

Chapter 1 Introduction

Background

Transport is always a prime concern for the physically disabled to lead a normal working and social life. The Social Sciences Research Centre has been commissioned by the Rehabus Alliance to research transport services for wheelchair users in Hong Kong.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this research are to

- 1) investigate wheelchair users experience in terms of availability, cost, etc. of existing transport services, both public transport and the Rehabus services;
- 2) review the existing public transport services for wheelchair users e.g. buses, MTR, KCR, taxis, etc;
- 3) understand the significance of Rehabus for wheelchair users' (present and future) needs; and
- 4) identify any shortfall in Rehabus in satisfying wheelchair users' needs.

It is intended that the research should reflect any difficulties faced by people with mobility problems, in particular wheelchair users, in playing a full role in society because of the difficulties with transport, in short to reflect the practical shortfall of the government vision of better public transport for **all**.

Overview

For the purpose of the study, disability is defined as any substantial, long-term physical or sensory condition which renders it difficult, if not impossible, to access mainstream transport and transport is defined as any form of public or voluntary transport, other than the private car, which is used by travelers in Hong Kong.

Key components

- Public transport policy and co-ordination
- Access to services and facilities
- Staff training
- Availability of information
- Few transport providers were found to undertake extensive or proactive

consultation with disabled people.

Government Policy

The Transport Department has projected a new vision, “Transport for All”, which aims to give people with disabilities a more accessible and practicable public transport services. Under the new “Transport for All” vision, a “5-Betters Strategy” has been formulated to provide clear directions for planning and implementation.

The “5-Betters Strategy” is:

1. Better accessible transport services for all
2. Better public transport infrastructure and facilities for all
3. Better streets and pedestrian areas for all
4. Better planning standards, guidelines and procedures
5. Better partnership for actions and results

Existing Public Transport Services

This section summarises the services currently offered and the claims made by the providers about how they serve people with disabilities. It does not purport to be an evaluation of these claims.

MTR

The Mass Transit Railway is a metropolitan railway running through Hong Kong. In the past 5 years, the stations and the train facilities have been improved and equipped to provide more convenient access for the disabled. Ramps, lifts (including stair lifts and passenger lifts), wheelchair aids, and bi-directional wide gates are available at stations for passengers with mobility problems. Inside the compartments, wheelchair parking spaces are now provided inside all trains. Wheelchair pictograms are fixed on platform screen doors or on the platform floor where there is no platform screen door and on the train body to identify train doors which lead wheelchair user directly to the multi-use parking spaces inside trains. Besides the facilities and equipment that provided at the stations and on the trains, staff are also claimed to be available at all stations to give assistance to passengers with disabilities. These services can be contacted in advance.

Kowloon-Canton Railway (East Rail)

The Kowloon-Canton Railway (East Rail) operates along Kowloon and North East New Territories. Similar to the MTR, passenger lifts and ramps are provided for

passengers with walking difficulties.

West Rail

West Rail was not operating at the start of the study, so we have excluded it from consideration.

Light Rail

Light Rail operates mainly in the North West New Territories. Ramps are provided at all stations for passengers with walking difficulties.

Franchised Bus Services

Five franchised bus companies are providing bus services to the public. Currently, 2030 or 30% of buses are claimed to be wheelchair accessible. They are equipped with fixed ramps, wheelchair space with back rest and restraint lap belt, front kneeling capability with wide entrance, super low floor covered with non-slip floor material, and priority seats for passengers with disabilities.

Taxis

There are three types of taxis running in Hong Kong: Urban taxis, New Territories taxis and Lantau taxis. Taxis provide point-to-point services often used by people with disabilities. Wheelchairs, crutches, or any other articles used by passengers with disabilities as an aid to or a means of mobility can be carried free of charge. However, not all types of wheelchair can be carried, only those which can be packed and folded so they can be put in the trunk.

