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Panel on Home Affairs

Updated background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat for the meeting on 19 December 2018

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

Hong Kong Public Libraries

2.   The Hong Kong Public Libraries ("HKPL") provides a network of 70 static libraries and 12 mobile libraries, which are interconnected by an integrated automated library system to provide access to a wide range of library services.   As at November 2018, the library collection has 14.9 million items, including books, audio-visual materials, newspapers, periodicals, CD-ROM databases, microforms and maps.

3.   According to the Administration, HKPL has applied the extensive use of information technology ("IT") to improve the efficiency in delivering library services, enhance and speed up access to the library collections, and optimize use of staff resources.   The automated library system is one of the largest computerized library systems in the world with Chinese and English capabilities. Through the Library Catalogue terminals, Internet facilities and multimedia terminals, information in electronic and multimedia formats has fast become an integral part of the library's resources.   Remote access to library services which includes telephone and web renewal service, online reservation service and email enquiry service is made available to the public.

Development of public library services

4.	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.

5.	In November 2001, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department ("LCSD") commissioned a consultancy study on the future development of 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.

6.	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 the betterment of Hong Kong's public library facilities and services. CoL submitted its Recommendation Report to SHA in May 2007.

7.	On 18 June 2007, the Administration briefed the Panel on the key recommendations of CoL's Recommendation Report. A summary of the key recommendations was issued vide LC Paper No. CB(2)2042/06-07(03).

8.	To take forth CoL's recommendations, the Public Libraries Advisory Committee ("PLAC") was set up in May 2008 to advise the Government on the overall development strategy of HKPL. The Panel discussed the development of public library services with PLAC representatives and the Administration on 14 June 2010 and 22 March 2013.

Deliberations of the Panel

Application of information technology

9.	At the Panel meeting on 22 March 2013, members sought details of HKPL's online library services and its IT infrastructure. The Administration advised that following the successful launch of the Next Generation Integrated Library System ("NGILS") in early 2012, HKPL was actively pursuing the next phase of development with a view to introducing more new service functions,

such as electronic reference service system, electronic resources management system, inter-library loan system and management information system, so as to better serve the public. Moreover, the upgrading of the Multimedia Information System, which aimed to (a) support the development and retrieval of digital content, (b) enhance navigation capabilities, and (c) provide additional channels for the public to access library resources through wireless and mobile technology, was also in good progress. These two major IT projects would be completed in 2013.

10. The Administration further advised that in parallel with the launch of NGILS, HKPL had been trying out the application of the Radio Frequency Identification ("RFID") technology in six selected libraries on a pilot basis since December 2011. A feasibility study was being conducted to examine the costs and benefits involved in the full-scale implementation of RFID at public libraries. The study would be completed in 2013. Subject to the outcome of the study, the Administration would recommend the way forward on whether the RFID technology should be applied at all public libraries.

11. Some members suggested that HKPL should install advanced self-service book borrowing and returning machines at major transportation outlets, such as the airport and Mass Transit Railway ("MTR") stations, to facilitate the general public in the loan and return of books. Members also enquired about the direction to be followed by HKPL in the provision of electronic library resources.

12. The Administration advised that it was exploring the feasibility of setting up convenient library outlets at MTR stations through the application of the RFID technology. On the provision of electronic library resources, the Administration advised that the collection and acquisition policy of HKPL was regularly reviewed to meet the changing needs of the different sectors, and that an appropriate mix of print, non-print and electronic collections should be built up. At the request of the Panel, the Administration provided supplementary information on the implementation of automated library service in September 2013 (LC Paper No. CB(2)1800/12-13(01)).

Planning standards for libraries

13. 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.

14.   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.   The Administration explained that while major and district libraries remained the backbone of the library network, it would keep in view the need to supplement library services in districts with small and mobile libraries where justified. Furthermore, it would continue to work with district organizations to set up community libraries under the "Libraries@neighbourhood Community Libraries Partnership Scheme", which had been gaining popularity in the local community.

15.   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 the betterment of the facilities and services of HKPL.

