

Ombudsman probes e-book lending service of public libraries under Leisure and Cultural Services Department (with photo)

The following is issued on behalf of the Office of The Ombudsman:

The Ombudsman, Ms Winnie Chiu, today (May 12) announced the launch of a direct investigation to examine the e-book lending service of public libraries under the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD).

Public libraries launched the first e-book collection in 2001. At present, the number of e-book collections offered by public libraries has increased to 12, comprising titles for adults and children. A wide range of Chinese and English e-books (including audiobooks) are available for readers of different ages.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the LCSD has since 2020 temporarily closed its public libraries at intervals and adjusted its services (such as shortening opening hours and limiting number of library visitors). Meanwhile, public demand for e-books of public libraries has surged. The overall use of seven e-book collections rose significantly by more than 250 per cent from about 960 000 times in 2019 to about 3.4 million times in 2020. Preliminary inquiry by the Office of The Ombudsman revealed that the waiting lists for some popular e-books were extremely long with hundreds of patrons, who would need to wait for months, if not years, to borrow the items.

Ms Chiu said, "The e-book lending service allows members of the public to access remotely a vast book collection free of charge, and enjoy the pleasure of reading even though borrowing printed books is infeasible during the pandemic. In fact, public interest in e-books has grown with more extensive use of the Internet and electronic devices. It has resulted in a decline in the checkouts of printed books from public libraries over recent years, while the opposite trend is seen in the use of e-books. The LCSD should keep pace with changes in the public's reading habits by reviewing and enhancing the e-book lending service of public libraries, which will also be conducive to promoting a reading culture in Hong Kong. I, therefore, have decided to initiate this direct investigation to examine whether the e-book lending service of public libraries is appropriate and identify any areas for improvement."

The Ombudsman is inviting views from members of the public on this topic. Written submissions should reach the Office of The Ombudsman by June 11, 2022:

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