Rehabus Services

The Rehabus services, operated by the Hong Kong Society for Rehabilitation, provide a territory-wide transport network, which enable people with disabilities to travel to work and school, or participate in social and recreational activities. There are 87 specially adapted vehicles which provide a door-to-door service for passengers who have serious walking difficulties including wheelchair users. The majority of Rehabuses accommodate up to 12 passengers, or a maximum number of 4 wheelchairs. Each bus is equipped with wheelchair restraint systems and safety belts for passengers with disabilities to ensure safety. Three types of Rehabus services are provided in Hong Kong:

- 1) The Scheduled Route Service: 57 Rehabuses are used to operate 56 routes throughout Hong Kong. They provide regular peak hour services taking passengers with disabilities to and from workplaces, schools, training centers, and medical

institutions.

2) The Feeder Service: there are 3 regular routes provided in Hong Kong: Kowloon City, Shatin, and Aberdeen. Two buses are deployed for operation on a fixed routing and schedule.

3) The Dial-a-ride Service: 19 dedicated and 57 off-duty Rehabuses from the scheduled route service are deployed to run this service. This pre-booked service takes passengers with disabilities to clinics, shops, sports centers, leisure facilities, etc.

Research Design

Data Collection Method

This research is divided into 4 parts: 1) Focus Group; 2) Telephone Survey; 3) Paper Survey; 4) Follow-up Focus Group

Focus Group

3 three-hour focus groups were held on 14th, 16th and 23rd April, 2003 respectively. Each group contained 5-6 wheelchair users. The aim of the focus groups was to investigate and evaluate the existing transport services. The information collected from the focus groups was used to construct questions in the telephone and paper survey. The focus group summary can be found in Appendix 5.

Pilot Study

To ensure that the questions were understandable and appropriate, five successful cases were done for each survey in May and July 2003 respectively to fine tune the logistics and the questionnaire design. These cases were not included in the target sample.

Telephone Survey

A structured Chinese questionnaire was designed for telephone survey. It comprised 36 mostly closed-ended questions. The questionnaire was administrated by well-trained interviewers in Cantonese and took about 15 minutes each to complete. The telephone numbers of the respondents were provided by the Alliance. They were collected from different organizations. Telephone interviews were carried out in two periods, 22nd and 26th of May and 27th August and 3rd September, 2003. All telephone calls were made between 2:00 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. A total of 298 successful interviews were done with a response rate of 81.6%.

Paper Survey

The same set of questions in telephone survey was used for the paper survey. The questionnaire was presented in a computerized design which allowed the returned questionnaires to be scanned by a computer system to expedite the data input process and to enhance data accuracy. The questionnaires were sent out in 2 ways: 1) mailed to target respondents and 2) distributed by organizations directly between August and September, 2003. The mailed addresses of respondents were provided by the Alliance, which contacted different organizations from the ¹Directory of Rehabilitation Services in Hong Kong. A total of 268 questionnaires were returned, with a response rate of 36.4%

Follow-up Focus Group

Two follow-up focus groups were conducted on 18th and 31st of May, 2004. Each focus group contained 5-6 wheelchair users. The purpose of the follow-up focus groups was to further examine the difficulties and needs of wheelchair users when using the transport services in Hong Kong. The findings obtained through these focus groups were used to explain some of the transport behaviours of wheelchair users and to make recommendations for improvements.

Target Respondents

The target respondents of the present survey were physically disabled with serious mobility problems in Hong Kong aged 7 to 60 years old. This age range was chosen as it covered active participants in the community, like students and workers. The analyses in the following chapter only include the 484 wheelchair users (out of 534 respondents) of the survey.

Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire for the survey was structured to ask about wheelchair users' transport behaviour and how transport affects their lives as follows:

1. The 3 main services of Rehabus: the schedule route service, the dial-a-ride service and the feeder service;
2. Public transport services: low-platform buses and MTR (these were the major public transport services used by wheelchair users that were identified in the focus groups);
3. General questions on individual transport needs; and
4. Demographics: gender, age, personal income, living district, type of mobility.

¹ Rehabilitation Division, Health and Welfare Bureau Government Secretariat 2000