

LCQ21: Pilot scheme on electric ferries

Following is a question by the Hon Lam San-keung and a written reply by the Acting Secretary for Environment and Ecology, Miss Diane Wong, in the Legislative Council today (November 13):

Question:

In 2021, the Environmental Protection Department (EPD) signed an agreement with two ferry operators participating in the pilot scheme on electric ferries (the pilot scheme) to subsidise their construction of electric ferries and charging facilities in order to test the relevant technical and commercial viability in Hong Kong. The EPD pointed out at the time that the department would assist the ferry operators having signed the agreement in the preparation in respect of the tenders for the construction of electric ferries, and that the testing for electric ferries was tentatively anticipated to commence in 2023. In addition, the EPD was also finalising the details of agreement with two other ferry operators at that time with a view to signing a subsidy agreement as soon as possible. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) whether the four ferry operators participating in the pilot scheme have completed the tendering procedure;
- (2) as it is learnt that some ferry operators have repeatedly extended the expiry of the tender documents, whether the Government has gained an understanding of the reasons for that; if so, of the details; and
- (3) of the progress of the testing for electric ferries; if the testing has not yet commenced, of the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

To promote the trial of electric ferries in Hong Kong, the Government has earmarked \$350 million to implement the Pilot Scheme for Electric Ferries (Pilot Scheme) to fully subsidise ferry operators on the fees of the construction of four electric ferries and the associated charging facilities, as well as the operational, maintenance and repair expenditures incurred by the operation of the electric ferries during the 24-month trial period.

In the early implementation stage of the Pilot Scheme, our preliminary estimate was that the trials of electric ferries could commence in 2023. Nevertheless, given that there are limited applications of electric ferries globally and the Pilot Scheme involved the conduct of trials on new technology of electric ferries locally for the first time, the ferry operators have to exercise extra prudence in the design and tendering process

so as to ensure that the electric ferries can meet their relevant operational needs and ensure the proper use of public money. Therefore, we subsequently updated the target and plan to test out the electric ferries in co-operation with ferry operators in 2024.

My response to the question raised by the Hon Lam is as follows:

(1) and (3) Three ferry operators have completed the open tender process for the procurement of ferries. The ship launching ceremony of an electric ferry constructed by one of the ferry operators was held in Nansha, Guangzhou, in early September this year. This electric ferry is currently undergoing various performance tests and will formally be put into service after undergoing final testing in the Hong Kong waters by the end of this year and allowing captains to familiarise themselves with the operation of electric ferry. The shipbuilding works of the other two ferry operators are now in progress. Since the shipbuilding works of an electric ferry generally take about 18 months, it is anticipated that these two electric ferries will be delivered to Hong Kong for final testing in the first half of 2025 and the first half of 2026. The remaining ferry operator has also commenced the open tender exercise for the procurement of electric ferry. The Environmental Protection Department is closely monitoring the progress and the target is to commence the services as soon as practicable for the Pilot Scheme.

(2) Owing to the different design and technical requirements of electric ferries from those of traditional ferries in many aspects, the ferry operators took a longer time to evaluate the tender documents submitted by all tenderers and requested the tenderers to provide explanations and clarifications on specific tender submissions or technical issues. The design of an electric ferry was even changed in accordance with the latest operational needs of an individual operator. Therefore, to avoid the need of re-tendering due to expiry of the tender price proposal submitted by the tenderers, which would increase the time required for procurement, two ferry operators extended the binding period of the tenders in 2023 in accordance with the general tendering procedures without violating any terms of the tender documents. It is not uncommon to extend the binding period of tenders, in particular when new technologies are involved or there are some technical issues which take time to resolve. The two ferry operators concerned have completed the tender process and the shipbuilding works are now in progress.

Unconscious remand person in custody dies in hospital

â€‹An 89-year-old male remand person in custody, who had been found unconscious in Siu Lam Psychiatric Centre, died in a public hospital today (November 13).

The remand person in custody suffered from hypertension. He required continuous medical care and follow-up at the institution hospital. At 4.06am today, the remand person in custody was found unconscious in his bed in the institution hospital by a correctional officer. The officer immediately called for reinforcement to provide first-aid treatment to him, and an ambulance was called at once to send him to a public hospital for further treatment. He remained unconscious after being sent to the public hospital. His condition deteriorated, and he was certified dead at 5.46am today.

The case has been reported to the Police. A death inquest will be held by the Coroner's Court.

The person in custody had been remanded for the offence of theft in November 2024.

