

# ACQUISITION AND MANAGEMENT OF COLLECTION ITEMS IN PUBLIC MUSEUMS

## Executive Summary

1. Museums collect, conserve, and exhibit their collections for the purpose of education and providing enjoyable and inspiring experiences. Through museum collections, the public could discover a composite picture of cultural, historical and natural heritage. The Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) is responsible for providing, developing and managing public museums and related services to collect historic, art and science objects, preserve local cultural heritage and promote public appreciation for it. As of September 2020, LCSD managed 14 museums, a film archive and 2 visual arts centres. The 14 museums and the film archive have been designated under section 105G of the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance (Cap. 132) as museums (unless stated otherwise, the 14 museums and the film archive are hereinafter referred to as LCSD museums).

2. The collection scope of LCSD museums includes Hong Kong art, Hong Kong history and culture, Chinese art and history, science and technology, and Hong Kong film heritage. As at 31 December 2019, LCSD museums had 1,595,615 collection items. LCSD museums acquire art, cultural and scientific items mainly through donations or purchases. From 2015-16 to 2019-20, LCSD acquired 143,557 collection items, of which 140,279 (97.7%) and 3,278 (2.3%) were acquired by donations and purchases respectively. The Audit Commission (Audit) has recently conducted a review of the acquisition and management of collection items in public museums managed by LCSD.

### Acquisition and accession of museum collection items

3. *Acquisition of museum collection items.* The acquisition, care and use of collection items of each LCSD museum are governed by its collection policy. LCSD has devised guidelines setting out the procedures and assessment criteria for the acquisition of museum collection items. According to LCSD acquisition guidelines of April 2020, when an object is proposed for acquisition, the proposal will be

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considered by the Programme Committee of the museum proposing the acquisition. At least two or three Museum Expert Advisers (MEAs) with relevant expertise will be invited to assess the object proposed for acquisition in all cases of acquisition by purchase, and in cases of acquisition by donation with query from the Programme Committee or the approving authority. With the support of the Programme Committee and unanimous support of all MEAs consulted, the proposal will be submitted to the approving authority for endorsement. LCSD will then sign a sale agreement with the seller or a deed of donation with the donor, and proceed with the payment and collect the object (paras. 2.2 to 2.4). Audit noted the following issues:

- (a) ***Need to duly appoint MEAs before soliciting their advice.*** LCSD appoints MEAs from different areas of expertise for a two-year term to provide expert advice to LCSD museums. MEAs are grouped in panels of specific knowledge. New MEA term commences on 1 April. For the 2018-19 to 2019-20 term and the 2020-21 to 2021-22 term, 180 and 174 MEAs were appointed respectively in 27 panels of each term (paras. 2.5 and 2.6). Audit noted that:
  - (i) LCSD did not have guidelines nor set a timetable for the appointment of MEAs;
  - (ii) invitation letters to MEAs for appointment were only sent in late March of 2018 and 2020 respectively (i.e. a few days before term commencement date of 1 April);
  - (iii) MEAs confirmed acceptance of appointment between 4 April and 24 August 2018 for the 2018-19 to 2019-20 term, and between 27 March and 9 May 2020 for the 2020-21 to 2021-22 term; and
  - (iv) three MEAs provided advice on an acquisition proposal (total estimated value of the items was \$100,000) for the Hong Kong Museum of History in April 2018 before accepting the MEA appointments for the 2018-19 to 2019-20 term in April, May and June 2018 respectively (para. 2.6);
- (b) ***Need to maintain at least five MEAs in each panel.*** In February 2014, a review on the appointment/re-appointment of MEAs conducted by LCSD suggested that the desirable size of each MEA panel is at least five MEAs. Audit examined the lists of MEAs for the 2018-19 to 2019-20 term and the

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2020-21 to 2021-22 term, and found that of the 27 MEA panels of each term, there were respectively five and six panels each comprising only three to four MEAs (para. 2.7); and

- (c) ***Room for improvement in acquisition of donated items.*** From 2015-16 to 2019-20, over 90% of collection items acquired were from donations each year. Audit examined the acquisition of donated items in the Hong Kong Museum of History and noted that in one case (involving the donation of two wooden boats), while endorsement was obtained for accepting the donation in January 2015, it was not until 2020 (after more than five years) that a suitable location was available for storing and carrying out the fumigation work. In the event, the donor subsequently informed LCSD that he decided to donate only one of the two boats. In July 2020, LCSD collected the boat and stored it in the Law Uk Folk Museum for fumigation and conservation treatment (para. 2.9).

