

LCQ1: Ferry services

Following is a question by the Hon Chan Han-pan and a reply by the Secretary for Transport and Housing, Mr Frank Chan Fan, in the Legislative Council today (December 18):

Question:

From the 11th to the 16th of last month, the blockage of the Tolo Highway, coupled with the total or partial suspension of train services of the East Rail Line at the same time due to vandalism of facilities, paralysed the external transport for residents in New Territories East (NTE). To facilitate NTE residents travelling to and from the region, the Government provided temporary free ferry service between Wu Kai Sha and Tai Po from the 15th to the 18th of last month. Regarding ferry services, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) how it determined the route of the aforesaid ferry service; why it did not arrange ferries to take NTE residents directly to and from Kowloon or to and from Hong Kong Island; why it provided the ferry service only after the external transport of NTE had been paralysed for four days, and whether it has reviewed if the Government's response capability was inadequate; whether it will formulate contingency measures that use ferry services to cope with traffic contingencies; if so, of the details (including the timetable); if not, the reasons for that;

(2) given that the prevailing public transport policy is to use the railway as the backbone of the public transport system, and waterborne transport services are not well-developed, whether the Government will plan afresh the transport networks of the various districts, including the provision of ferry services between districts in New Territories West (e.g. Tsuen Wan and Tuen Mun) and districts on Hong Kong Island (e.g. Central and Wan Chai); if so, of the details (including the timetable); if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) given that the Government plans to increase the number of subsidised outlying island ferry routes from six to 14 with a view to maintaining the financial viability of such ferry services, whether it has assessed if such a funding mode is conducive to the development of transport networks; whether measures are in place to attract more operators to operate inner harbour ferry services; if so, of the details and timetable; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

Since June 2019, over 900 (should be 1 000) protests and public meetings have been staged in Hong Kong, many of which eventually turned into violent illegal events, including blocking various strategic routes and cross-harbour tunnel facilities, paralysing the traffic, as well as wantonly damaging road

safety facilities. These reckless acts have jeopardised public order and public safety and severely affected the mobility of the general public.

The Government has been adopting a public transport-oriented policy, which encourages the public to make good use of the public transport network for their journeys as far as possible. Among them, railways and franchised buses are the most efficient in terms of economic, social and environmental aspects. In 2018, the average daily number of trips made on the heavy rail (note 1) amounted to approximately 4.95 million. The patronage of franchised buses is second only to the railways, with an average daily patronage of about 4.05 million trips in 2018. Together, the heavy rail and franchised buses serve about 70 per cent of passengers on public transport on average.

As regards ferry services, while the outlying island ferries provide public transport services essential for the outlying islands, the in-harbour ferry services perform a supplementary role. Objectively speaking, compared with the huge capacity of railways and franchised buses, ferry has constraints in carrying capacity, sailing times and frequency of sailings, etc. The average daily number of passenger trips made on ferries in 2018 was about 130 000, accounting for about one per cent of all public transport passenger trips.

The Transport Department (TD) has all along put in place contingency plans for individual strategic routes and rail lines. In case of an incident, the TD and other government departments, public transport service operators as well as tunnel and bridge management companies, etc, will maintain contact and co-ordinate appropriate actions according to the contingency plans. For instance, given that some of the MTR stations cannot operate as usual, the MTRCL provides free feeder bus service for passengers as far as practicable under safe conditions. Franchised bus operators also strengthen their bus services as appropriate, and will strive to continue their services to the public by taking diverted routes or shortening bus trips, as long as road surface traffic condition and road safety allow.

Ferry services also play a supporting role in certain unforeseeable circumstances. During the days when individual trunk roads and cross-harbour tunnels were closed or blocked, the Government arranged special free ferry services to meet passenger demand.

Having consulted relevant departments, I set out my reply to the question raised by the Hon Chan Han-pan as follows:

(1) Due to road blockages by protesters, Tolo Highway and the Cross-Harbour Tunnel in Hung Hom had been closed since November 12 and 13 respectively. After assessing the development of the incident and considering that the roads concerned could not be reopened in a short time, the Government arranged special free ferry services between Tai Po and Wu Kai Sha from November 15 to 18, as well as between Hung Hom and Wan Chai and between Kowloon City and Wan Chai from November 20 to 29 for the convenience of the commuting public. Various government departments undertook a series of preparatory work, including liaising with ferry service operators, selecting vessels, identifying suitable berthing facilities, etc, within a short time

span so as to provide the services the soonest possible. That said, although the services concerned provided some relief, railway and bus services cannot be replaced.

