

Executive Summary

Direct Investigation Report

E-book Lending Service of Public Libraries under Leisure and Cultural Services Department

Introduction

In 2001, the Hong Kong Public Libraries under the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (“LCSD”) launched the first e-book collection. Currently, the number of e-book collections offered by public libraries has increased to 14, providing more than 490,000 e-books (including extra copies). Subsequent to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, LCSD had temporarily closed its public libraries at intervals and adjusted their services (such as shortening opening hours and limiting number of library visitors). Public demand for e-books of public libraries surged. With some popular e-book titles having a long waiting list, there could be months-long or even year-long wait for patrons.

2. Advancement in technology has given impetus to increased popularity in e-books publishing and reading. This Office considers that LCSD should attach greater importance to its work relating to e-book collections and continue to enhance the e-book lending service of public libraries.

3. Since the commencement of our preliminary inquiry, LCSD has been working on improving the e-book lending service with reference to our views and observations. LCSD’s proactive approach in this regard is commendable. Nevertheless, our findings of this direct investigation show that LCSD should reconsider the loan periods of e-books and make more efforts to learn about public demand so as to ensure optimal utilisation of resources. LCSD should also make good use of the advantages of e-books to enhance the services of public libraries and promote a reading culture among the public.

Our Findings

4. On the e-book lending service of LCSD’s public libraries, we have the following comments and recommendations.

(I) Insufficient Grounds for Shorter Loan Periods of Some E-books in Comparison to Printed Books

5. LCSD considered that it was easier to read, borrow and return e-books. Hence, it had set a loan period of 5 or 7 days for most e-books, which was shorter than the 14-day loan period for printed books, to avoid affecting circulation of e-book loan items. While we understand that LCSD, when deciding the loan periods, takes into consideration various factors such as the scales of e-book collections, usage rate, the function of and quota for online reading and the impact on waiting time for requested items, we consider that LCSD should also take into account the length of e-books' content and assess how much time patrons need for reading them. Otherwise, it may discourage patrons from borrowing e-books, which is against the principle of promoting a reading culture advocated by LCSD.

6. Having perused the information we provided about the loan periods offered by libraries in other cities (ranging from 14 to 21 days), LCSD slightly extended the loan period of Chinese e-books from 5 days to 7 days and maintained the loan period of English e-books at 7 days. We recommend that LCSD continue to review whether the loan periods of e-books should be further extended to allow patrons reasonable time for reading the borrowed items.

(II) To Systemically Collect, Analyse and Record Information about E-book Lending and Waiting Time

7. As LCSD's e-book lending service is provided through the platform of service providers, LCSD can only grasp the usage of e-book service of the Hong Kong Public Libraries with reference to the data provided by the service providers. Nonetheless, the types of data so provided are limited. For example, the service providers could not provide the number of patrons on the waiting list and the waiting time for reserved items. LCSD, on its part, has not made any steps to collect information and keep records about the highest number of reservation and the waiting time for popular e-books. Without a comprehensive set of data, it is difficult for LCSD to accurately understand the usage of the e-book collections and individual e-book titles. Notwithstanding the fact that LCSD has regularly reviewed the usage of e-books and understood the reservation situation through information about the reservation counts, we consider that the waiting time and the number of reservation of an e-book at a specific period of time can hardly be reflected merely by the accumulative reservation counts. Nevertheless, we agree that it

may not be cost effective for LCSD to collect and maintain the number of patrons on the waiting list and the waiting time for tens of thousands of e-books on its own. As such, LCSD can consider other approaches, such as sorting out and recording the reservation data of some particularly popular e-books. On the other hand, LCSD has not maintained data and records on the e-books replaced due to low usage within the subscription period of the relevant e-book collection. This shows that it has not taken such data and records as important information.

8. We consider that LCSD should strengthen the current mechanism for regularly collecting, analysing and recording information about the usage of e-books. By doing so, LCSD could better understand patrons' demand for e-books and acquire or subscribe suitable types and quantities of e-books to cater for public demand and shorten the waiting time for popular e-books.