[LCQ1: Resolving congestion problem of road harbour crossings](#)

Following is a question by the Hon Shang Hailong and a written reply by the Secretary for Transport and Logistics, Mr Lam Sai-hung, in the Legislative Council today (November 13):

Question:

The Government has implemented time-varying tolls at the three road harbour crossings (RHCs) since December 17 last year. According to the paper provided by the Transport and Logistics Bureau for the Panel on Transport of this Council on May 17 this year, after the implementation of time-varying tolls, the overall traffic at the three RHCs during peak hours with higher tolls had decreased, but the traffic had obviously shifted to the Western Harbour Crossing (WHC) as the average longest traffic queue at WHC during peak hours had increased from 0.6 kilometres (km) in December last year to 1.6 km in April this year, which was close to the 1.8 km average traffic queue of the Cross-Harbour Tunnel. Moreover, many members of the public have relayed to the media that the morning congestion problem at WHC is even more serious than that before the implementation of time-varying tolls. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) whether the Government had anticipated that congestion at WHC would become more serious after the implementation of time-varying tolls; whether the Government can provide figures of the average traffic flow at the three RHCs in each time slot in each day after the implementation of time-varying tolls;
- (2) as there are views pointing out that while there is no stopping for

paying tolls when crossing RHCs after the implementation of HKeToll, the speed limit within the area of the former toll plazas of the RHCs and on some road sections outside the tunnel tubes (the areas) remains at 50 km per hour (km/h), and the speed limit of the roads leading to the areas is usually 70 km/h to 80 km/h, whether the Government will consider enhancing or relaxing the speed limit arrangements of the roads, thereby improving the traffic situation at RHCs; and

(3) as it has been reported that the Secretary for Transport and Logistics indicated earlier on that in the long run, the congestion problem of existing RHCs needs to be resolved with the construction of a fourth cross-harbour tunnel at the Kau Yi Chau Artificial Islands, whether the Government will conduct a feasibility study in this regard, and of the relevant timetable?

Reply:

President,

(1) The Government has implemented time-varying tolls since December 17, 2023, at the three road harbour crossings (RHCs), namely the Western Harbour Crossing (WHC), the Cross-Harbour Tunnel (CHT) and the Eastern Harbour Crossing (EHC). The Transport Department (TD) has been closely monitoring the traffic condition after implementation of the new tolls. With the co-operation of motorists and adjustments to their commuting patterns, the distribution of total cross-harbour traffic flows among the three RHCs has become more even than before. While the traffic flows at CHT and EHC have decreased, the traffic flow of WHC has increased as a result of the reduction in tolls, which is within the Government's expectation; the WHC now has the highest traffic flow among the three RHCs.

The total traffic demand of the three RHCs, before the implementation of time-varying tolls, has far exceeded the total capacity of the three RHCs, particularly during peak hours. From January to September 2024 (excluding summer holidays, public holidays, days with inclement weather and the associated days affected), the overall weekday traffic flows of the three RHCs remained similar to the condition before the implementation of time-varying tolls. Despite the reduced total cross-harbour traffic flows during peak hours, occurrence of traffic queues were still inevitable. The total cross-harbour traffic flow about half an hour immediately before and after peak hours increased. As for other time periods that account for nearly 80 per cent of the time of a day, the traffic of the three RHCs (including the CHT which remained congested for a long time in the past) was smooth and congestion-free. The case of non-cross-harbour local traffic being affected by the queues tailing back from the tunnels was significantly reduced. Details of the average daily traffic flow of the three RHCs on weekdays with respect to time slots are at Annex.

The above figures show that time-varying tolls have effectively utilised the capacity of the three RHCs, and have encouraged some motorists to commute outside peak hours, thereby rationalising the uneven distribution of traffic in the past, which is in line with the Government's policy objectives and expectation. The implementation of time-varying tolls brings benefits to

motorists, the public transport trades, the commercial vehicle trades, cross-harbour bus passengers, and the community as a whole. The figures show that the cross-harbour traffic conditions are still changing, and the traffic flow varies in different quarters of the year. The Government will continue to collect data and keep the cross-harbour traffic condition under review so as to comprehensively analyse the impact of time-varying tolls on the cross-harbour traffic.

In view of the increased traffic flow at WHC, the TD is planning to construct an additional lane at the exit of WHC on Hong Kong Island towards Central and Sheung Wan to increase the carrying capacity of the road section and reduce weaving activities, so as to smoothen the traffic flow at the tunnel portal and its surrounding areas. The related road works are expected to commence in 2025 for completion in 2026.

