

Transport Department's management of a ferry service operator's announcement arrangements

Investigation Report

On 20 May 2024, the complainant made a complaint to this Office against the Transport Department (“TD”).

The Complaint

2. According to the complainant, one day in 2024 (“Incident Day”), he arrived at the pier, intending to take the ferry, only to find a notice stating that the service had been temporarily suspended due to a fireworks rehearsal. Failing to find any such notice on the ferry company’s or TD’s website, he called the ferry company to enquire about the service resumption arrangements but in vain. Subsequently, he lodged a complaint with 1823, asserting that TD had failed to inform the public in advance about the ferry company’s service suspension, nor had it provided details on the resumption arrangements. TD later replied to him by phone and text message, explaining that it had checked with the ferry company and confirmed that the temporary disruption was caused by activities in the Victoria Harbour, rather than the fireworks rehearsal and that the ferry company had posted notices at the piers concerned to inform passengers.

3. The complainant was dissatisfied with TD for shifting the blame onto the ferry company and failing to communicate effectively with it, which resulted in discrepancies in their respective statements about the reason for the temporary service suspension (**Complaint Point (1)**), and for failing to notify the Information Services Department, which resulted in the Government’s making no announcement about the suspension of service (**Complaint Point (2)**).

Our Investigation

4. This Office initiated a preliminary inquiry with TD in May 2024. In June, TD responded to both the complainant and this Office. In July, the complainant commented on TD’s reply, noting that the ferry company’s service suspension due to the rehearsal had hampered public interests and was more than just a minor inconvenience. In September, this Office decided to launch a full investigation into the

matter. After reviewing all relevant information, the investigation was completed in October, with the following findings.

Our Findings

Response from TD

5. TD indicated that, its primary responsibility in regulating ferry services is to ensure that ferry companies provide services according to the routes, schedules and fares specified in the service details. Where temporary service adjustments are necessary due to actual circumstances (such as changes in weather or sea conditions), ferry service operators (“operators”) must promptly notify affected passengers by posting notices or arranging on-site staff to offer assistance.

6. As regards arrangements for announcing ferry service adjustments, TD explained that if temporary traffic arrangements (including designation of temporary restricted areas within the harbour to limit vessel navigation) or adjustments to public transport services (including ferry operations) are pre-planned for a specified event (e.g. the fireworks display on the second day of Chinese New Year), TD will normally publish the relevant information through TD notices or traffic notices in due course before the event.

7. TD stated that in this case, upon receiving notification from the Marine Department (“MD”) about an event to be held in the Victoria Harbour, including a rehearsal to take place on the Incident Day, it promptly relayed the information to operators and reminded them that if temporary adjustments to ferry services would be required during the rehearsal, they must notify affected passengers accordingly. Following the issuance of an MD notice, TD sent written reminders to operators, advising them to stay vigilant about sea conditions, navigate with caution, and adhere to on-site directives from MD and the Marine Region of the Police throughout the rehearsal and the event.

8. TD explained that the event did not involve designation of any temporary restricted areas within the harbour, so its impact on ferry services was relatively minor. Furthermore, the actual time when vessels participating in the rehearsal travelled along designated routes and crossed the inner-harbour ferry routes differed, resulting in varying degrees of impact on different ferry routes. As far as TD understood, some

inner-harbour ferry services were not significantly affected. Therefore, TD communicated with operators before the event (see **para. 7**), considering such approach more effective and direct in conveying relevant information to affected passengers while avoiding unnecessary disruptions to other ferry passengers whose journeys were not impacted by the procession or rehearsal.

9. TD forwarded the complaint that the complainant submitted via 1823 (see **para. 2**) to the operator involved for investigation and follow-up. The operator confirmed that the relevant ferry service was only temporarily suspended for approximately half an hour on the Incident Day due to the rehearsal. The ferry company posted notices at the relevant piers half an hour before the suspension to inform passengers of the arrangement. The notice read: “Due to marine traffic conditions, ferry service is suspended until further notice. We apologise for any inconvenience caused.” TD later relayed these findings to the complainant by phone and in writing (see **para. 2**).