4. ***Accession of museum collection items.*** Accession is the process of registering and cataloguing museum collection items. Audit examined the accession of collection items in the Hong Kong Museum of History, the Hong Kong Heritage Museum and the Hong Kong Film Archive (para. 2.14). Audit found room for improvement as follows:

- (a) ***Need to ensure timely completion of accession of collection items in the Hong Kong Museum of History.*** As at 31 December 2019, there were 13,346 items pending accession in the Hong Kong Museum of History. Of these, 3,622 (27%) items were acquired at least five years ago (para. 2.16);
- (b) ***Need to expedite accession of items with unknown source acquired in the 1980s in the Hong Kong Museum of History.*** In December 2005, LCSD identified an unknown number of collection items in the Hong Kong Museum of History. In October 2009, LCSD checked and recorded that the unknown items comprised some 10,000 items with untraceable source. According to LCSD, these items were acquired in the 1980s and kept in the museum temporary stores afterwards. Audit examined the accession records of these 10,000 items and noted that, as at 31 December 2019, accession of 1,851 items had not yet been completed. Of the 1,851 items, 1,714 items were under the registration process and accession of 137 items had not yet been commenced (paras. 2.18 and 2.19);

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- (c) ***Need to ensure completion of accession before presenting the collection items.*** As at 31 December 2019, there were 414 items pending final checking and recording in the Hong Kong Museum of History. Although accession of these 414 items was not completed, LCSD has been presenting them in the “Hong Kong Story” permanent exhibition in the Hong Kong Museum of History since 2001. In early 2020, LCSD has resumed the accession processes for these 414 items starting from registration. According to LCSD, the purpose of resuming the accession processes was to rectify the old records to ensure that the items concerned would not be mixed up with other stage decoration materials when they were dismantled during enhancement of the permanent exhibition (paras. 2.20 to 2.22); and
- (d) ***Need to critically review the accession processes and monitor the progress of accession of collection items in the Hong Kong Heritage Museum and the Hong Kong Film Archive.*** In late August and September 2020, LCSD informed Audit that 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 (paras. 2.24 to 2.26).

### Stocktaking and storage of museum collection items

5. ***Stocktaking of museum collection items.*** According to the operation manuals of the museums, LCSD will conduct stocktaking for all collection items on a cyclical basis (i.e. regular stocktaking) and surprise checking for selected collection items. Audit examined the regular stocktaking and surprise checking records in the Hong Kong Museum of History and the Hong Kong Film Archive (para. 3.2). Audit noted the following issues:

- (a) ***Need to ensure completion of regular stocktaking within the required timeframe.*** 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). The 10-year stocktaking cycle for 112,429 items under this category last

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commenced in April 2011 and had been scheduled for completion in March 2021. However, as at 30 April 2020, only 28,395 (25%) of the 112,429 items had the regular stocktaking process completed (paras. 3.3 and 3.4);

