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Panel on Home Affairs

**Updated background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat
for the meeting on 8 June 2012**

Development of public library services

Purpose

This paper summarizes the concerns of members of the Panel on Home Affairs ("the Panel") on the development of public library services.

Background

2. In June 2007, the Administration briefed the Panel on the key recommendations of the Recommendation Report of the Committee on Libraries^(note) which covered the following areas: mission of Hong Kong Public Libraries ("HKPL"); making knowledge accessible and affordable; supporting lifelong learning; bringing culture to the community; leveraging the use of information technology ("IT"); offering value-added services; promotion of reading and literary arts; and mode of governance. To take forth these recommendations, the Public Libraries Advisory Committee ("the Advisory Committee") was set up in May 2008 to advise the Administration on the overall development strategy of HKPL.

3. The provision of public libraries in Hong Kong is made with reference to the Hong Kong Planning Standards and Guidelines ("HKPS&G") which states that one district library should be provided for each district and that there should also be a district library for every 200 000 persons. Taking into account the geographical and demographic characteristics as well as the infrastructural development of individual districts, the Administration may consider providing a

Note: The Committee on Libraries was established in November 2004 to advise the Secretary for Home Affairs on strategies and plans for betterment of the Hong Kong public libraries' facilities and services. It submitted its Recommendation Report to the Secretary for Home Affairs in May 2007.

major library in lieu of two district libraries for every 400 000 population. Small libraries may also be provided to play a supplementary role in the library network. For locations where it is infeasible to provide static libraries, arrangement will be made for mobile library vans to visit designated service points to provide convenient lending services for the residents in the vicinity. Currently, there are 67 static libraries and 10 mobile libraries.

4. In addition to providing new public libraries, the Administration has been adopting multi-pronged approach to enhance public library services through the following measures –

- (a) enhancing space provision of district and major libraries;
- (b) reprovisioning, upgrading and renovation of existing public libraries to upgrade / improve the facilities provided;
- (c) supporting the development of community libraries through collaborating with non-governmental organizations;
- (d) supporting libraries of schools and kindergartens by collaborating with the Education Bureau;
- (e) developing a "library without walls" to enable the public to access the e-resources collection of public libraries; and
- (f) extending opening hours of major and district libraries to provide library services seven days a week.

Deliberations of the Panel

5. The Panel held five meetings between June 2007 and June 2010 to discuss issues relating to the development of public library services and met with the Advisory Committee at a special meeting on 14 June 2010. The deliberations and concerns of members are summarized below.

Provision of library services

6. Noting the ongoing demand from the respective District Councils ("DCs") for additional library facilities, members expressed grave concern that the provision of library services at the district level was far from adequate in meeting the local demand. Some members considered that the planning standards for public libraries as suggested in HKPS&G had failed to take into account Hong Kong's crowded living environment and the need of the public for more study and reading space. They urged the Administration and the Advisory Committee to review the planning standards for public libraries in order to address the growing needs for library facilities.

7. According to the Advisory Committee, 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 and quality to ensure the standard of library services.

8. The Administration advised that the planning standards for public libraries provided in HKPS&G were last reviewed by the then Committee on Libraries in 2006 and no change was proposed in respect of the planning standards. Apart from HKPS&G, consideration was also given to the geographical and demographic characteristics of a district in determining the provision of library facilities for a district. Tung Chung area was cited as an example that a district library was provided for a population of around 80 000 on account of the special circumstances of Tung Chung.

9. Some members maintained the view that more resources and proactive efforts should be devoted to meeting the demand for library facilities. They further urged the Administration to exercise flexibility in addressing the demand of the local community for more small libraries at the district level.

10. The Advisory Committee advised that under the Libraries @ neighbourhood – Community Libraries Partnership Scheme, 154 community libraries had been set up through collaboration with non-profit making and local organizations to offer convenient, assessable library services across 18 districts to complement the services of HKPL. Efforts were also made to extend the distribution points and networks for library services through the growing number of community libraries.

Opening hours of public libraries

11. Some members were concerned that the opening hours of public libraries had failed to address the needs of the working population and students. To optimize public use of library facilities, they suggested that the Administration should earmark extra resources for extending the opening hours until 10:00 pm.

12. The Administration advised that the opening hours of 33 major and district libraries had been extended 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. As the extension of opening hours was well-received by the public, the Advisory Committee would consider further extending the opening hours. Members were also advised that the Administration would liaise with the DCs concerned in considering the use of DC funds for extending the opening hours of public

libraries, in particular those at remote areas.

13. On members' suggestion of recruiting volunteers to render assistance to frontline staff during the extended opening hours to alleviate the pressure on staff cost, the Administration advised that it would review the role of volunteers in its review of manpower deployment for library services.

Self-service facilities beyond library premises

14. Citing the examples of Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen where 24-hour self-service book lending/returning machines were introduced at busy transport interchanges at modest costs, some members suggested that the Administration and the Advisory Committee should explore the feasibility of setting up similar facilities for the lending of popular collections and returning of library items at MTR stations and outlying island ferry piers, in order to facilitate the accessibility of library services to the public, particularly the working population.

15. Members were advised that the Advisory Committee 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, choice and size of the collections, locations of the facilities and related rental costs. The Administration also pointed out that the development of RFID technology made the borrowing and returning books through self-service vending machines possible. The feasibility of the proposal was subject to the outcome of a pilot test on the RFID Sub-system which aimed at enhancing the efficiency in major library processes, including lending and returning of library materials.

16. The Panel passed a motion at its meeting on 9 April 2010 urging the Administration to (a) 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; (b) provide additional public libraries and extend library opening hours with reference to the views of various DCs; and (c) consider setting up library outlets at mass transit railway stations and ferry piers on outlying islands for convenient access by the public.

Promotion of e-materials

17. Members explored the feasibility of promoting the use of e-books which was a more cost-effective and convenient option in the delivery of library services. There was also a suggestion of making available e-version of overseas periodicals and newspapers for public viewing.

18. The Advisory Committee held the view that the promotion of the use of e-resources collection of public libraries was one of the main directions in developing a "library without walls" which enabled the public to access reading materials without physically visiting the public library premises. The Advisory Committee remarked that the new mode of delivery of library services would also help resolve the space shortage problem for HKPL.

Promotion of literary arts and reading habits

19. Holding the view that the Advisory Committee should focus its resources in cultivating and enhancing the cultural quality of people through library services, members sought information about the long-term plan to promote literary arts. There was a suggestion that HKPL should collaborate with publishers and community organizations in the promotion of reading habits to the community, in particular among students.

20. 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 Literature, to enhance literature appreciation and literary creativity. HKPL also collaborated with publishers, non-profit making organizations and schools in organizing various educational activities to promote reading habits, such as reading programmes, book displays and exhibitions.

Membership of the Advisory Committee

21. Members expressed concern on the membership of the Advisory Committee. Some members considered that representatives from the Legislative Council and DCs should be appointed to sit on the Advisory Committee in order to follow up public views and suggestions on the public library services, while other members held the view that more female members should be invited to the Advisory Committee so as to keep up with the Administration's gender benchmark target of 30% for appointment to advisory and statutory bodies.

22. The Administration responded that DC members had been engaged in the management of library services at the district level to cater for the needs of the local community since January 2008. The Administration had sought to ensure a balanced and professional composition in the appointment of members of the Advisory Committee.

Recent developments

23. HKPL launched on 29 September 2011 a trial scheme 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 new service would encourage people to use public library services and promote the culture of reading.

Relevant papers

24. A list of the relevant papers on the Legislative Council website is in the **Appendix**.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
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Relevant papers on the development of public library services

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

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