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Panel on Home Affairs

**Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat
for the meeting on 22 March 2013**

Development of public library services in Hong Kong

Purpose

This paper provides background information on the development of public library services in Hong Kong and summarizes the views and concerns expressed by members of the Panel on Home Affairs ("the Panel") on the subject.

Background

2. In April 2000, the Culture and Heritage Commission ("CHC") was established to advise the Government on the policies as well as funding priorities on culture and arts. CHC submitted the "Culture and Heritage Commission Policy Recommendation Report" to the Government in April 2003, and put forward its policy recommendations on a wide range of areas relating to the long-term cultural development in Hong Kong, including the development of public library services.

3. In November 2001, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department ("LCSD") commissioned a consultancy study on the future development of Hong Kong Public Libraries ("HKPL"), with a view to formulating a strategic plan for the development of LCSD's public library services and recommending the most appropriate institutional arrangement and organizational strategy for operating public library services.

4. To follow up on the CHC's recommendations relating to library services and facilities as well as the recommendations of the consultancy study commissioned by LCSD, the Government established the Committee on Libraries ("CoL") in November 2004 for a tenure of two years. CoL was

tasked to advise the Secretary for Home Affairs ("SHA") on strategies and plans for betterment of Hong Kong's public library facilities and services. CoL submitted its Recommendation Report to SHA in May 2007.

5. In June 2007, the Administration briefed the Panel on the key recommendations of CoL's Recommendation Report. A summary of the key recommendations is in **Appendix I**. To take forth the recommendations, the Public Libraries Advisory Committee ("PLAC") was set up in May 2008 to advise the Administration on the overall development strategy of HKPL.

Deliberations of the Panel

6. The Panel held four meetings between June 2007 and June 2010 to discuss issues relating to the development of public library services and met with PLAC at a special meeting on 14 June 2010. Major views and concerns expressed by Panel members are summarized below.

Provision of libraries

7. Some members considered that the planning standards for libraries suggested in the Hong Kong Planning Standards and Guidelines ("HKPS&G") had failed to take into account Hong Kong's crowded living environment and the need of the public for more reading spaces. They urged the Administration and PLAC to review periodically the planning standards for public libraries in order to address the growing needs for library facilities. They also considered that more resources and proactive efforts should be devoted to meeting the demand of districts for library facilities.

8. According to PLAC, modern libraries were not merely physical premises, but also establishments for the provision of an array of comprehensive and diversified services. In the planning of library facilities, there was a need to strike a balance between quantity (viz. the number of libraries) and quality (such as the application of multimedia and internet access) to ensure the standard of library services.

9. The Administration advised that the current provision of public libraries had generally met the relevant standards in HKPS&G that there should be a district library for every 200,000 persons. Apart from HKPS&G, the Government also took into account the geographical and demographic characteristics as well as the infrastructural development of a district in determining the library facilities to be provided for the district. As the opening of new libraries had substantial resource implications, such requests would need to be carefully considered and justified to ensure the prudent use of public money.

10. At the Panel meeting on 9 April 2010, members passed a motion urging the Administration to, amongst others, review afresh HKPS&G in relation to public library services with a view to lowering the population standard for the provision of public library facilities. As advised by the Administration, the planning standards for public libraries provided in HKPS&G were last reviewed by the then CoL in 2006. While CoL did not propose any change to the planning standards, it had recommended strategies and plans for betterment of the facilities and services of HKPL. To take forth CoL's recommendations, PLAC was set up in 2008 to advise the Government on the overall development strategies of HKPL. Based on PLAC's Strategic Plan for HKPL 2009-2018, the Administration would devise business plans (to be reviewed at three-yearly intervals) to implement the missions and meet the strategic goal of the plan.

Services of small/community libraries

11. Members were concerned about the services provided by small/community libraries and urged the Administration to exercise flexibility in addressing the demand of the local community for more small libraries at district level. The Administration was also urged to take heed of the special geographical and demographic circumstances of individual areas in considering the establishment of small libraries.

12. PLAC advised that more resources had been dedicated to enhancing the quality of library services in recent years to keep pace with the changing living mode of society. For instance, space provision of district and major libraries was increased to facilitate the provision of new facilities and a larger seating capacity and IT was widely applied to various aspects of library services. Whether the provision of small libraries was a good option for enhancing the quality of library service would be further studied by PLAC.

13. The Administration further advised that 154 community libraries had been set up under the Libraries @ neighbourhood - Community Libraries Partnership Scheme through collaboration with non-profit-making and local organizations. Community libraries offered convenient, accessible library services across 18 districts to complement the services of HKPL in meeting the local residents' demand for library services in the neighbourhood.

Opening hours of public libraries

14. Some members were concerned that the opening hours of major public libraries had failed to suit the needs of the working population and students. They suggested that the Administration should earmark extra resources for extending the opening hours until 10:00 pm. The Administration advised that 33 major and district libraries had extended their opening hours to 71 hours a week since April 2009 to provide seven-day-a-week library services. To cater

for the needs of the working population, these libraries operated until 8:00 pm during weekdays. Members were also advised that the Administration would liaise with the District Councils ("DCs") concerned in considering the use of DC funds for extending the opening hours of public libraries, in particular, those at remote areas on a case-by-case basis.

Self-service facilities beyond library premises

15. There was a suggestion that the Administration and PLAC should consider setting up self-service facilities for the lending of popular collections and returning of library items at Mass Transit Railway ("MTR") stations on a trial basis to facilitate the accessibility of library services to the public, particularly the working population. Another suggestion was made that library facilities should also be set up near outlying island ferry piers for the convenience of commuters.