- (b) ***Room for improving efficiency in regular stocktaking exercises.*** Collection items in the Hong Kong Film Archive are categorised into film items, film-related items and film-related reference items. As at 31 December 2019, there were 1,305,368 collection items in the Hong Kong Film Archive. According to LCSD, the 1,305,368 items comprised 611,566 items with accession completed and 693,802 items pending accession. Audit examined the regular stocktaking records on collection items with accession completed in the Hong Kong Film Archive (paras. 3.6 and 3.7). Audit noted that:
- (i) for film items, the last stocktaking cycle completed in November 2013 and the first interim stocktaking report was issued in December 2013. However, it took 45 months (from December 2013 to September 2017) to rectify all irregularities and find all missing items. In July 2020, a new stocktaking cycle commenced (i.e. no stocktaking had been conducted in the 34-month period between September 2017 and June 2020); and
  - (ii) for film-related items, only 25,120 (5.5%) of the 455,801 items had stocktaking completed as at 31 December 2019, more than 11 years since the cycle commenced. Moreover, stocktaking had been suspended on two occasions (totalled 25 months) during the 11 years (paras. 3.7 and 3.8);
- (c) ***Need to improve comprehensiveness of requirements on regular stocktaking.*** There was no stocktaking requirement on film-related reference items in the operation manual of the Hong Kong Film Archive. As at 31 December 2019, of the 1,305,368 collection items in the Hong Kong Film Archive, 149,551 (11%) items were film-related reference items (para. 3.9);
- (d) ***Need to conduct adequate surprise checking on collection items.*** The objective of surprise checking of collection items is to provide an independent counter-checking on the collection items by persons not

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directly involved in routine collection management. However, Audit noted that the Hong Kong Film Archive had counted items handled during daily operation, deeming them as samples that had already been subjected to surprise checking (para. 3.11); and

- (e) ***Need to increase frequency of stocktaking for valuable items.*** LCSD museums conduct stocktaking of their collection items on a cyclical basis. Depending on monetary values, historical values and location of the collection items, some LCSD museums will conduct stocktaking on some of their collection items more frequently. Audit noted that for the Hong Kong Film Archive, regular stocktaking will only be conducted 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 (paras. 3.12 and 3.13).

6. ***Storage of museum collection items.*** As of September 2020, LCSD museums maintained a total storage space of 16,090 square metres (m<sup>2</sup>) for storing collection items, including 6,100 m<sup>2</sup> (38%) in storerooms inside museums and 9,990 m<sup>2</sup> (62%) in off-site stores. Audit examined the storage of collection items in the Hong Kong Museum of History and the Hong Kong Film Archive (para. 3.16). Audit noted the following issues:

- (a) ***Need to keep temperature and relative humidity of off-site stores within appropriate ranges.*** As of September 2020, of the four off-site stores (not purpose-built for storage of museum collection items) maintained by the Hong Kong Museum of History, two were not provided with 24-hour temperature and humidity control (Store A and Store B). Audit noted that the temperature and relative humidity in the two storerooms of Store A in the period between 1 January 2020 and 26 August 2020 ranged from 16 °C to 34 °C, and 45% to 90% respectively. According to LCSD, collection items kept in stores not purpose-built for storage are carefully selected according to the material nature. In addition, LCSD will deploy other effective means such as creation of microclimate to keep collection items in good condition if it is deemed necessary. However, Audit noted that LCSD had not laid down guidelines on collection items stored in stores not purpose-built (paras. 3.19 to 3.21);

