to 1 000 students from low-income families; and
- (i) IT training programmes for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in specific sectors.

Previous discussions

3. The Panel received regular updates from the Administration on the digital inclusion initiatives undertaken by the Government, NGOs and the private sector in the context of the implementation of the Digital 21 Strategy.

4. The Panel discussed the digital inclusion initiatives at its meetings on 10 June 2008, 12 January and 9 February 2009. Panel members expressed grave concern about the low level of digital integration in respect of the six disadvantaged groups (i.e. the elderly, persons with disabilities and/or chronic illness, female homemakers, single parents, new arrivals and children of low-income families) identified by the Task Force. Members called on the Administration to implement additional measures to narrow the digital divide and enhance ICT adoption of the under-privileged groups, thereby helping them to integrate into the information society. To assess the effectiveness of the digital inclusion initiatives, members suggested that quantifiable performance indicators be drawn up to measure digital inclusion for the disadvantaged groups and to chart the progress that each district

had made towards digital inclusion under the DCC pilot scheme on a regular basis. The Administration was also urged to step up liaison with the 18 districts and compile district-based data on digital inclusiveness.

5. According to the Administration, starting from 2008, a study had been conducted on a regular basis to update the Comprehensive Digital Inclusion Index of the six disadvantaged groups so as to reflect the latest digital inclusion situation in Hong Kong and to gauge the effectiveness of the initiatives.

6. Panel members noted that according to the statistics from the survey conducted by the Census and Statistics Department, some 20 000 (3%) students in Hong Kong did not have computers and Internet access at home. Members were particularly concerned that in this digital age where web-based learning and research on the Internet became an integral part of education, school children of needy families should have the opportunity to access to computer facilities and online services at home, at school as well as community centres and libraries. Members urged the Administration to provide convenient and suitable Internet learning opportunities for students in need. They also called on the Administration to consider including Internet access charges in the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme for eligible low-income families with children studying in primary or secondary schools.

7. Given that it would be a long-term process to narrow the digital divide and eliminate cross-generation poverty, some Panel members were of the view that Government commitment and continued funding support were important for the success and sustained development of the digital inclusion initiatives. They called on the Government to commit to a clear policy objective to support the digital inclusion initiatives such as providing recurrent provision in the estimates for the long-term development of the DCC pilot scheme. Suggestion was also made to run a mobile cyber centre, similar to the operation of the mobile library, to bring computer and ICT facilities to every district. On the location and distribution of the selected DCCs, some members were of the view that as the DCC pilot scheme was targeted at needy groups in the community, the centres should preferably be located at less affluent low-income districts, such as Tin Shui Wai, Tai Po, Sheung Shui and Tseung Kwan O, where the digital divide was most serious. The Administration committed that the pilot scheme would be expanded by phases to enable needy groups in more districts to enjoy the services of the DCCs.

8. Panel members expressed grave concern about the low PC and Internet penetration rate (59.8%) in respect of SMEs, and urged the Administration to look into the causes of poor penetration rate for small business establishments in Hong Kong. The Administration undertook to further examine the barriers to ICT adoption and make continued efforts to promote the wider use of ICT among SMEs.

Latest position

9. To help narrow the digital divide, the Financial Secretary has announced

the Facilitating Internet Learning initiative in the 2010-2011 Budget to mitigate the impact of digital divide on the quality of learning of school-age children in needy families. The Administration will brief the Panel on 12 April 2010 on the latest development of the digital inclusion initiatives undertaken by the Government. The Panel on Education will also discuss the item on "Subsidy on Internet access charges for needy students and related measures" at its meeting to be held on 12 April 2010 at 4:30 pm.

Relevant papers

Information paper provided by the Administration for the Information Technology and Broadcasting Panel meeting on 10 June 2008

<http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr07-08/english/panels/itb/papers/itb0610cb1-1755-3-e.pdf>

Background brief on progress report on the 2008 Digital 21 Strategy prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat for the Information Technology and Broadcasting Panel meeting on 10 June 2008

<http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr07-08/english/panels/itb/papers/itb0610cb1-1755-4-e.pdf>

Minutes of Information Technology and Broadcasting Panel meeting on 10 June 2008

<http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr07-08/english/panels/itb/minutes/itb080610.pdf>

Information paper provided by the Administration for the Information Technology and Broadcasting Panel meeting on 12 January 2009

<http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr08-09/english/panels/itb/papers/itb0112cb1-508-4-e.pdf>

Minutes of Information Technology and Broadcasting Panel meeting on 12 January 2009

<http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr08-09/english/panels/itb/minutes/itb20090112.pdf>

Information paper provided by the Administration for the Information Technology and Broadcasting Panel meeting on 9 February 2009

<http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr08-09/english/panels/itb/papers/itb0209cb1-715-4-e.pdf>

Updated background brief on Digital 21 Strategy prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat for the Information Technology and Broadcasting Panel meeting on 9 February 2009

<http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr08-09/english/panels/itb/papers/itb0209cb1-715-5-e.pdf>

Minutes of Information Technology and Broadcasting Panel meeting on 9 February 2009

<http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr08-09/english/panels/itb/minutes/itb20090209.pdf>