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Panel on Home Affairs

Updated background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat for the meeting on 8 February 2021

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 January 2021, 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 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 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 policy recommendations on 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.   To follow up on the CHC's recommendations as well as the recommendations of the consultancy study commissioned by LCSD, the Government established the Committee on Libraries ("CoL") in November 2004 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.

6.   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).

7.   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.

8.   On 19 December 2018, the Administration consulted the Panel on its proposal to develop a Smart Library System ("SLS") to enhance the quality, cost-effectiveness and customer-friendliness of the facilities and services of HKPL.   The funding proposal was approved by the Finance Committee on 15 February 2019.   According to the Administration, SLS would be implemented in phases with an aim of launching all the core functions by mid-2023.

Deliberations of the Panel

Development of Smart Library System

9.   Considering that the devotion of about $880 million as capital expenditure for the development of SLS was quite substantial, some members suggested that key performance indicators should be formulated for the evaluation of SLS. They further enquired how SLS would support the development of Hong Kong as a Smart City.   Members also enquired about the details of the hardware and

system software involved in SLS and whether patrons' personal data, including their e-IDs, would be protected when the big data of public libraries were shared as open data.

10.   The Administration explained that SLS would enhance the quality and efficiency of library services and optimize the use of staff resources through wider use of information and communications technologies and self-service facilities.   For instance, it was estimated that SLS would bring about annual recurrent savings of about $144.1 million, and the time for delivering returned books to libraries of origin would also be shortened from the current four working days to two working days.   Besides, the Administration considered that SLS would enable HKPL to explore the extension of library service hours in a more cost-effective way (please see paragraph 16 below).

11.   The Administration further advised that SLS would support the development of Hong Kong as a Smart City by facilitating the capturing and analysis of big data which could be shared as Public Sector Information for use by both public and private sectors for analysis, research and innovative application.   The Administration informed members that SLS would be implemented by phases and would replace the current two major library information technology systems, namely the Next Generation Integrated Library System and the Multimedia Information System, with wider use of information and communications technology and self-service facilities enabled with Radio Frequency Identification ("RFID") technology, which allowed borrowing of library materials inside the library using patron's own mobile devices, and checking-out of items instantly with simple taps complementary to RFID-enabled self-charging terminals.   The Administration assured members that the privacy of patrons would be protected when relevant data were shared as open data.   Moreover, effective key performance indicators would be formulated for SLS in consultation with PLAC as appropriate.

12.   Some members suggested that a more robust search function should be provided in SLS and the contents of physical books should be made searchable as far as possible.   The Administration advised that various library resources including physical books, e-books and e-databases could be searched via a single platform in future.   The Administration would request publishers to provide excerpts of printed books as far as possible to facilitate searching.

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 demands 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.[1] The Administration also undertook that members' views would be taken into consideration as and when HKPS&G was next reviewed.

Opening hours of public libraries and provision of self-service facilities

15.   Some members considered that the opening hours of public libraries should be extended in order to meet the needs of the working population and students. They suggested that the Administration should earmark extra resources for extending the opening hours, and review the existing differences in the opening hours of various public libraries. Members also suggested that the provision of user-friendly self-service facilities should be enhanced, and more locations should be arranged for patrons to borrow and return books.

16.   The Administration explained that the opening hours of public libraries varied according to their respective types and functions. At present, the Hong Kong Central Library, the 37 major/district libraries and 32 small libraries opened for 74 hours, 71 hours and 50 hours a week respectively. The Administration advised that the extension of library opening hours would entail a large amount of extra staff resources under the existing system and its mode of operation. However, after the development of SLS in future, the adoption of innovation and new technology supported by user-friendly facilities, such as RFID-enabled multi-functional self-service kiosks, would enable HKPL to explore the extension of library hours in a more cost-effective way.

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[1]   Under the "Libraries@neighbourhood Community Libraries Partnership Scheme", HKPL collaborates with non-profit-making organizations and local groups in providing community-based library services. These organizations and groups are offered block loan of library materials as well as professional advice on setting up community libraries tailored to the needs of their target users.

Promotion of literary arts and reading habits

17.   Some members considered that PLAC should seek to enhance the cultural quality of Hong Kong 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 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 development

19.   The Administration will consult the Panel on a public works proposal for the renovation of the Tsuen Wan Public Library at the next meeting on 8 February 2021.

Relevant papers

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

Council Business Division 4
Legislative Council Secretariat
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Relevant documents on the
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
	22.3.2013 (Item III)	Agenda Minutes
---	--- (issued on 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)
Panel on Home Affairs	19.12.2018 (Item V)	Agenda Minutes
	29.4.2019 (Item III)	Agenda Minutes

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