

LCQ18: Public access to records and materials of the Public Records Office

Following is a question by the Hon Charles Mok and a written reply by the Chief Secretary for Administration, Mr Matthew Cheung Kin-chung, in the Legislative Council today (June 27):

Question:

Regarding public access to the holdings of the Public Records Office (PRO), will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the current volume of PRO's holdings; in respect of each type of holdings (including files, bound volumes, photographs, posters, maps and plans as well as films), (i) the volume of holdings and (ii) the percentage of holdings digitised;

(2) of the current means by which the public can obtain copies of PRO's holdings free of charge; whether the Government will, by making reference to the practices of the National Archives of the United Kingdom, ensure that the public can have at least one way of obtaining copies of its holdings free of charge (e.g. taking photographs of the original records directly by themselves or downloading digital files from the Internet);

(3) whether it has recently tightened the following practice: a member of the public may (i) request staff members of the PRO Search Room to print a digital file of its holdings and then (ii) take photographs of the printed copy with his/her personal digital photographic device (while the printed copy will be kept by PRO for viewing by other members of the public); if so (e.g. refusing to provide the aforesaid free printing service), of the details and its justifications for increasing the costs and difficulties of members of the public in obtaining copies of the holdings for research purposes; and

(4) as the Government has indicated that it will strive to digitise those frequently accessed and popular archival records, of the progress of the digitisation work?

Reply:

President,

The Public Records Office (PRO) of the Government Records Service (GRS) serves as the central repository for the permanent archives of the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. PRO is committed to appraising and acquiring records and materials of enduring value and making them available for public access and use. It offers a rich heritage resource consisting of documents, photographs, films, posters and other archival

records tracing the development of Hong Kong. Access to these holdings is managed under the Public Records (Access) Rules 1996, and members of the public are required to observe applicable regulations made to protect the records, including the "Rules on Using the Public Records Office Search Room" and other regulations on the protection of copyright, personal data, etc. Public access to archival records is free of charge. However, a fee is payable for obtaining a paper copy or digital copy of any records of the holdings. This arrangement is in line with the practice of other overseas national archives. To enhance its services to the public, PRO has since April 2009 been providing the service of "Using Personal Photographic Device in Search Room", under which the public may take photographs of the paper records of PRO's holdings free of charge with their personal photographic devices, provided that they undertake to observe the Copyright Ordinance and that the physical condition of the holdings is suitable for photography.

Our reply to the question raised by Hon Charles Mok is as follows:

(1) PRO currently houses a total of nearly 1.5 million holdings. Among them, more than 85 000 archival records, or 5.7 per cent of all holdings, have been digitised to produce some two million digital images. The numbers of archival records and digitised holdings stored in various media are set out below:

Medium	Number of Archival Holdings (nos.)	Number of Digitised Holdings (%)
Files/Bound Volumes (Note 1)	763 400	69 300 (9%)
Photographs	15 700	6 000 (38%)
Posters	1 300	600 (46%)
Maps and plans	8 500	2 300 (27%)
Films	3 000	1 800 (60%)
Microforms (Note 2)	708 300	5 800 (0.8%)
Total	1 500 200	85 800 (5.7%)

Note 1: Only a combined total is available. We do not maintain a breakdown of individual items.

Note 2: Microfilming is an internationally recognised practice suitable for the long-term preservation of records. As the public can access microfilm records directly through a computer, the digitisation of microforms is not a priority for GRS.

(2) As mentioned above, from April 2009 onwards, the public may, under the service of "Using Personal Photographic Device in Search Room", take photographs of paper records of the PRO's holdings with their personal photographic devices free of charge for research or private study purposes.

Starting from May 24 this year, the public may also obtain copies of digital records free of charge through taking photographs of images on a computer screen. The arrangements on the free service of "Using Personal Photographic Device in Search Room" have been posted in the PRO Search Room and uploaded to the GRS website for public information. Members of the public may also access digitised archival records which have been uploaded to the website and download them free of charge for research or private study purposes. Owing to reasons such as copyright considerations, some digitised archival records are not available on the GRS website for downloading by the public.

(3) PRO has always been committed to providing quality service to facilitate public access to its holdings and keeps its service under review. In the past, arrangements were made by PRO to have the copies of digital records procured from overseas national archives printed in black and white, so that the public might obtain free copies of the digital records through taking photographs of the printed copies with their personal photographic devices. In a recent review of the service, PRO found that such practice is not only outdated but also inconsistent with those adopted by overseas national archives in handling digital records. Apart from the implications on manpower and resources, a large amount of paper (note 3) and printer toner are consumed in the production of paper copies which defeats the principle of conservation and environmental protection. As such, PRO has, starting from May 24 this year, adopted a more relaxed approach by allowing members of the public to take photographs of the images on a computer screen directly with their personal photographic devices to obtain copies of digital records free of charge, provided that they comply with applicable regulations made to protect the records, including those on copyright and personal data. This does not only shorten the time required for the public to obtain copies of holdings, but also allows them to obtain colour copies of the digital records. It also serves the purpose of environmental protection. In the long run, PRO will continue to study other measures that may facilitate public access to and downloading of archival records via the Internet.

Note 3: The average paper consumption in the past three years was about 11 200 sheets per year, while the paper consumption in first five months this year has already reached 20 000 sheets.

(4) GRS has been digitising its holdings with reference to criteria commonly adopted by overseas archival institutions (e.g. physical condition of holdings, users' demand or utilisation rate, copyright restriction, personal data consideration etc.) in order to facilitate public access to the holdings via digital means. At present, over 85 000 archival holdings have been digitised by GRS to produce about two million digital images, including about 1.3 million digital images of microfilm collections, oversized maps and architectural plans that are of greater public demand, so as to enhance public accessibility to the relevant items via digital means.

Digitisation of archival holdings is a complex process which involves a number of different steps on testing and treatment (e.g. cataloguing and quality checking of digital records, standardising equipment at regular intervals etc.). Such steps aim to ensure that the archival documents to be

digitised are restored to good condition and the data therein are visibly clear before proceeding with the process. Moreover, the quality of the resultant images must also undergo stringent checking after digitisation. These tasks require substantial input of manpower and resources. The GRS plans to digitise archival holdings with high popularity first in the coming 10 years, with an annual production of about 350 000 digital images. The total number of digital images is expected to increase to 6 million items, or about 10 per cent to 15 per cent of all archival records, which is comparable to the digitisation rates of overseas archives.