10. TD acknowledged that temporary adjustments to ferry schedules cause inconvenience to passengers. In this case, TD considered that the ferry company should have provided clearer and more accurate information at the relevant piers as early as possible. TD has reiterated to operators that if temporary service adjustments are necessary due to marine traffic conditions, timely and accurate notices must be issued, accompanied by appropriate assistance to passengers during service disruption.

Our Comments

11. After reviewing the relevant records and correspondence, this Office has the following comments.

12. Regarding **Complaint Point (1)**, TD has explained its responsibilities in regulating ferry companies and the follow-up actions taken in response to the complainant’s complaint. This Office finds that upon learning about the rehearsal scheduled for the Incident Day, TD maintained communication with the ferry company to facilitate necessary service adjustments. Furthermore, the discrepancy between TD’s and the ferry company’s statements regarding the reason for the temporary suspension (see **para. 9**) does not constitute a conflict. The Ombudsman, therefore, considers **Complaint Point (1) unsubstantiated**.

13. As for **Complaint Point (2)**, TD has clarified the general procedures for announcing ferry service adjustments and the reasons for not issuing prior notification in this case (see **paras. 6 and 8**). The relevant records show that after receiving details of the event from MD, TD fulfilled its duty by promptly reminding the operator involved to monitor marine traffic conditions and notify passengers of any service adjustments. In accordance with TD's instructions (see **para. 5**), the operator posted notices at the piers informing affected passengers of the service suspension (see **para. 9**). While we acknowledge the complainant's view that the impact on affected individuals was not insignificant, we consider, from an administrative standpoint, that TD's handling of the matter aligned with the Government's standard procedures for announcing ferry service adjustments and involved no impropriety. Hence, The Ombudsman considers **Complaint Point (2) unsubstantiated**.

14. Overall, The Ombudsman considers the complainant's complaint against TD **unsubstantiated**.

Recommendations

15. Nevertheless, in light of the rapid growth of digital communication, this Office considers that posting notices solely on-site to inform passengers of temporary transport service adjustments is no longer adequate. To optimise these arrangements and enhance public convenience, The Ombudsman recommends that, in addition to requiring operators to post on-site notices, TD also:

- (1) engage with operators to assess the feasibility of providing early announcements of ferry service adjustments (including suspension and resumption arrangements) via their websites and social media platforms;
- (2) if recommendation (1) proves feasible, consider formulating an implementation plan;
- (3) explore the feasibility of leveraging TD's all-in-one mobile application, "HKeMobility", to issue notifications of ferry service adjustments, including suspension and resumption arrangements;
- (4) if recommendation (3) proves feasible, consider formulating an

implementation plan;

- (5) review the current notification practices used by other public transport operators (“other operators”) for temporary service adjustments to identify areas for improvements.

TD’s Response to Our Recommendations

16. With respect to **recommendations (1) and (2)**, TD indicated that it has reviewed the current notification arrangements for temporary ferry service adjustments and acknowledged the need for improvement. The Department will engage with franchised and licensed ferry operators to explore the feasibility of optimising notification arrangements, including exploring the publication of relevant service adjustment updates on operators’ websites and social media platforms.

17. Regarding **recommendations (3) and (4)**, TD indicated that while exploring improvements under recommendation (1), it will also consider utilising “HKeMobility” mobile application to issue relevant notifications.

18. As for **recommendation (5)**, TD noted that major public transport service operators, including other operators, currently have effective mechanisms for incident notification and information dissemination. The Department’s Emergency Transport Coordination Centre (“ETCC”), operating 24 hours a day, monitors traffic conditions across Hong Kong. In the event of a traffic incident, ETCC closely collaborates with the relevant operators, departments and organisations to monitor traffic and transport situations and release the latest traffic news via the media, TD’s website, and “HKeMobility” mobile application in a timely manner. Additionally, other operators notify the public of temporary service adjustments through existing channels, such as updates on their websites and mobile applications, as well as passenger notices displayed inside vehicles and at stations. Furthermore, TD regularly reminds operators, through routine meetings and ongoing communication, to follow existing notification mechanisms for temporary service adjustments, enabling affected passengers to receive timely information and plan their journeys accordingly. Following a review of these arrangements, TD considers that the current notification arrangements of other operators for temporary service adjustments are generally effective.

Conclusion

19. We are pleased to note that TD has accepted our recommendations and we will continue to monitor progress to ensure their full implementation.

Office of The Ombudsman

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