

Report No. 48 of the Director of Audit — Chapter 6

PROVISION OF PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICES

Summary

1. Libraries managed by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) are collectively known as the Hong Kong Public Libraries (HKPL). As at December 2006, there were 76 public libraries and 11.9 million library items. In 2006-07, total expenditure on the provision of public library services was estimated at \$687 million. The expenditure on acquisition of library materials in 2006-07 was about \$86 million.

Management of library collections

2. ***Need to conduct regular checking of inventories of library materials.*** The LCSD has not conducted any stocktakes in public libraries since it took over the management of public libraries in January 2000. In this review, Audit conducted stocktakes in six libraries. The stocktakes have shown that the missing rate of library items was 2.1%. Audit also demonstrated that, by means of a phased approach, library stocktakes can be conducted without unduly affecting the services to library users. *Audit has recommended that the Director of Leisure and Cultural Services should re-examine the need for conducting regular checking of inventories of library materials.*

3. ***Need to incorporate a stocktaking function in the library computer system.*** The barcoding system of the HKPL's Library Automation System (LAS) is not conducive to performing an efficient stocktaking function. There is a newer technology known as Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) which may offer better stock management capabilities. As at February 2007, the LCSD had secured funding approval from the Legislative Council to launch a pilot RFID scheme in 2010 after the replacement of the LAS. *Audit has recommended that the Director of Leisure and Cultural Services should consider incorporating a stocktaking function in the RFID systems, if adopted by the HKPL.*

4. ***Need to review reference proportions of library materials.*** The HKPL has laid down reference proportions of library materials in its acquisition policy. For example, the reference proportion of books for adults to books for children is 70% to 30%. The reference proportions have been adopted by the HKPL since January 2000. Audit analysed the profile of books borrowed by users, and ascertained the loan proportions which reflected the community demands for library materials. The loan proportions were found to be at variance with the reference proportions. In particular, the loan proportion of books for children of 40% was considerably higher than the reference proportion of 30%. This suggests that the current reference proportions may not fully meet the community needs.

Audit has recommended that the Director of Leisure and Cultural Services should: (a) critically review whether the current reference proportions of library materials are still appropriate, taking into account changes in social and demographic factors; and (b) review the reference proportions of library materials for public libraries periodically.

Acquisition of library materials

5. ***Need to meet local needs.*** Based on Audit's analysis, for the two new libraries to be opened in Tung Chung (in 2009) and Tin Shui Wai (in 2011), there was a mismatch between the expected demands and the planned provisions. *Audit has recommended that the Director of Leisure and Cultural Services should: (a) before building up the collections of new libraries, ascertain the needs of the communities to be served by them; and (b) for the two new libraries in Tung Chung and Tin Shui Wai, review the proportions of Chinese books to English books, and books for adults to books for children, to ensure that the collections best meet the needs of the local communities.*

6. ***Need to shorten the lead time for building up new library collections.*** The HKPL needs to consider shortening, as far as possible, the lead time for building up the collections for new libraries, taking into account that: (a) it is not good value for money for the new library items to be left unused for years, pending library opening; and (b) the items acquired may become outdated when the new libraries are opened. *Audit has recommended that the Director of Leisure and Cultural Services should: (a) consider ways to shorten the lead time for building up the collections of new libraries; and (b) when selecting items for building up the collections of new libraries, take into account the risk that the items may become outdated by the time the new library is opened.*

Processing of new library materials

7. ***Need to ensure prompt processing of new library items.*** The key processing stages for new library materials include cataloguing, binding, delivery to the holding libraries, and preparation. To maximise the benefits of library materials, they need to be released for public use as early as possible. Audit's sample checking showed that: (a) for items which required binding, 27% took more than the target time to complete processing; and (b) for items which did not require binding, 60% took more than the target time to complete processing. *Audit has recommended that the Director of Leisure and Cultural Services should ensure that the processing time targets are met for all new library materials.*

8. ***Need to enhance the monitoring of new library items under processing.*** There is no management information to help the HKPL monitor the time spent at each processing stage. The HKPL also does not regularly generate lists of long outstanding items under processing for follow-up action. *Audit has recommended that the Director of Leisure and Cultural Services should: (a) enhance the monitoring of new library items under processing; and (b) ensure that the HKPL regularly generates lists of outstanding library items under processing for the following up of all long outstanding items.*

Collection of library fees and charges

9. ***Need to improve management of outstanding library fees and charges.*** Audit noted that some outstanding library fees and charges had not been included in the annual arrears of revenue return. This is because, under the existing LAS, overdue fines are regarded as arrears of revenue only when the status of the library item concerned is set as “lost”. As at 31 March 2006, of the \$17.6 million arrears of revenue, \$0.2 million had already exceeded the six-year limitation period for the recovery of debts. *Audit has recommended that the Director of Leisure and Cultural Services should: (a) ensure that all overdue fines are included in the arrears of revenue return in future; and (b) expedite recovery actions on outstanding library fees and charges.*

Other areas for improvement

10. ***Demand for extending library opening hours.*** In a consultancy study in 2002, it was reported that the public wanted longer library opening hours, and that the HKPL could consider whether the extra resources required for extending opening hours were justified by usage. However, there was no systematic assessment of the public demand and potential usage of longer library opening hours. *Audit has recommended that the Director of Leisure and Cultural Services should: (a) systematically assess the public demand and potential usage of longer library opening hours; and (b) address the resource implications of extending library opening hours in formulating the strategic plan of the HKPL.*

11. ***Need to explore the use of new technologies.*** The use of information technology helps in the effective and efficient provision of public library services. For example, the enhancement of the LAS may help address some of the problems related to the processing of new library materials. *Audit has recommended that the Director of Leisure and Cultural Services should continue exploring the use of emerging technologies (e.g. RFID) for improving public library services.*

12. ***Need to formulate a strategic plan.*** The LCSD recognises the need to formulate a strategic plan for the development of public library services. However, seven years after its establishment in January 2000, the LCSD has still not formulated a formal strategic plan for the HKPL. *Audit has recommended that the Director of Leisure and Cultural Services should accord priority to formulating and promulgating a strategic plan for the HKPL.*

Response from the Administration

13. The Administration has accepted all the audit recommendations.

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