Following is the speech delivered by the Permanent Secretary for Home Affairs, Mrs Carrie Yau, at the Civic Debate on Culture and Cultural Facilities today (October 30):

The motion tonight is “Hong Kong lacks culture not cultural facilities”. Whether Hong Kong lacks culture or not, it is difficult to conclude since it all depends on how broad a definition you wish to adopt. But I have no hesitation to admit that Hong Kong lacks cultural facilities at this juncture. My proposition tonight is Hong Kong needs both culture and cultural facilities. On both aspects, the community needs to do more. And I do mean the community, not just Government.

Cultural facilities do not exist for their own sake. They are there to serve, develop, and promote culture. Culture is an all-embracing subject. In Hong Kong, our cultural characteristic is “diversity”. If you wish to find the open-mindedness in this city in attracting people from all walks of life, irrespective of their background, it’s probably embedded in the word “diversity”.

There is a debate as to whether Hong Kong has a cultural policy. I believe that we do have a cultural policy. Ours is a descriptive cultural policy as opposed to a prescriptive cultural policy. We do not interfere and we do not prescribe. We adopt an accommodating approach. This policy is in line with the core values of Hong Kong as a free, diversified and open society. The basic tenets of Hong Kong’s cultural policy are:

- respect freedom of creativity and expression
- provide opportunities for participation
- encourage diversified and balanced development
- provide a supporting environment

We do need cultural facilities when culture is presented through performances, exhibitions particularly when we need to capture the audience in specially designed facilities. In other words, cultural
facilities are the necessary hardware and vehicle for the artistic expression and presentation of our cultural achievements, be they on the performing arts front, the visual arts front, film art or literary arts front, to name a few. As civilization develops and matures, facilities are built to present, to conserve and to pass on our culture and our cultural achievements. Museums and performing arts venues have always been planned with the cultural programmes, the artists and the general participating public in mind. The importance of a cultural facility to an art work/endeavour is best manifested in the example of the importance of a concert hall to an orchestra or an orchestral performance, not to mention that nowadays, with iconic architectural approach, a cultural facility is as much part of our culture as the cultural endeavours inside.

To put my point in perspective, we all know that cultural facilities have a long history. If culture did not need cultural facilities, we would not have the ancient Greek and Roman amphitheatres dating back to the BC era. A web search will tell us that the first publicly owned museum, the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, opened to the public in as early as 1765. The need for cultural facilities is the proven wisdom of our ancestors. The need for cultural facilities is recognized by human kind just so long ago. In modern day society, we need cultural facilities for the pragmatic purposes of showcasing our cultural or art works both to our own people and to visitors, of sharing cultural experiences, of nurturing performers or artists, of educating the community, of growing audience, of encouraging community participation in the arts and of providing a convenient medium to facilitate philanthropic contributions to the arts. Investment in these cultural facilities is primarily for the purpose of implementing these wide cultural policy objectives.

This is precisely the purpose behind the Government’s investment in the host of public cultural facilities managed by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD). Over the years, LCSD has been facilitating the growth and development of many arts groups and artists, through the various types of venue-based support and programming support provided at its venues. The LCSD cultural facilities are there to serve the Hong Kong culture, the Hong Kong artists and the Hong Kong community. There is always room for improvement in management and operation of the LCSD venues and cultural presentations, such as through
the Venue Partnership Scheme, as well as widening community participation through a dedicated advisory committee on cultural programming, but the underlying arts and cultural development objectives remain the same.

In the success stories of non-LCSD venues like the Fringe Club and the Hong Kong Arts Centre, we see two cases of how thoughtfully positioned and successfully operated cultural facilities have provided a platform to nurture budding artists and arts groups, and allow the birth of new experimental art forms characteristic of Hong Kong. Without these two venues, we may not have seen the league of up and coming artists, arts groups, arts administrators, and the new art forms as what we have today. These two cultural facilities are definitely cradles for arts and cultural development, and for new artistic experiences. For one, the Fringe is as much a synonym for art nouveau as it is for a quaint heritage cultural facility off the Central district.