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- (b) ***Need to expedite relocation of collection items from an off-site store.*** One of the stores (Store C) maintained by the Hong Kong Museum of History was located in an aged building. Audit noted that the conditions of the aged building used as Store C were causing concerns. In March 2017, ArchSD advised LCSD that using the aged building as Store C was not recommended. Since 2017, LCSD had been looking for suitable storage space to relocate the collection items stored in Store C. In September 2020, LCSD informed Audit that a space was identified to relocate part of the collection items stored in Store C and relocation was scheduled to commence in the first quarter of 2021. Furthermore, LCSD would continue to identify additional space to relocate the remaining collection items stored in Store C (paras. 3.22 and 3.24);
- (c) ***Need to ensure appropriate temperature and relative humidity in storerooms inside museums.*** There are six storerooms with a total area of 1,228 m<sup>2</sup> in the Hong Kong Film Archive building for storage of collection items. According to LCSD, three (Storerooms A, B and C) of the six storerooms were purpose-built for storage and the remaining three (Storerooms D, E and F) were not purpose-built for storage but subsequently changed to be used as temporary storage. LCSD has laid down reference ranges of temperature and relative humidity of the storerooms for storing the collection items. Audit examined the temperature and relative humidity records of the six storerooms between 1 January 2019 and 1 June 2020 (totalled 75 weeks) and found that the temperature and relative humidity of the storerooms were out of the reference ranges in 69% and 68% of the time respectively (para. 3.26); and
- (d) ***Need to expedite development of the Heritage Conservation and Resource Centre.*** In March 2005, LCSD identified a site in Tuen Mun for the development of the Central Museum Collection Repository (later renamed Heritage Conservation and Resource Centre — HCRC) to alleviate the shortage of museum storage space. In March 2009, LCSD found that the proposed site in Tuen Mun was not suitable for HCRC development due to technical constraints and its remote location. Alternatively, another site in Tin Shui Wai was identified. In April 2009, the Yuen Long District Council proposed to incorporate more public space and facilities accessible by the public in the project. Since then, LCSD has been liaising with the relevant government bureaux and departments and stakeholders on the inclusion of public facilities. In June 2018, the Finance Committee of the Legislative Council approved a funding of \$89 million for the

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pre-construction consultancy services and site investigation works for the construction of HCRC. In October 2020, LCSD informed Audit that it would submit the revised HCRC proposal to the Yuen Long District Council in the first half of 2021 (paras. 3.28 to 3.31).

### Other related issues

7. ***Enhancement of museum permanent exhibitions.*** Permanent exhibitions of individual museums contain collection items or exhibits of the subject matter of the museum which are essential and remain relevant during the entire time they are open to the public. As of September 2020, there were a total of 49 permanent exhibitions in the LCSD museums. LCSD enhances permanent exhibitions in the museums at intervals to sustain the appeal to the public, cultivate a wider audience base and enhance the educational elements in their services (paras. 4.2 and 4.3). Audit noted the following issues:

- (a) ***Need for timely enhancement of permanent exhibitions.*** According to LCSD, in line with professional practice of museums worldwide, permanent exhibitions are 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 (para. 4.5). Audit noted that:
  - (i) 10 (59%) of the 17 permanent exhibitions in the 2 science-related museums had been operating for more than 15 years (more than 15 to 29 years). While enhancement for 1 of the 10 exhibitions was in progress, those for the remaining 9 exhibitions were under planning; and
  - (ii) 7 (22%) of the 32 permanent exhibitions in 2 of the 13 other museums had been operating for more than 20 years (more than 20 to 33 years) and enhancement of the exhibitions was in progress (para. 4.6); and
- (b) ***Need to better monitor progress of enhancement for permanent exhibitions.*** Audit examined the enhancement for 17 permanent exhibitions completed between 2015-16 and 2019-20 and found that the enhancement of 4 exhibitions was completed with delay of some 1 to 6 years. Audit



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selected the two exhibitions with 6-year delay (i.e. Project A in the Hong Kong Space Museum) for further examination. Audit noted that Project A was delayed for 76 months and the permanent exhibitions were closed for 30 months for the enhancement. According to LCSD, the delay was due to time taken for deciding the themes of enhanced exhibitions, preparing the specification for detailed design, rectifying building defects, and fabricating and installing new exhibits. In April 2014, LCSD established a steering committee to monitor the progress of enhancement of permanent exhibitions (including Project A) (paras. 4.8 to 4.12).