In addition, the Emergency Traffic Co-ordination Centre (ETCC) under the TD, which operates 24 hours a day, closely monitors the situation of traffic and transport services. The ETCC liaises and co-ordinates with government departments, public transport service operators and organisations concerned in handling traffic incidents, and disseminates the latest traffic news to the public. Regarding the large-scale road blockages occurred earlier on, the Government will also draw on the experiences and refine the contingency mechanism.

(2) Currently there are seven in-harbour ferry routes (note 2) in Hong Kong, which primarily play a supplementary role. There are views among the community suggesting that more in-harbour ferry routes should be explored. Since the number of passengers is expected to increase with the successive completion of a number of residential and commercial development projects in East Kowloon, the Government proposed re-commissioning the "Central-Hung Hom" ferry route as well as launching a pilot "water taxi" service plying between Kai Tak, Hung Hom, Tsim Sha Tsui East, West Kowloon and Central. On December 13, the TD carried out a tender exercise for the two services. The two routes will commence services in the next year the earliest.

The Government also welcomes any application for the operation of new ferry services. The Government will take into account all factors, including passenger demand, financial and operational viability.

(3) It is the Government's established policy that public transport services should be run by the private sector in accordance with commercial principles to enhance efficiency and cost-effectiveness. Ferry services serve as an indispensable external transportation for outlying island residents, yet the business environment has been very difficult. In view of this, the 2019 Policy Address proposed that the Government should provide Special Helping Measures to 14 outlying island ferry routes (note 3) and launch a Vessel Subsidy Scheme to replace the fleets of 11 ferry routes (note 4). These measures will be implemented successively from the next year, which can effectively maintain the financial viability of ferry services and alleviate the burden of fare increases on passengers.

In-harbour ferry services will continue to provide alternatives other than land-based transport and railway services to commuters. To alleviate the operating costs of the routes concerned, the Government has taken over the maintenance work of piers, where applicable, and reimbursed pier rentals and exempted vessel licence fees, etc.

Note 1: The heavy rail lines include the Kwun Tong Line, Tsuen Wan Line, Island Line, South Island Line, Tseung Kwan O Line, Tung Chung Line, Disneyland Resort Line, East Rail Line, Ma On Shan Line, West Rail Line, and Airport Express.

Note 2: The seven in-harbour ferry routes are "North Point-Hung Hom", "North

Point-Kowloon City", "North Point-Kwun Tong-Kai Tak", "Central-Tsim Sha Tsui", "Wan Chai-Tsim Sha Tsui", "Sai Wan Ho-Sam Ka Tsuen" and "Sai Wan Ho-Kwun Tong" routes.

Note 3: The 14 outlying island ferry routes are "Central-Cheung Chau", "Inter-islands" between Peng Chau, Mui Wo, Chi Ma Wan and Cheung Chau, "Central-Mui Wo", "Central-Peng Chau", "Central-Yung Shue Wan", "Central-Sok Kwu Wan", "Aberdeen-Cheung Chau", "Aberdeen-Yung Shue Wan via Pak Kok Tsuen", "Aberdeen-Sok Kwu Wan via Mo Tat", "Tuen Mun-Tung Chung-Sha Lo Wan-Tai O", "Discovery Bay-Mui Wo", "Ma Wan-Central", "Ma Wan-Tsuen Wan" and "Central-Discovery Bay" routes.

Note 4: These 11 routes are "Central-Cheung Chau", "Inter-islands" between Peng Chau, Mui Wo, Chi Ma Wan and Cheung Chau, "Central-Mui Wo", "Central-Peng Chau", "Central-Yung Shue Wan", "Central-Sok Kwu Wan", "Aberdeen-Cheung Chau", "Aberdeen-Yung Shue Wan via Pak Kok Tsuen", "Aberdeen-Sok Kwu Wan via Mo Tat", "Tuen Mun-Tung Chung-Sha Lo Wan-Tai O" and "Discovery Bay-Mui Wo" routes.