

# 立法會 *Legislative Council*

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## **Panel on Security**

### **Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat for the meeting on 1 December 2009**

#### **Replacement of emergency ambulances**

#### **Purpose**

This paper summarizes past discussions by the Panel on Security (the Panel) on replacement of emergency ambulances.

#### **Background**

##### Emergency ambulance service

2. The Fire Services Department (FSD) is responsible for providing emergency conveyance for any person who needs urgent medical attention in a hospital and for providing necessary pre-hospital care. The existing performance pledge of FSD is to handle 92.5% of all emergency calls within 12 minutes from the time of call.

3. According to information provided by the Administration to the Panel in October 2008, in the first nine months of 2008, FSD received a total of 453 195 emergency ambulance calls, or 1 660 calls per day on average. The response time performance (i.e. the percentage of calls successfully handled within the 12-minute target time) achieved by FSD in this period was 91.9%.

##### Maintenance and replacement of ambulances

4. At present, FSD operates a fleet of around 250 ambulances for its emergency ambulance service (EAS). The average age of these vehicles is 8.4 years. A breakdown by vehicle age is as follows -

Vehicle age

Number of ambulances

2 to 4 years	36 (14.3%)
4 to 6 years	23 (9.1%)
6 to 8 years	10 (4%)
8 to 10 years	114 (45.2%)
10 years and above	69 (27.4%)

5. To ensure the effective operation of its emergency ambulances, FSD has engaged the Electrical and Mechanical Services Department (EMSD) to provide maintenance service. The services provided include both preventive and corrective maintenance. Alongside with the established arrangements for maintenance, the Administration has been replacing aged ambulances in accordance with the resource allocation mechanism over the years. According to the advice of EMSD, the economic service life of an ambulance is normally seven years. This serves as a general guide for shortlisting a vehicle for possible replacement.

### **Past discussions**

6. At the Panel meeting on 27 October 2008, the Administration briefed members on its plan to replace 196 aged ambulances, which account for nearly 80% of the existing fleet, and further measures adopted by FSD and EMSD to improve ambulance reliability. The major views and concerns raised by members are summarized in the ensuing paragraphs.

### **Reasons for ambulance breakdown**

7. Members noted that from January to September 2008, there were a total of 680 maintenance cases on ambulances of FSD arising from mechanical failure, representing an average of 76 cases per month. These cases included breakdowns while the ambulances were attending service calls and those occurring during standby. Members were deeply concerned about cases of breakdown of emergency ambulances and the ageing of the ambulance fleet. They asked for the causes for such incidents and measures taken by the Administration to address the problem.

8. The Administration advised that generally speaking, there were more incidents of ambulance breakdown in the summer months from July to September. This could be attributed mainly to the adverse effect of the heat and humidity on battery life, and on the wear and tear of air-conditioner components and engine belts. To strengthen the maintenance and repair of the aged emergency ambulances, EMSD had performed special inspection on the whole fleet of ambulances at the end of July 2008 and had undertaken to enhance the scheduled preventive maintenance to four times a year before the delivery of new vehicles. Apart from scheduled preventive maintenance, EMSD also performed corrective maintenance on ambulances, as and when necessary, to repair or replace components which had failed or broken down.

### Lead time required for replacing emergency ambulances

9. When briefed on the lead time required for the replacement of emergency ambulances, members in general considered that the lead time of two to three years for the replacement of aged emergency ambulances was far too long. They enquired whether the Administration would review the existing procedures for vehicle procurement, so as to shorten the lead time required and expedite the replacement of ambulances. Members considered that timely replacement of ambulances was essential and possible given the rapid developments in technology.

10. The Administration explained that a period of six months was normally required for the preparation of the specifications of requirements, and another six months for the submission, receipt, evaluation and award of contracts. Depending on the number of new vehicles to be purchased, it would probably take six months to one year for the suppliers to complete the manufacturing process and deliver the vehicles to FSD. There was not much room for expediting the replacement programme by compressing the time required for the tendering exercise. Nevertheless, the Administration would endeavour to shorten the period for preparation of specifications of the requirements. The Administration stressed that it attached great importance to the quality of its EAS. With a view to further improving the reliability of the ambulance fleet, FSD would replace in batches a total of 196 aged ambulances, including those which only had a service life of five years. The first 100 new vehicles would be put into service before the end of 2009, and the remaining 96 would become available within 2010. After all these new vehicles had arrived, the average age of FSD's ambulance fleet would be reduced from the current average of 8.4 years to 1.7 years.

### Criteria for determining the replacement schedule

11. Members were concerned whether there were any objective assessment criteria for determining the replacement schedule of ambulances.

12. The Administration advised that emergency ambulances were regarded as specialized vehicles and there were specific criteria for determining the replacement schedule of ambulances. In deciding on the replacement schedule, the departments concerned would take into account a number of factors, including the actual working condition of the vehicle, the vehicle's age, cumulative mileage and maintenance history. According to EMSD, the economic service life of an ambulance was normally seven years. This served as a general guide for shortlisting a vehicle for possible replacement. FSD had all along been replacing ambulances in accordance with the general guide and actual need. In view of the long lead time required, the Administration had been working in full gear to advance the replacement of the 196 ambulances in question. The Administration would review the assessment criteria and make adjustment, as and when necessary.

13. Some members were concerned that in the past few years, ambulance replacement had not been planned and carried out in an orderly manner. They enquired whether it was due to low vehicle breakdown rate or resource constraints of the Government. They also asked whether the Administration would formulate a more structured plan on ambulance replacement.

14. The Administration advised that it had all along been replacing ambulances in accordance with the resource allocation mechanism, having regard to the actual need and the advice of the relevant departments. The criteria for determining the priority of ambulance replacement included the age, maintenance history and mileage of the vehicles. Among the 196 new ambulances to be procured, the funding for 123 ambulances was secured in previous years. The expenditure involved was around \$147 million. The Government had provided further funding of \$97 million for the procurement of another 73 ambulances in batches, so as to speed up the replacement programme of aged ambulances.

#### Response time performance of EAS

15. Members noted that in the first nine months of 2008, around 92% of emergency calls could be met within the 12-minute target response time. In respect of calls to which FSD had failed to respond within 12 minutes, members sought information on the length of and reasons for the delay.

16. The Administration explained that FSD had a performance pledge of responding to at least 92.5% of all emergency ambulance calls within a response time of 12 minutes. In the past few years, there were only a small number of emergency ambulance calls where the response time target of 12 minutes was not met. According to FSD's records, response time could be affected by many factors, including travelling distance, traffic and weather conditions. Generally speaking, the percentage of calls in the New Territories with response time exceeding 12 minutes was slightly higher than those of the other regions. FSD believed that this was mainly due to the comparatively larger geographical coverage of the New Territories region and hence the longer travelling time required.

#### **Latest development**

17. At the Panel meeting on 27 October 2008, the Administration assured members that it would seriously consider members' views and suggestions in reviewing the mechanism for allocation and replacement of ambulances. At the request of members, the Administration undertook to revert to the Panel in the 2009-2010 legislative session on the latest development of the issue, including the results of its review.

**Relevant papers**

18. Members may wish to refer to the following minutes of meeting and papers for further details of the discussions -

- (a) Administration's paper for the meeting of the Panel on Security on 27 October 2008 [LC Paper No. CB(2)129/08-09(15)]; and
- (b) Minutes of the meeting of the Panel on Security on 27 October 2008 [LC Paper No. CB(2)348/08-09].

19. The above minutes and papers are also available on the website of the Legislative Council (<http://www.legco.gov.hk>).

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