

LCQ5: Public library services

Following is a question by the Hon Ngan Man-yu and a written reply by the Secretary for Culture, Sports and Tourism, Mr Kevin Yeung, in the Legislative Council today (February 28):

Question: At present, the Government provides mobile libraries to enable people living in areas without static libraries and those living in remote areas to gain access to library services. The Government also provides self-service library stations at convenient locations with heavier pedestrian flow but far from existing libraries, rendering round-the-clock library services such as borrowing, return, payment and pickup of reserved library materials. There are views that self-service library stations can facilitate self-service borrowing and return of books by members of the public, especially working people, at any time. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the following information for each mobile library and each self-service library station in each of the past three years: the number of loans, the number of returns and the number of pickups of reserved library materials (with the relevant information tabulated by District Council district);

(2) how the costs of mobile libraries compare with those of self-service library stations in each of the past three years, including the total costs and the average operating costs of each unit (with the relevant information tabulated by District Council district);

(3) whether it has reviewed and compared the effectiveness (including cost-effectiveness and level of public satisfaction) of the services of mobile libraries and self-service library stations, and whether it has considered providing more self-service library stations in various districts and, where appropriate, using them to replace mobile libraries; and

(4) as there are views pointing out that the current opening hours of libraries mostly fall within normal working hours, making it more difficult for working people to make use of the services, whether the authorities have studied the adjustment of the opening hours of libraries, including extending library opening hours in the evenings and on public holidays?

Reply:

President,

The reply to the question raised by Dr the Hon Ngan Man-yu is as follows:

(1) The Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) operates 12 mobile libraries, with a total of 112 service stops, providing services for the

public across districts in Hong Kong. In the past three years, the total numbers of loans and returns of library materials processed by the above mobile libraries were 812 664 and 941 530 respectively. The respective numbers of loans and returns of each of the mobile libraries during the period, broken down by District Council districts, are tabulated at Annex.

Currently, the LCSD provides one self-service library station (library station) each on Hong Kong Island, in Kowloon and in the New Territories respectively at convenient locations with heavier pedestrian flow but far away from existing libraries, rendering round-the-clock services such as borrowing, returning, payment and pickup of reserved library materials. The numbers of loans, returns and pickups of reserved materials of the three library stations in the past three years are tabulated below:

| Item | Number of Loans | | | Number of Returns | | | Number of Pickups of Reserved Materials | | |
|---|-----------------|--------|--------|-------------------|--------|--------|---|-------|-------|
| | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 |
| Library Station on Hong Kong Island Note (Eastern District) | 13 829 | 16 382 | 8 454 | 40 198 | 39 570 | 38 361 | 5 168 | 5 978 | 3 151 |
| Library Station in Kowloon (Yau Tsim Mong District) | 10 643 | 11 336 | 4 539 | 11 190 | 12 586 | 7 190 | 3 034 | 4 305 | 1 490 |
| Library Station in the New Territories (Sha Tin District) | 15 897 | 18 305 | 10 204 | 66 157 | 68 407 | 78 033 | 5 876 | 7 281 | 6 309 |

Note: Since October 2023, the services provided by the library station on Hong Kong Island have been suspended for refurbishment works and installation of new equipment employing radio frequency identification (RFID) technology. During the service suspension, only returning services are provided.

(2) All libraries under the Hong Kong Public Libraries (HKPL) are interconnected by an integrated automated library system. The total operating expenditures for providing library services were \$1.25 billion, \$1.328 billion and \$1.336 billion in 2020-21, 2021-22 and 2022-23 respectively, covering staff cost and the costs of library materials, replacement of furniture and equipment, public utilities, system maintenance, store items, etc, as well as rental for libraries at leased premises, hiring of contracted services and other operational expenses. Since many functions are coordinated centrally, a breakdown on the recurrent operating expenditures incurred by individual libraries (including mobile libraries and library

stations) is not available.

(3) Library stations and mobile libraries enhance the library network by providing complementary services for the public in different modes. Library stations render round-the-clock library services at fixed locations, while mobile libraries provide the public with convenient library services by setting up service stops at different locations across the territory. The LCSD reviews the utilisation of mobile libraries from time to time and collects views from the public on mobile library services through different channels, such as regularly holding Reader Liaison Group gatherings and maintaining close communication with District Councils. Since the commencement of operation of library stations, the LCSD has been collecting usage data for analysing the utilisation of various library stations and has conducted opinion surveys on services of the library stations. Generally speaking, the services provided by mobile libraries and library stations have been well-received by the public.

To enhance the overall library services, the LCSD is now developing a Smart Library System (SLS), which will include a full application of the radio frequency identification (RFID) technology to enable the development of more diversified and user-friendly self-service facilities. The LCSD will carry out refurbishment works in phases for the three library stations by installing new facilities such as book dispensers, book drops and multi-functional kiosks to replace the existing ones, thereby dovetailing with development of the new SLS and enhancing various facilities of the library stations. Such projects are anticipated to be completed within 2024, subsequent to which the LCSD will explore the feasibility of further delivering the services of library stations in due course.

(4) The LCSD currently operates a total of 71 static libraries and 12 mobile libraries, providing diversified library services for the public. To meet the public's aspiration for extending library service hours, the Government has allocated additional resources to extend the opening hours of the Hong Kong Central Library (HKCL) as well as major and district libraries. The HKCL now opens seven days a week, with its service hours extended to 9pm daily and to 7pm on public holidays. All 38 major and district libraries also open seven days a week, with their opening hours extended to 8pm on weekdays and Saturdays, and to 5pm on Sundays and public holidays. Meanwhile, the opening hours of students' study rooms of libraries now run until 10pm from Mondays to Fridays, and until 8pm and 5pm on Saturdays and Sundays respectively.

Given the substantial resources and manpower required for the current mode of library operation, any further extension of library opening hours would not be possible without a significant increase in operating expenditure and staffing. In view of the above, the LCSD must be prudent in weighing a host of factors, including the additional manpower, long-term financial expenditure required, the public's library usage needs and patterns, resource allocation and cost-effectiveness, etc, when determining or adjusting the opening hours of public libraries. On the whole, the existing opening hour arrangements of the HKPL can cater to the needs of the majority of the public.

The LCSD has been exploring measures to extend library service hours in a more cost-effective and sustainable manner. These include the provision of three library stations in phases from 2017, one each on Hong Kong Island, in Kowloon and in the New Territories at convenient locations with heavier pedestrian flow but far away from existing libraries, for round-the-clock services such as borrowing, returning, payment and pickup of reserved library materials; and the launch of the "Joyful Reading at Your Neighbourhood: Library-on-Wheels" Pilot Project in 2020, where the Library-on-Wheels, specially converted small trucks, visit communities at different timeslots including Saturdays, Sundays and public holidays to provide self-borrowing and returning service, offer readers an e-reading experience, and hold reading promotion activities. Given the public's changing mode of reading, the HKPL also sustains its efforts to enhance online electronic resources, with a view to enabling readers to read e-books and access e-databases, digital collection and online library services without time and physical constraints.

In addition, as mentioned in the reply to part (3) above, the LCSD is proactively developing the SLS. In addition to providing self-charging terminals and book drops employing the new-generation RFID technology, the new system will enable installation of smart book drops and lockers outside some of the libraries so that patrons can return borrowed materials and pick up their reserved materials in a self-service manner beyond library opening hours.