(III) Inconsistent Approving Procedure for Previous Acquisition of E-books

9. All printed books to be acquired for public libraries under LCSD must be approved in the Collection Development Meeting. Nevertheless, prior to July 2021, LCSD had not followed this procedure when selecting titles for some of the e-book collections, resulting in inconsistency in the practice of acquisition of books. After our preliminary inquiry had commenced, LCSD required that all e-book titles shortlisted for acquisition be submitted to the Collection Development Meeting for approval.

(IV) To Review Acquisition of Extra Copies and New Editions

10. While it is LCSD's usual practice to acquire multiple copies of printed books, nearly all e-books of public libraries have only one copy. Unlike the public libraries in other cities where popular e-books have dozens of extra copies, LCSD would only acquire one copy for popular e-books, which is unsatisfactory. Also, in our opinion, LCSD cannot simply rely on the online reading quota to tackle the problem of long waiting time for e-books, and it is necessary for LCSD to implement other effective measures at the same time. We are pleased to note that LCSD has taken our advice in the course of this direct investigation and acquired more than 11,000 extra copies and new editions of some e-books. The circulation of some e-books with more extra copies or new editions acquired seems to have slightly improved. Nonetheless, we consider it will be unwise for LCSD to acquire a large number of extra copies simply to shorten the waiting time for certain items. Therefore, we recommend that LCSD regularly examine the data on usage and waiting time for popular e-books and where appropriate, acquire

reasonable quantity of extra copies or new editions of titles involving a longer waiting time.

(V) *Ineffective Readers Opinion Survey on E-booking Lending Service*

11. In readers opinion survey, LCSD combined the 14 e-book collections and more than 80 e-Databases together as “e-books/e-databases” and asked patrons to rate their levels of satisfaction. Neither did LCSD’s survey focus on the e-book lending service, nor did it specifically set the quantity, types, waiting time and user interface of e-books as individual items to allow patrons to rate their levels of satisfaction and give comments separately.

12. In our view, LCSD’s existing survey could not gauge patrons’ opinion on the e-book lending service accurately. Hence, the surveys are ineffective in assisting LCSD to analyse the situation and formulate appropriate measures to enhance or publicise such service.

(VI) *To Strengthen Promotion of E-books*

13. We recommend that LCSD consider strengthening the promotion of e-book collections of the Hong Kong Public Libraries on its website and social media platforms. For instance, LCSD may inform the public of the availability of e-book collections with e-books in various languages, announce the top ten most-read e-books in each collection, publicise the new editions of popular e-books acquired as well as giving advice on e-book devices that are compatible with the e-books lending services of the Hong Kong Public Libraries.

Our Recommendations

14. In light of our findings in this direct investigation, The Ombudsman has made the following six recommendations to LCSD:

- (1) continue to review the situation and consider whether the loan periods of e-books should be extended to allow patrons reasonable time for reading the items borrowed;

- (2) strengthen the current mechanism for reviewing regularly the usage and lending service of e-book collections and their e-book titles (such as the number of patrons on the waiting lists and estimated waiting time for the reserved items) in a systematic manner;
- (3) continue to monitor the acquisition of e-books in public libraries to ensure that all e-books suggested for acquisition must go through the Collection Development Meeting for approval;
- (4) regularly evaluate the arrangement for acquisition of e-books and consider acquiring more extra copies and/or new editions of popular e-books taking into account their usage and waiting time;
- (5) set specific questions on e-book service of public libraries in future readers opinion surveys to obtain substantive comments from patrons about e-book service; and
- (6) make good use of the websites and social media accounts of the Hong Kong Public Libraries to promote e-book titles, for instance, providing relevant information on the availability of e-books in other foreign languages, top ten most-read e-books, new editions of popular e-books and compatible e-book devices.

Office of The Ombudsman

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