8. ***Maintenance of museum exhibits and facilities.*** Permanent exhibitions present museum collections and exhibits, and are fitted with facilities to support the presentation of the collection items and exhibits. Proper and timely maintenance of museum exhibits and facilities is essential for the smooth operation of a museum for the enjoyment of the public. Audit examined the maintenance of museum exhibits and facilities in the Hong Kong Science Museum and the Hong Kong Space Museum (para. 4.15). Audit noted the following issues:

- (a) ***Scope for improvement in monitoring and conducting maintenance works.*** LCSD has adopted a computer system, namely the Exhibition Maintenance Portal (EMP), to record and facilitate maintenance of exhibits and facilities in the Hong Kong Science Museum and the Hong Kong Space Museum. According to EMP records, in 2019-20, 8,277 repair orders were completed, of which 72 (1%) orders had each taken more than 90 days to complete. Audit noted that apart from EMP records (with the dates of placing and completion of the repair order), there were no other records showing the progress of 64 of the 72 repair orders. For the remaining 8 (72 minus 64) repair orders, relating procurement records showed that procurements (e.g. replacement parts) were only conducted three to eight months after the placing of the repair orders (paras. 4.16 to 4.18); and
- (b) ***Need to improve accuracy in calculating availability of interactive exhibits in the Hong Kong Space Museum.*** LCSD pledges to maintain at least 90 % of the hands-on (i.e. interactive) exhibits in use at all times in the Hong Kong Science Museum and the Hong Kong Space Museum. EMP was used in the Hong Kong Science Museum to monitor the availability of interactive exhibits. However, the related EMP functions were not applicable in the Hong Kong Space Museum. To assess the availability of interactive

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exhibits, the Hong Kong Space Museum has been using the total number of repair orders placed (for interactive and non-interactive exhibits) and half of the total number of exhibits in the calculation (based on the assumption that the number of interactive exhibits was approximately half of the total number of exhibits). In July 2020, LCSD informed Audit that LCSD was planning to enhance EMP. Upon completion of the enhancement, the availability of interactive exhibits could be monitored through the system (paras. 4.21 and 4.22).

9. ***Need to adopt a consistent approach in reporting number of museum collection items.*** According to LCSD's Controlling Officer's Report, as at 31 December 2019, there were 1,595,627 museum collection items (stated as number of objects in museums collections in the Controlling Officer's Report as a performance indicator). Of the 1,595,627 museum collection items, 1,595,615 items were in the LCSD museums and 12 items were in the Art Promotion Office. Audit noted that 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, and the Hong Kong Film Archive. However, for the remaining 11 museums, only the number of collection items with accession completed were reported (para. 4.25).

10. ***Need to improve public access of museum collection items on the museum websites.*** Since 2002, LCSD museums have been uploading information (e.g. photographs and descriptions) of selected collection items on individual museum websites to enhance public accessibility of museum collections. According to LCSD, as at 31 December 2019, 431,304 (27%) of the 1,595,615 collection items were accessible on the museum websites. Audit noted that nearly all collection items in the Hong Kong Museum of Art, the Hong Kong Science Museum and the Hong Kong Space Museum were accessible on the museum websites. However, only 5%, 14% and 30% of collection items in the Hong Kong Heritage Museum, the Hong Kong Museum of History and the Hong Kong Film Archive respectively were accessible on the museum websites. According to the five-year Corporate Business Plan of LCSD museums for 2017-22, LCSD would make use of the museum websites, along with other online platforms, to make the collection items more accessible to the public (paras. 4.27 and 4.28).

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### Audit recommendations

11. Audit recommendations are made in the respective sections of this Audit Report. Only the key ones are highlighted in this Executive Summary. Audit has *recommended* that the Director of Leisure and Cultural Services should:

- (a) take measures to ensure that MEAs are timely appointed for each term and consider laying down guidelines and setting a timetable for the MEA appointment process (para. 2.12(a));
- (b) explore effective means to increase the number of MEAs to ensure that at least five MEAs are maintained in each panel as far as practicable (para. 2.12(b));
- (c) make greater efforts to identify storage spaces for donated items promptly in future as far as practicable (para. 2.12(c));
- (d) for accession of museum collection items in the Hong Kong Museum of History:
  - (i) continue to make efforts to ensure timely completion of accession of collection items (para. 2.28(a)(i));
  - (ii) complete accession of items with unknown source acquired in the 1980s as soon as practicable (para. 2.28(a)(ii)); and
  - (iii) for the items pending final checking and recording but being presented in permanent exhibitions, take measures to ensure that they are suitably recorded before dismantling so that they would not be mixed up with other decoration materials, and complete accession of them as soon as practicable after the items are dismantled (para. 2.28(a)(iii));
- (e) for the Hong Kong Heritage Museum and the Hong Kong Film Archive, critically review the accession processes and closely monitor the progress of each process with a view to completing the accession of collection items in a timely manner (para. 2.28(b));

