

PORT OPERATIONS COMMITTEE

Promoting More Frequent and Flexible Use of the Central Fairway by International Cruise Ships

Purpose

This paper serves to seek members' comments on a proposed trial scheme to facilitate more regular use of the Central Fairway, Northern Fairway and Western Fairway (collectively referred to as Central Harbour Transit ("CHT")) by cruise ships berthing at KTCT, with reference to the latest findings and recommendations of a marine traffic impact assessment ("MTIA") consultancy study conducted by a consultant ("the Consultant") engaged by the Tourism Commission ("TC").

Background

2. Since 1994, vessels over 120m in length are required to apply to the Marine Department ("MD") for permission for CHT on a case-by-case basis to ensure navigational safety of vessels navigating in the vicinity of the Central Harbour. When this transit restriction was implemented, major marine works projects along the Victoria Harbour were planned/underway¹ and maritime industrial facilities such as Public Cargo Working Areas ("PCWAs") within the Victoria Harbour were also in use together with non-scheduled pleasure yacht events. The transit restrictions were to ensure navigational safety amidst the concentration of maritime activities in the Central Harbour. Whilst future works projects within the Victoria Harbour could not be ruled out at this stage, the aforementioned major works projects which disrupted fairway traffic have since been completed and some PCWAs, including the Kwun Tong PCWA and Wan Chai PCWA, have also been relocated. (Note from MD: the proposed wordings aim to reflect the fact.)

3. The cruise industry has long appealed to allow more regular CHT to boost cruise tourism by leveraging the iconic scenery of Victoria Harbour and the Symphony of Lights show. Having regarded that the Marine Traffic and Port Users Study conducted during the design phase of KTCT only covered passenger

¹ For example, Central and Wan Chai Reclamation, Shatin to Central Link (East Rail Line Cross-Harbour Extension), Western Harbour Crossing, West Kowloon Reclamation etc.

ship arrival and departure via the Eastern Fairway, Lei Yu Mun (“LYM”) and Tathong Channel, and did not cover CHT, TC, in response to the industry’s request, commissioned a study in 2022 to assess the feasibility of allowing CHT on a more regular basis under a set of conditions.

Current arrangements

4. Currently, cruise ships calling at KTCT and with length overall 120m or above are required to apply to the Vessel Traffic Centre (“VTC”) of MD for approval if they wish to conduct CHT. In practice, it is noted that permission is usually granted subject to conditions and the prevailing weather and marine traffic situation. The Berthing Guidelines (“BGL”) for “CHT – Passenger Ship (Conventional/ Highly Manoeuvrable)” (**Annex I** refers), endorsed by Pilotage Advisory Committee (“PAC”) and published by MD in 2018, sets out the conditions and requirements. (Note from MD: the amendments aim to address the approval system more precisely.)

Marine Traffic Impact Assessment and Trial Scheme

5. To promote cruise tourism by allowing cruise ships to safely conduct CHT, TC, after consultation with MD, has commissioned a MTIA within the designated study area² (**Annex II** refers). The MTIA aims to identify and assess the marine traffic impacts and navigational risks that would be brought about by regular CHT of cruise ships and to provide workable mitigation measures, including but not limited to safe and practicable transit conditions, transit window and related stakeholders’ awareness of the transit. The MTIA also covers a review of port facilities and marine works (including both planned and in progress), risk analysis of historical traffic data obtained from the MD’s Vessel Traffic Surveillance system and real time camera-monitoring of marine traffic. (Note from MD: the amendments aim to provide a more precise description.)

6. After a review of marine traffic and other relevant conditions, the Consultant has identified, amongst others, that the lowest volume of aggregate marine traffic in the Central Harbour is between 19:00 – 22:00 under normal conditions. No insurmountable navigational risks have been identified. The Consultant therefore proposes to establish **a transit window between 19:00-22:00 on a trial basis** (“trial scheme”) to allow passenger vessels calling at KTCT and falling within certain categories (i.e. highly manoeuvrable passenger ships under 345m length overall and conventional passenger ships under 290m length overall) to conduct CHT without the need for prior approval from VTC, subject to a compliance with the relevant BGL.

² The Study Area covers the waters from Lei Yue Mun to south of Tsing Yi Island, including the Western Fairway, the Yau Ma Tei Fairway, the North Green Island Fairway, the Central Fairway, the Sulphur Channel, the Hung Hom Fairway, the Northern Fairway, the Eastern Fairway and the Southern Fairway and their adjacent waters.

The Trial Scheme

7. With regard to the permissible transit window from 19:00 - 22:00, the Consultant has drawn up the earliest and latest pilot on board time for inbound vessels and terminal departure time for outbound vessels participating in the trial scheme (please see **Annex III** for details). The trial period will be for 24 months, and the expectation is that the number of passenger vessels, including cruise ships plying in the Victoria Harbour, will gradually return to pre-COVID-19 level during the period. Depending on the outcomes of the trial scheme and feedback from stakeholders, the possibility of regularising the transit arrangement and/ or expanding the transit window to cover a longer duration will be explored.

8. For CHT outside the trial scheme period (i.e., 19:00-22:00) and vessels falling outside of the classes listed in paragraph 6, vessels are required to apply to VTC for permission on a case-by-case basis in accordance with the existing practice. Meanwhile, given the increasing size of cruise ships, TC will continue to explore with MD if the maximum overall lengths that have been adopted by BGL can be further relaxed, particularly if the trial scheme has been conducted smoothly for some time.