(2) The HKeToll, a free-flow tolling service, brings convenience and smoother road experience to motorists. The Highways Department is now dismantling all the toll booths and toll islands, and is adjusting the arrangement of traffic lanes. It is expected that the relevant works involving the three RHCs will be completed in the second quarter of 2025. The TD will continue to monitor the traffic conditions around the original toll plaza and the existing bus stops, and review the speed limits of the relevant road sections in the light of the actual situation and needs. In considering whether to revise the speed limits, the TD needs to take into account the impact on the operation of bus stops to ensure that buses can safely re-enter traffic lanes from bus stops during peak and non-peak hours of the tunnel.

(3) The Government promulgated the Hong Kong Major Transport Infrastructure Development Blueprint in December last year, which formulates a planning framework for the city's future transport infrastructure development. The planned Tuen Mun Bypass, Route 11, Tsing Yi-Lantau Link and Hong Kong Island West-Northeast Lantau Link can provide more commuting options, reduce journey time, and effectively alleviate the pressure on existing major roads.

To facilitate the Kau Yi Chau Artificial Islands project, the Government is carrying out planning study for the transport infrastructures, including the Hong Kong Island West-Northeast Lantau Link under the project.

Suspension of “A Symphony of Lights”

Attention duty announcers, radio and TV stations,

Please broadcast the following as soon as possible and repeat it at suitable intervals:

The Tourism Commission announces that as the Hong Kong Observatory will issue the Strong Wind Signal No. 3 this afternoon (November 13), "A Symphony

of Lights" will be cancelled tonight.

LCQ8: Carers of children with special educational needs

Following is a question by the Hon Stanley Li and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Mr Chris Sun, in the Legislative Council today (November 13):

Question:

It has been reported that the findings of a survey published by a concern group indicate that more than half of the carers of children with special educational needs (SEN) interviewed provide "full-time and unpaid care", and among them, nearly 65 per cent wish to take up employment. In addition, there are views that the Government's current support for carers of SEN children is inadequate (e.g. child care services). In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) whether it has compiled statistics on the number of carers of SEN children in the past three years;
- (2) of the respective numbers of applications received and approved by the authorities so far this year for the Training Subsidy Programme for Children on the Waiting List of Subvented Pre-school Rehabilitation Services;
- (3) in view of the aforesaid situation where over half of the carers of SEN children interviewed provide full-time and unpaid care, whether the Government will consider lowering the threshold for them to apply for government subsidies and increasing the amount of subsidies, as well as specifically improving the policy of providing financial assistance to carers of SEN children in order to alleviate their livelihood pressure; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;
- (4) regarding the problem of the inadequate support for carers of SEN children in relation to child care services, whether the Government will consider increasing the provision of child care services, including the establishment of service stations and an increase in the manpower of relevant professionals; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;
- (5) as there are views pointing out that carers of SEN children have difficulties in finding suitable interest classes for their children, whether the Government will introduce incentive measures to encourage social welfare organizations to offer more related interest classes for SEN children, as well as provide corresponding guidance and formulate specifications; if so,

of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(6) given that nearly 65 per cent of the carers of SEN children interviewed wish to take up employment, whether the Government will consider setting up an effective employment information platform and providing targeted vocational training to help them successfully find a job; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

In response to the Hon Stanley Li's question, having consulted the Education Bureau (EDB), our consolidated reply is as follows:

(1), (3), (4) and (6) In the 2023/24 school year, there were approximately 64 200 students with special educational needs (SEN) attending public sector ordinary secondary and primary schools, and approximately 8 700 students attending aided special schools. In addition, as at end-March 2024, there were around 18 700 pre-school children receiving pre-school rehabilitation services provided by the Social Welfare Department (SWD). While the Government does not have the statistics on the number of carers of students with SEN, it is estimated that there are tens of thousands of carers of these students having regard to the aforementioned student numbers.

On child care services, carers of students with SEN would have a few hours to attend to other matters, including part-time or full-time employment, when the students are attending school. To support parents with further need for child care (including carers of students with SEN), the SWD provides subvention to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for the provision of different types of day child care services, including Child Care Centre Services, After School Care Programme for Pre-primary Children, After School Care Programme for Primary School Students and Neighbourhood Support Child Care Project. In addition, the Government launched the School-based After School Care Service Scheme to provide focused support for primary students (including students with SEN) from single-parent families to stay at school after school hours for care and learning support, allowing their parents to take up jobs. Over 110 primary schools across the territory have participated in the scheme in the 2024/25 school year and, subject to actual utilisation and outcome of the scheme, the quota for participating primary schools may be removed in the 2025/26 school year. Furthermore, there are 47 Special Child Care Centres (SCCCs) and Early Education and Training Centres (EETCs) in the territory providing Occasional Child Care Service for pre-school children with special needs aged between 2 and 6.