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- (f) review the progress of regular stocktaking of collection items in the Hong Kong Museum of History to ascertain whether it is practicable to complete the stocktaking within the 10-year cycle ending in March 2021, and draw up a backup plan if necessary (para. 3.14(a));
- (g) for stocktaking in the Hong Kong Film Archive:

  - (i) closely monitor the progress of regular stocktaking of film items and film-related items, and take measures to ensure that stocktaking is completed within the timeframe as stated in the operation manual in future (para. 3.14(b)(i));
  - (ii) for film-related items, review the progress of regular stocktaking of the current cycle and draw up a timetable with a view to completing the stocktaking process within the cycle (para. 3.14(b)(ii));
  - (iii) consider conducting regular stocktaking on film-related reference items (para. 3.14(b)(iii));
  - (iv) revise the operation manual to specify adequate number of collection items to be checked in surprise checking (para. 3.14(b)(iv)); and
  - (v) review the frequency of regular stocktaking for collection items with higher monetary or historical value (para. 3.14(b)(v));
- (h) review the practices of regular stocktaking and surprise checking in other LCSD museums (i.e. other than the Hong Kong Museum of History and the Hong Kong Film Archive), look into any similar irregularities as identified in this audit review, and take remedial measures as necessary (para. 3.14(c));
- (i) for the off-site stores of the Hong Kong Museum of History, lay down guidelines on suitable storage of collection items (para. 3.33(a));
- (j) relocate the collection items of the Hong Kong Museum of History stored in the aged building as soon as practicable (para. 3.33(b)(i));

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- (k) in collaboration with the Director of Architectural Services, continue to closely monitor the structural condition of the aged building, and take prompt actions to strengthen the structure if the building would continue to be used as stores and repair any defects identified (para. 3.33(b)(ii));
- (l) take measures to maintain the temperature and relative humidity in the storerooms of the Hong Kong Film Archive within the reference ranges (para. 3.33(c));
- (m) review the conditions of storerooms inside museums and off-site stores of other LCSD museums (i.e. other than the Hong Kong Museum of History and the Hong Kong Film Archive), look into any similar irregularities as identified in this audit review, and take remedial measures as necessary (para. 3.33(d));
- (n) step up efforts to expedite the development of HCRC (para. 3.33(e));
- (o) timely enhance the permanent exhibitions in the science-related museums and other museums (para. 4.13(a));
- (p) better monitor the progress of enhancement for permanent exhibitions in future and take prompt actions to ensure timely completion (para. 4.13(b));
- (q) improve documentation for repair orders in the Hong Kong Science Museum and the Hong Kong Space Museum (para. 4.23(a));
- (r) review the documentation and time taken for conducting maintenance works of museum exhibits and facilities in other LCSD museums (i.e. other than the Hong Kong Science Museum and the Hong Kong Space Museum), look into any similar irregularities as identified in this audit review, and take remedial measures as necessary (para. 4.23(b));
- (s) closely monitor the progress of the EMP enhancement project to improve accuracy in calculating the availability of interactive exhibits in the Hong Kong Space Museum (para. 4.23(c));

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- (t) **review and adopt a consistent approach in reporting the number of museum collection items in the Controlling Officer's Report in future (para. 4.29(a)); and**
- (u) **step up efforts to increase the number of museum collection items accessible on the museum websites, in particular the websites of the Hong Kong Heritage Museum, the Hong Kong Museum of History and the Hong Kong Film Archive (para. 4.29(b)).**

## **Response from the Government**

12. The Director of Leisure and Cultural Services agrees with the audit recommendations.