In the experience of our only statutory body with a mandate to develop the arts, the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC), it is working hard not only to fund the performances or exhibitions of budding artists but also to find venues for these performances and exhibitions to happen. As HKADC will be able to tell us, we need somewhere, or somewhere suitable, before we can have a congregation before which the artists can showcase their artistic feats.

In the experience of the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts—the major degree-award institution in performing arts, the performing arts venues and facilities within the Academy campus serve the crucial professional training and exposure purpose for the performing arts students, as well as to facilitate community participation and appreciation in the arts.

From the Government’s point of view, both planned cultural facilities and organically developed cultural venues are equally important. We encourage organic clustering of the creative class, for example, the Shek Kip Mei flatted factory estate now being turned into Creative Arts Centre.
In the Committee on Performing Arts Recommendation Report (I) released last June, it was stated that ‘…In a typical year, some 3800 indoor and outdoor performances are presented by LCSD, while around 4000 performances are presented by hirers of major facilities in LCSD venues. More than 2500 programmes are provided in other major non-LCSD performing arts venues…’ It is clear that over the past 10 years, we have come a long way in terms of the proliferation of performing arts programmes in Hong Kong, due to many factors, including not the least the ever growing cosmopolitan nature of our city, the growing cultural literacy of the average Hong Kong citizen, and until more recently, the philanthropic endeavours of corporations and individuals in the community to support arts and cultural programmes. For example, the Swire Group is donating $36 million over a three-year period to support the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra and we see a host of other Hong Kong corporations lending their support to the Hong Kong Arts Festival Society for the annual HK Arts Festival events.

We have also come some way since what Mr Benny Chia referred to as a ‘one horse town’ of Hong Kong (in his recent SCMP article) when we only had the Hong Kong City Hall. Between 1980 and 2000, we had added 14 venues. But what we have so far is still not enough. There is a significant turn-away rate of some 40% of potential hirers from the LCSD venues. It is precisely because of this lack of venue that we have not been able to allow our arts groups to flourish and develop as they may have been able to. We always hear arguments that programmes which can be self-sustaining moneywise have not been able to do so due to the lack of adequate slots at the prime LCSD performing venues to allow them to do long runs which will make economic sense for many shows. The West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD) initiative is what we propose as a response.

In the case of the WKCD, what we have put forward for public engagement are articulations on the essential software requirements (target art forms, seating capacity, ticketing price range to ensure affordability to the public etc.) for cultural facilities of our WKCD Core Arts Facilities Consultative Committee based on elaborate consultations with artists, arts groups and other stakeholders eight to ten years down the road. These proposals are drawn up with the development needs of
artists and arts groups, the programmes, the audience as well as the participating public in mind. They serve to ensure that all these new arts and cultural facilities would be planned from the “inside” out. More importantly, we propose to adopt different modes of governance and management (rather than a repetition of Government-run arts facilities), which would provide maximum room for community participation particularly by the arts community in the running of these cultural facilities.

In the same spirit, we shall be supporting and facilitating the growth of “alternative arts spaces” in the 18 districts in Hong Kong with real local flavour in the 18 districts, such that arts and culture do take deeper roots in the community. There is no end to the list of what can be “alternative arts spaces”. It can be decommissioned factory buildings, it can be school halls, it can be community centres, it can be shopping arcades, it can be railway concourses, it can be heritage buildings. It can even be open spaces.

We fully subscribe to the view that the success of cultural facilities to achieve cultural policy objectives depends on effective and timely strategies to develop and strengthen cultural software. That is why we are planning to provide more resources to step up measures on all fronts to strengthen cultural software.

Culture does not belong to the Government. It belongs to the community and is in fact an integral part of the community. Cultural facilities can be private or public but because they are expensive to build and maintain, a bigger involvement from the public sector is not unexpected.