On employment support, the Labour Department (LD) provides diversified employment services, and disseminates job vacancy information through various channels, including the Interactive Employment Service (iES) website (www.jobs.gov.hk) and its mobile application. To further encourage older and middle-aged persons (including carers of children with SEN) to join the employment market, the LD launched the three-year Re-employment Allowance

Pilot Scheme (REA Scheme) in July 2024. Each eligible participant who has worked for 12 consecutive months will receive a maximum re-employment allowance of \$20,000. The REA Scheme also covers part-time jobs and qualified "casual work" to cater for the needs and circumstances of participants.

The Employees Retraining Board (ERB) implements the Modular Certificates Accumulation Scheme to encourage individuals who cannot take training courses of the ERB in full-time mode (including carers of children with SEN) to make flexible study arrangement and acquire recognised qualifications, with a view to assisting them in joining or re-joining the labour market. Besides, under the "Hire and Train" Scheme, participating employers will provide suitable job vacancies for trainees, adjust the working hours and leave arrangements to cater for trainees' family and personal situations, and provide on-the-job training and other related support measures so as to encourage the potential workforce to enter the labour market.

To strengthen support for low-income carers, the SWD regularised the Scheme on Living Allowance for Low-income Carers of Persons with Disabilities (the Allowance Scheme) in October 2023 to provide carers of persons with disabilities from low-income families with allowances to supplement their living expenses. Carers of persons with disabilities who are on the waiting lists for any specified rehabilitation services subvented by the SWD (including SCCCs), special schools with boarding placement under the EDB or infirmary service of the Hospital Authority are eligible for the Allowance Scheme. A monthly allowance of \$3,000 is provided for an eligible carer taking care of one person with disabilities, and a maximum monthly allowance of \$6,000 is provided for a carer taking care of more than one person with disabilities simultaneously. To ensure prudent use of public money, there is a means test under the Allowance Scheme. The household income of beneficiaries shall not exceed 75 per cent of the Median Monthly Domestic Household Income by household size in Hong Kong. Assets are not included in the calculation. The SWD will review the implementation of the Allowance Scheme as appropriate.

(2) On pre-school rehabilitation services, the SWD subvents NGOs to provide services for children with special needs. Services include On-site Pre-school Rehabilitation Services (OPRS), SCCCs, EETCs and the Integrated Programme in Kindergarten-cum-Child Care Centre. Among others, OPRS provides comprehensive and timely assistance to pre-school children with different levels of special needs through inter-disciplinary service teams under a school-based and integrated approach for children. Starting from 2024-25, OPRS has achieved "zero waiting time", providing over 10 000 service places as of today, covering nearly 900 kindergartens/kindergarten-cum-child care centres (i.e. around 90 per cent of total) across the territory.

Moreover, the SWD provides training subsidy for children on the waiting list of subvented pre-school rehabilitation services, including a Higher Level Subsidy (non-means-tested with maximum subsidy level of \$6,904 per month) for children waitlisting for SCCCs and a Normal Level Subsidy (means-tested with maximum subsidy level of \$3,549 per month) for children waitlisting for other pre-school rehabilitation services, so as to enable

eligible children with special needs to receive training by recognised service providers as early as possible. From January to September 2024, the SWD received a total of 1 696 applications, of which 1 186 applications were approved and 369 applications were withdrawn as places had been allocated.

(5) To strengthen support for the parents and relatives/carers of persons with disabilities (including carers of children with special needs), the SWD has established 19 Parents/Relatives Resource Centres (PRCs) across the territory to provide emotional support and professional advice for them to learn how to take care of persons with disabilities in their families, as well as to facilitate them to exchange experiences and support one another. PRCs also organise various types of activities, including interest classes and parent-child activities, therapeutic groups, community education programmes, care skills workshops, social and recreational activities. In addition, other subvented welfare service units such as Integrated Family Service Centres and Integrated Children and Youth Services Centres also organise similar activities for meeting the needs of service users.

In addition, the EDB provides different kinds of recurrent subsidies and resources for public sector schools (including special schools) to provide appropriate after-school learning activities in a school-based approach, with a view to facilitating whole-person and all-round development of students (including students with SEN). For example, to support needy students to participate in after-school learning activities, the EDB has since the 2005/06 school year implemented the School-based After-school Learning and Support Programmes to provide public sector schools (including special schools) and schools under the Direct Subsidy Scheme as well as NGOs with the School-based Grant and Community-based Project Grant respectively to organise school-based and district-based after-school learning activities for needy students. Eligible students with SEN can also benefit from these grants.