

100 Rehab taxis to hit the roads

By JOHN TANG

ABOUT 100 taxis giving priority to disabled passengers were expected to be on the road by next year, the Commissioner for Rehabilitation, Mr Francis Ho, said yesterday.

The scheme is being studied by Mr Ho's office, the Transport Branch and the Transport Department and a detailed report will be submitted to the Executive Council by the end of the year.

If endorsed, special licences for Rehab taxis would be put up for tender without going through the legislature, Mr Ho said.

Drivers of the cabs will be required to give priority to physically handicapped people from 7 am to 10 pm, although they will be allowed to take able-bodied people during off-peak hours.

Mr Ho said the taxi industry had been consulted and generally supported the scheme, although the demand was understood to be lower than for normal taxis.

However, he said some controversies remained because the scheme involved not only the general rehabilitation policy, but also the

more complicated transport policy.

"There are two problems. The first one is the problem of monitoring — how can we make sure that taxi drivers give priority to handicapped people during peak hours.

"There is also the economic problem. We cannot expect taxi drivers and owners to operate taxis which have a lower demand, but still require them to tender for licences in the same price level as normal taxis," he said.

But if a lower tender price level could be accepted for Rehab taxi licences, a scramble for these licences must be prevented, Mr Ho said.

The Government was drafting a number of licensing conditions to deal with these problems, he said. But he declined to disclose details.

Speaking after officiating at the 11th annual meeting of the Spastics Association of Hongkong, Mr Ho said the concept of introducing commercial-run Rehab taxis was initiated by the Government.

The plan was in line with general guidelines set out by a working group commissioned by the Secretary for

Education and Manpower in 1984 to look into the transportation needs of the disabled people, he said.

The working group suggested the planning of a territory-wide special transport system for this group.

It also proposed to encourage mildly disabled people to use public transport, and to provide severely handicapped people with transport between home and rehabilitation centres.

It is believed that the Rehab taxi plan was favoured by the Government because an experimental taxi voucher scheme, implemented in March, was not successful.

Under this scheme, taxi fare vouchers were issued to disabled applicants, but it received a cool response from both disabled people and taxi drivers.

An experimental Rehab taxi scheme, which saw the first converted London taxi operated by the Hongkong Society for Rehabilitation (HKSR), was also unsuccessful. A spokesman for the Society also said the taxi would cease to operate unless more able-bodied customers could be induced to use the service.