Proposed Conditions in Association with the Trial Scheme

9. To facilitate a favourable operational condition for CHT, the Consultant has suggested the following mitigation measures during the trial scheme:

- (a) Priority for use of the harbour shall be given to events as promulgated by Marine Department Notices (MDNs), such as fireworks displays, sea parades and large-scale water sports events like the Around-the-Island Race. The cruise line or its agents shall review relevant MDNs prior to transit to prevent any possible clashes;
- (b) No head-on/overtaking actions are allowed by cruise ships when conducting CHT;
- (c) Proper scheduling of CHT by port agents, effective and efficient communication and timely coordination between pilots-on-board respective ships and related stakeholders, and if necessary, involvement of VTC, would be conducive to facilitating safe movement of vessels generally, particularly the possible conflicting traffic situations arising from two-way traffic of OGVs with wider beams, for example; (Note from MD: coordination with other stakeholders using the Victoria Harbour is required also.)
- (d) Deployment of an additional escort tug as per the proposed berthing guideline at Annex IV; and
- (e) During the trial period, large-scale marine works for the Kau Yi Chau Project may be implemented and impact fairways along the CHT route. The CHT trial is subject to change or suspension if there is any significant change of marine traffic along the route, including Western Fairway,

Northern Fairway, Central Fairway, etc., depending on the impact of the works.

Suggested BGL for the Trial Scheme

10. Subject to the agreement of the proposed trial scheme, a separate BGL for “CHT – Passenger Ship (Conventional/ Highly Manoeuvrable) (Trial Window)” were developed at **Annex IV**.

Cruise Passengers’ Positive Feedback on Central Fairway Transit

11. Since the resumption of international cruises in January 2023, several cruise ships on their maiden calls to Hong Kong have been permitted to transit the Central Fairway. Cruise passengers onboard were able to enjoy the magnificent views of Hong Kong’s skyline and the Symphony of Lights show, contributing greatly to the success of the “Hello Hong Kong” campaign in welcoming visitors. From media reports, posts on social media as well as feedback obtained globally by the Hong Kong Tourism Board, cruise ships transiting the Central Fairway have been very well received by both cruise passengers and cruise lines. The relevant reports and posts have also substantially enhanced the worldwide image of Hong Kong.



Mein Schiff 5 transiting the Central Fairway upon departure on 9 March 2023

12. We believe that allowing more frequent and regular CHT of cruise ships through the Central Fairway will further enhance the attractiveness of Hong Kong as a cruise destination. From a wider perspective, the arrangement will give us an opportunity to showcase the stunning Victoria Harbour and to take advantage of a more connected harbourfront promenade for the community and tourists alike to appreciate the vibrant harbour with international cruise ships sailing through.

Consultation

13. We have consulted stakeholders to solicit their views on facilitating passenger vessels to regularly transit the Central Fairway (**Annex V** refers). Generally, stakeholders supported the proposal and agreed that the proposal will significantly enhance the attractiveness of cruises including Hong Kong as a destination in their itineraries.

14. As the trial scheme will increase vessel traffic in the Central Harbour, the Royal Hong Kong Yacht Club, the Hong Kong Cargo-Vessel Traders' Association Ltd., and the Hong Kong China Rowing Association would like to have advance notice or more transparency about the Central Fairway schedule so as to help minimise any adverse impacts. Similarly, the Hong Kong and Kowloon Ferry asked for advanced schedule to avoid delay in their ferry schedule caused by the trial scheme. Accordingly and as one of our recommendations (see paragraph 15(d) below), the terminal operator of KTCT will publish the Central Fairway transit schedule on their website.

Recommendations

15. Given the latest marine traffic analysis and the consultation with stakeholders, we recommend:

- (a) adopting on a trial basis 19:00-22:00 as a transit window for CHT for a period of 24 months whereby cruise ships falling within certain classes of passenger ships (i.e. highly manoeuvrable passenger ships under 345m overall length and conventional passenger ships under 290m overall length) can transit through the Central Fairway, conditional on their full compliance with relevant BGL and subject to applicable conditions (including those listed in paragraphs 7 and 9 above);
- (b) for cruise ships wishing to conduct CHT outside the trial scheme window or not falling within the classes of passenger ships mentioned in (a), the requirement for prior approval from MD's VTC on a case-by-case basis should be maintained in accordance with the existing practice;
- (c) a separate BGL for "CHT – Passenger Ship (Conventional/ Highly Manoeuvrable)" at **Annex IV** to be endorsed by PAC; and
- (d) the terminal operator of KTCT publishing the Central Fairway transit schedule in advance to inform harbour users and the general public.

Way forward

16. Subject to the views of the relevant consultative committees³ under MD and the endorsement of the separate BGL by PAC, we aim to commence the trial scheme as soon as possible, and the earliest would be in January of 2024.

³ They are the Port Operations Committee (POC), Pilotage Advisory Committee (PAC), Locals Vessel Advisory Committee (LVAC) and High Speed Craft Consultative Committee (HSCCC).

Advice Sought

17. Members are invited to give views on the latest findings of the MTIA and the recommendations as stated in paragraph 15 above.

**Tourism Commission
December 2023**