

Acquisition and management of collection items in public museums

The Audit Commission ("Audit") conducted a review of the acquisition and management of collection items in public museums managed by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department ("LCSD"). A related review was conducted in March 2006.¹

2. LCSD manages 14 museums and a film archive, which have been designated under section 105G of the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance (Cap. 132) as museums ("LCSD museums"). Since the last Audit Review in 2006, the number of collection items in LCSD museums has increased by 540 159 (51%), from 1 055 456 items in December 2007 to 1 595 615 items in December 2019. LCSD museums acquire art, cultural and scientific items mainly through donations or purchases. From 2015-2016 to 2019-2020, LCSD acquired 143 557 collection items, of which 140 279 (97.7%) and 3 278 (2.3%) were acquired by donations and purchases respectively. In 2019-2020, the expenditure incurred by LCSD in provision of museum services amounted to \$480.7 million.

3. The Committee noted the following findings from the Director of Audit's Report:

- Audit examination of the appointment of 180 and 174 Museum Expert Advisers ("MEAs")² in 27 panels respectively for the 2018-2019 to 2019-2020 term and the 2020-2021 to 2021-2022 term discovered that:
 - (a) LCSD had not devised guidelines nor timetable for the appointment of MEAs. Invitation letters to MEAs for appointment were only issued in late March of 2018 and 2020 respectively (i.e. a few days before term commencement date of 1 April);
 - (b) MEAs confirmed acceptance of appointment between 4 April and 24 August 2018 for the 2018-2019 to 2019-2020 term, and between 27 March and 9 May 2020 for the 2020-2021 to 2021-2022 term; and

¹ Chapter 5 of the Director of Audit's Report No. 46 – "Provision of public museum services".

² LCSD appoints MEAs from different areas of expertise to provide expert advice to LCSD museums for a two-year term commencing on 1 April. MEAs are grouped in panels of specific knowledge.

- (c) three MEAs provided advice to the Hong Kong Museum of History in April 2018 on an acquisition proposal for items with the total estimated value of \$100,000 before accepting the MEA appointments for the 2018-2019 to 2019-2020 term in April, May and June 2018 respectively;
- a review on the appointment/re-appointment of MEAs conducted by LCSD in February 2014 suggested that the desirable size of each MEA panel should be at least five MEAs. However, Audit examination of the lists of MEAs for the 2018-2019 to 2019-2020 term and the 2020-2021 to 2021-2022 term revealed that among the 27 MEA panels of each term, there were five and six panels each comprising only three to four MEAs respectively;
 - in one case involving two donated items to the Hong Kong Museum of History, while endorsement was obtained for acceptance of the donation in January 2015, it was not until 2020 (after more than five years) that a suitable location could be identified for storing and carrying out fumigation work for the two donated items. However, the donor subsequently decided to donate one of the items only;
 - Audit examination of the accession³ of collection items in the Hong Kong Museum of History, the Hong Kong Heritage Museum and the Hong Kong Film Archive revealed that:
 - (a) as at 31 December 2019, there were 13 346 items pending accession in the Hong Kong Museum of History and 3 622 (27%) of which were acquired at least five years ago;
 - (b) of some 10 000 collection items with untraceable source acquired in the 1980s in the Hong Kong Museum of History, as at 31 December 2019, the accession of 1 851 items had not yet been completed. Of these 1 851 items, 1 714 items were under the registration process and the accession of 137 items had not yet been commenced;
 - (c) as at 31 December 2019, there were 414 items pending final checking and recording in the Hong Kong Museum of History. Although the accession of these 414 items was not completed, they had been presented in an exhibition since 2001; and

³ Accession is the process of registering and cataloguing museum collection items.

Acquisition and management of collection items in public museums

- (d) as at 30 April 2020, 24 314 and 693 819 items were pending accession in the Hong Kong Heritage Museum and the Hong Kong Film Archive respectively. Of the 24 314 items pending accession in the Hong Kong Heritage Museum, 1 104 (5%) items were acquired at least 10 years ago, and of the 693 819 items pending accession in the Hong Kong Film Archive, 456 666 (66%) items were acquired at least 10 years ago;
- Audit examination of the regular stocktaking and surprise checking records in the Hong Kong Museum of History and the Hong Kong Film Archive discovered that:
- (a) the last 10-year stocktaking cycle⁴ for 112 429 collection items in the Hong Kong Museum of History commenced in April 2011 and was scheduled for completion in March 2021. However, as at 30 April 2020, only 28 395 (25%) of these items had the regular stocktaking process completed;
- (b) for the collection items in the Hong Kong Film Archive,⁵ while the last stocktaking cycle for film items completed in November 2013,⁶ it took 45 months (from December 2013 to September 2017) to rectify all irregularities and find all missing items. Since then, no stocktaking had been conducted until a new stocktaking cycle commenced in July 2020 (i.e. no stocktaking had been conducted in the 34-month period between September 2017 and June 2020);⁷
- (c) only 25 120 (5.5%) of the 455 801 film-related items had stocktaking completed as at 31 December 2019, more than 11 years since the cycle commenced in April 2008. During the 11-year period, stocktaking had also been suspended on

⁴ According to the operation manual of the Hong Kong Museum of History, for collection items with accession completed (other than those presented in permanent exhibitions, of special heritage value or stored in special storerooms), regular stocktaking will be conducted in a 10-year cycle (i.e. each item will undergo the stocktaking process once in 10 years).