16.   Nevertheless, PLAC representatives informed members that PLAC had recommended an enhancement of space provision for new libraries from the previous 3 310 square meters to 6 200 square meters for major libraries and 2 200 square meters to 2 900 square meters for district libraries, so as to provide more spacious library environment.   The new standards had been adopted in the planning of new libraries (e.g. the Ping Shan Tin Shui Wai Public Library ("PSTSWPL"), which was open to the public in February 2013).   The enhanced floor space allowed spatial configuration of the libraries to accommodate more and newer collections and resources, IT services and other ancillary facilities. In addition to the enhanced facilities and services for adults and children, PSTSWPL provided a dedicated library for young adults, a user education hall, an exhibition hall as well as an enlightening greening and outdoor reading environment.   Subject to the availability of space, the Administration might adopt similar layout concept to renovate or upgrade existing libraries to improve their facilities and environment.

Opening hours of public libraries

17.   Some members were concerned that the opening hours of major public libraries 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 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.

Book drop service at Mass Transit Railway stations

18.   Regarding the book drop service provided at three major MTR interchange stations, namely, Central, Kowloon Tong and Nam Cheong, some members questioned why the service could not be extended to other MTR stations, despite the general support received for the service.   Noting that the drop boxes for returning books at Nam Cheong Station had recorded a low usage rate, members suggested that consideration might be given to relocating the book drops from Nam Cheong Station to other stations along the West Rail line, such as East Tsim Sha Tsui Station or Hung Hom Station.   They further suggested that the book drops should be made more eye-catching and visible and located appropriately for the convenience of users.

19.   The Administration explained that the findings of the recent review of the trial book drop service showed that the monthly usage of the book drop service had been on the rise gradually since its launch in September 2011, but the average monthly usage during the period was only about 29% of its planned capacity.   In view of the high start-up and recurrent costs involved and the readers' preference to return and borrow books in person, it would not be cost-effective to extend the service to more MTR stations using the current mode of operation.   Pending the result of the feasibility study on the business case of service-wide adoption of the RFID technology, it was recommended that the book drop service at the three MTR stations should be maintained until a longer-term arrangement was worked out.   On the feasibility of relocating the book drop from Nam Cheong Station to another MTR station along the West Rail line, the Administration advised that it would look into the issue and discuss further with the MTR Corporation Limited.

Promotion of literary arts and reading habits

20.   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.

21.   The Administration advised that HKPL had all along been promoting reading and literary arts in Hong Kong and would continue to do so through a variety of library extension activities catering for all age groups.   Apart from regular reading programmes held in branch libraries, HKPL also organized in collaboration with community organizations territory-wide literary programmes to incubate and sustain reading habits and interest of the public in support of lifelong learning and to build an extensive patron base.   These activities included the Reading Programme for Children and Youths, Reading Clubs and various reading ambassador programmes launched in partnership with schools and local organizations.

Recent developments

22.   At the policy briefing-cum-meeting on 22 October 2018, the Administration informed the Panel that to support the development of "smart city" and to further promote reading culture in the community, LCSD planned to develop a new "Smart Library" system for wider application of new technology and provision of innovative services.

23.   The Administration will consult the Panel on the funding proposal for the creation of "Smart Library" by redevelopment of library information systems with innovative technology at the next meeting on 19 December 2018.

Relevant papers

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

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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
	12.12.2008 (Item V)	Agenda Minutes
	17.4.2009 (Item V)	Agenda Minutes
	9.4.2010 (Item IV)	Agenda Minutes
	14.6.2010 (Item I)	Agenda Minutes
	---	Administration's paper on the development of public library services (LC Paper No. CB(2)2272/11-12(01))
	---	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))
	22.3.2013 (Item III)	Agenda Minutes
Legislative Council	20.11.2014	Official Record of Proceedings (pages 146 to 149)
	25.2.2015	Official Record of Proceedings (pages 24 to 26)

Committee	Date of meeting	Paper
	29.4.2015	Official Record of Proceedings (pages 30 to 33)
---	29.2.2016	Research Brief: Challenges of public libraries in Hong Kong prepared by the Research Office of the Legislative Council Secretariat (LC Paper No. RB02/15-16)
Legislative Council	27.4.2016	Official Record of Proceedings (pages 21 to 27)
	4.5.2016	Official Record of Proceedings (pages 66 to 69)
	17.5.2017	Official Record of Proceedings (pages 72 to 77)
Panel on Home Affairs	22.10.2018 (Item III)	Agenda

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