16. Members were advised that PLAC had studied the proposal of providing self-service book return and pick-up services at major MTR stations, taking into account a number of considerations such as the latest technology required for the provision of such service, choice and size of collections, locations of the facilities and related rental costs. The Administration also pointed out that the development of the radio frequency identification ("RFID") technology made the borrowing and returning books through self-service vending machines feasible. The feasibility of the proposal was subject to the outcome of the pilot test on the RFID Sub-system, which aimed at enhancing the efficiency in major library processes, including lending and returning of library materials.

Promotion of literary arts and reading habits

17. Some members considered that PLAC members should capitalize on its knowledge and expertise and focus its resources in cultivating and enhancing the cultural quality of people through library services. There was a suggestion that HKPL should collaborate with community organizations to promote reading habits among students, as well as publishers and authors on book launching activities.

18. The Administration advised that HKPL played an active role in promoting literary arts through organizing literary awards and competitions, including the Hong Kong Literature Festival and the Hong Kong Biennial Awards for Chinese, to enhance literary creativity and extensive reading. HKPL also collaborated with publishers, non-profit-making organizations and schools in organizing various activities to promote reading habits, such as reading programmes, book displays and exhibitions.

Role and membership of PLAC

19. There was a view that PLAC should comprise representatives from the Legislative Council ("LegCo") and DCs in order to follow up public views and suggestions on the provision of library services directly. The Administration was also urged to consider appointing more female members to PLAC to keep up with the Administration's gender benchmark target of 30% for appointment to advisory and statutory bodies. Some members considered that PLAC should enhance the transparency of its deliberations and make available records of its meetings to the public.

20. Members were advised by PLAC that the wide spectrum of background of PLAC members, including academic, cultural, IT, government and business sectors, had enabled PLAC to provide balanced and comprehensive views on issues related to the development of library services. The Administration had been receptive to PLAC's recommendations. The Administration stressed that like other advisory bodies, the Government sought to ensure a balanced and professional composition in the appointment of PLAC members.

Recent developments

21. In June 2012, the Administration provided the Panel with an information paper setting out the major developments in the provision of public library services and the follow-up actions taken subsequent to the Panel's special meeting on 14 June 2010.

22. According to the Administration, HKPL launched a trial scheme on 29 September 2011 to provide book drop service at three major MTR interchange stations, namely Central, Kowloon Tong and Nam Cheong. A total of 12 book drop boxes were placed in the paid areas of the three MTR stations to provide convenience for commuters especially the working public to return library books borrowed from the public libraries. The Administration undertook to review the trial service in late 2012 to assess the public's response to and cost-effectiveness of the scheme, as well as its long-term manpower and financial implications.

23. The Administration also advised that in December 2011, the computerized system of HKPL had undergone a major revamp to replace the original Library Automation System by an enhanced and upgraded Next Generation Integrated Library System to provide comprehensive automated library services. To further increase the efficiency of delivery library services and collection management, HKPL also launched the pilot application of RFID technology in six selected libraries. The Administration would review the RFID pilot scheme and conduct a feasibility study to examine the

cost-effectiveness and benefits of full implementation of RFID at public libraries.

24. The Administration will brief the Panel on the latest progress in the development of library services at its meeting on 22 March 2013.

Relevant papers

25. A list of relevant papers with their hyperlinks at the LegCo website is in the **Appendix II**.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
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A brief summary of the key recommendations of the Report of the Committee on Libraries

- (a) public libraries should not just be a place for borrowing books, but also a venue for organizing a variety of cultural activities. The mission of the Hong Kong Public Libraries ("HKPL") should be restructured to comprise the local community service dimension and the broader cultural dimension;
- (b) while the Administration's plan for District Councils to participate in the management of district libraries was a significant step in enhancing community involvement in the provision of library services, it should reinforce the role of the Hong Kong Central Library ("HKCL") to serve as a territory-wide public library in helping the community to establish its own cultural identity;
- (c) measures to enhance the accessibility of knowledge should be introduced. These include, for example, improvement of library environment and facilities, provision of library services at convenient locations, offer of book delivery service at a charge and regular reviews on the collection and acquisition policy of HKPL to meet the changing needs of different sectors;
- (d) library services should be strengthened to complement the educational programmes in schools, to support continuing education for the community, and to promote activities on reading and literary arts in close partnership with outside organizations and other government departments;
- (e) HKPL should formulate a strategy for the development of specific collections of cultural interest and explore collaboration opportunities with the Public Records Office on sharing of archival information and mounting exhibitions on the history of Hong Kong; and
- (f) an advisory board should be set up to advise on the overall development strategy of public libraries, in particular how the broad "cultural" dimension of HKPL's mission could be fulfilled through HKCL.

Panel on Home Affairs

Relevant documents on development of public library services in Hong Kong

Committee	Date of meeting	Paper
Panel on Home Affairs	18.6.2007 (Item VI)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Home Affairs	12.12.2008 (Item V)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Home Affairs	17.4.2009 (Item V)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Home Affairs	9.4.2010 (Item IV)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Home Affairs	14.6.2010 (Item I)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Home Affairs	---	Administration's paper on the development of public library services (LC Paper No. CB(2)2272/11-12(01))
Panel on Home Affairs	---	Updated Background Brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat on the development of public library services (LC Paper No. CB(2)2272/11-12(02))