⁵ Collection items in the Hong Kong Film Archive are categorized into film items, film-related items and film-related reference items.

⁶ The stocktaking cycle for film items was 11 years. The last stocktaking cycle commenced in 2011 and was scheduled for completion in 2022. Since 2019, the stocktaking cycle for film items has been revised from 11 to 2.5 years.

⁷ According to LCSD, the work plan for the new stocktaking cycle was affected by the outbreak of Coronavirus Disease 2019.

Acquisition and management of collection items in public museums

two occasions (for 25 months in total) due to relocation of collection items and staff redeployment respectively;

- (d) no stocktaking requirement was set out for film-related reference items in the operation manual of the Hong Kong Film Archive. As at 31 December 2019, among the 1 305 368 collection items in the Hong Kong Film Archive, 149 551 (11%) were film-related reference items. The Hong Kong Film Archive had also counted items handled during daily operation as samples that had already been subjected to surprise checking; and
 - (e) the Hong Kong Film Archive conducted regular stocktaking in 2.5-year cycle and 18-year cycle for film items and film-related items respectively. The practice of conducting more frequent regular stocktaking on collection items with higher monetary or historical value was not adopted;
- Audit examination of the storage of collection items in the Hong Kong Museum of History and the Hong Kong Film Archive revealed that:
- (a) as of September 2020, two of the four off-site stores (not purpose-built for storage of museum collection items) maintained by the Hong Kong Museum of History were not provided with 24-hour temperature and humidity control. The temperature and relative humidity of the two storerooms in the period between 1 January and 26 August 2020 ranged from 16 to 34 degrees Celsius, and 45% to 90% respectively. LCSD had not laid down guidelines on the storage of museum collection items in non-purpose-built stores;
 - (b) since 2017, LCSD had been looking for suitable storage space to relocate the collection items stored in an aged building with undesirable conditions by the Hong Kong Museum of History. While LCSD had subsequently identified a suitable space for relocating part of the collection items stored in the above building in the first quarter of 2021, the remaining collection items were still pending for storage in a proper place; and
 - (c) LCSD had spent some 15 years (from 2005 to 2020) developing the Heritage Conservation and Resource Centre to alleviate the shortage of museum storage space, but the project was still in its pre-construction stage;

Acquisition and management of collection items in public museums

- while permanent exhibitions were often designed to last for 10 to 15 years for science-related museums (i.e. the Hong Kong Science Museum and the Hong Kong Space Museum) and 15 to 20 years for other museums, 10 (59%) of the 17 permanent exhibitions in the above two science-related museums had been operating for more than 15 to 29 years, and 7 (22%) of the 32 permanent exhibitions in 2 of the 13 other museums had been operating for more than 20 to 33 years;
- the number of museum collection items reported in the Controlling Officer's Report included collection items pending accession in the Hong Kong Heritage Museum and its two branch museums,⁸ and the Hong Kong Film Archive, whereas only the number of collection items with accession completed were reported for the remaining 11 museums of LCSD; and
- as at 31 December 2019, 431 304 (27%) of the 1 595 615 collection items were accessible on the museum websites. The Hong Kong Heritage Museum, the Hong Kong Museum of History and the Hong Kong Film Archive had only 5%, 14% and 30% respectively of their collection items accessible on the museum websites.

4. The Committee did not hold any public hearing on this subject. Instead, it asked for written responses regarding the procedures and criteria for acquisition of collection items in public museums, identification of suitable space for storing donated items, the latest position of accession of collection items in public museums, measures to expedite the accession and stocktaking of museum collection items, the progress of LCSD's review on the practices in conducting regular stocktaking and surprise checking by public museums, measures to ensure proper storage of collection items, the implementation of the construction project of the Heritage Conservation and Resource Centre, and enhancements to permanent exhibitions in public museums. The replies from **Director of Leisure and Cultural Services** are in *Appendices 5* and *6*. The Committee noted that:

- as at 1 December 2020, the number of collection items pending accession in the Hong Kong Museum of History, the Hong Kong Heritage Museum and the Hong Kong Film Archive were 12 796, 21 946 and 693 458 respectively;

⁸ The two branch museums of the Hong Kong Heritage Museum are the Hong Kong Railway Museum and the Sheung Yiu Folk Museum.

Acquisition and management of collection items in public museums

- the above three museums had planned to further review and streamline the accessioning process, such as upgrading the collection management system to expedite the approval process and simplifying information required for accession. With the implementation of these measures, it was anticipated that the time required for completing accession could be reduced by one-third; and
- the expected time required to complete the accession of the remaining collection items was about three years by the Hong Kong Museum of History and the Hong Kong Heritage Museum, and about seven to eight years by the Hong Kong Film Archive.

5. The Committee is particularly concerned that the Hong Kong Film Archive requires around seven to eight more years to complete the accession of all its existing collection items, and considers that it should take further measures, such as recruiting professionals from the local film industry, which is facing acute challenges and a high unemployment rate as a result of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 epidemic, to expedite the accession process.

6. The Committee wishes to be kept informed of the progress made in implementing the various recommendations in respect of this subject.