

Executive Summary
Equal Opportunities Commission
Submission on 2025-26 Budget Consultation
Navigating Economic Opportunities in Equal Opportunities Issues

Highlights (4 Themes, 7 Recommendations)

Promoting Universal Design Principles and Accessible Tourism in Hong Kong

1. Implement plans to enhance accessible tourism via budgeting for a one-stop accessible tourism resource hub and budget to enhance the inclusiveness and accessibility of tourism products and services.
2. Budget to conduct targeted accessibility audit on facilities and measures that support tourism.
3. Financial incentives and subsidies prioritized to taxi owners procuring wheelchair-accessible e-taxis in order to speed up the phase-out of non-accessible taxis in order to enhance physical mobility of PWDs.

Exploring Economic Opportunities in an Inclusive Society

4. Arrange assistive technologies fairs at the community level for people in need to get in touch with products that could improve their wellbeing, economic opportunities and make direct purchases.

Supporting Persons with Mental Health Needs

5. Budget to develop the Clinical Social Work (CSW) system to achieve timely treatment for the growing number of people with mental health needs.

Enhancing Childcare and Childbirth

6. Budget for investigating the availability and distribution of baby care and lactation facilities across districts in Hong Kong to better meet the needs of breastfeeding women.
7. Expand the scope of tax deductible items for individuals receiving reproductive technology to include counseling, storage of gametes, and related medical treatments.

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Introduction

Economic opportunities in equal opportunities issues are often overlooked, especially in the times of economic downturn, as people often think the implementation of equal opportunities can only incur costs. As a matter of fact, appropriate budgetary initiatives with consideration of mainstreaming equal opportunities can bring about economic benefits for many industries and at the same time level the playing field improve wellbeing of diverse groups including persons with disabilities (PWDs), the older persons, and families with childcare responsibilities. The Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) sees disadvantaged groups as an integral part of the economy and wishes to put forward 7 recommendations under 4 themes that would contribute to an inclusive economy where people with diverse needs can also thrive and contribute to economic developments of Hong Kong. We suggest that an inclusive economy is more than welfare and cash incentives to disadvantaged people, and includes building a community that is fit for all and concerns all.

I. Promoting Universal Design Principles and Accessible Tourism in Hong Kong

Enhancing Accessible Tourism via One-stop Accessible Tourism Resource Hub

1. **Hong Kong should implement plans to enhance accessible tourism** so that more types of tourists will be attracted to visit Hong Kong. First impressions last. Tourism is an indispensable part of a recovering economy. However, according to a report on most accessible cities, Hong Kong did not make it to the top 10 most accessible cities. In contrast, Singapore, Shanghai and Tokyo were voted as few of the 10 most accessible cities in the world.¹ While *The Development Blueprint for Hong Kong's Tourism Industry 2.0 (The Blueprint)*, promulgated in December 2024) proposed different initiatives in relation to accessible tourism, including the expansion of the market for silver hair groups and the development of intelligent and convenient travelling in Hong Kong,² corresponding measures are needed to support the city's transformation into an accessible destination. The EOC would like to emphasise the importance of mainstreaming universal design across products, environments, programmes, and services to promote inclusive participation in mega events. When

¹ The Valuable 500 Foundation. 2022. "10 Most Accessible Cities." Retrieved from: <https://www.thevaluable500.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/1Valuable-500-Accessible-Cities-Report-2022-1.pdf>.

² The Culture, Sports and Tourism Bureau. 2024. *Development Blueprint for Hong Kong's Tourism Industry 2.0*. Retrieved from: https://www.cstb.gov.hk/file_manager/en/documents/consultation-and-publications/Tourism_Blueprint_2.0_English.pdf.

planning these mega events or various policy initiatives, it is essential for the Government to consider the diverse needs of individuals to create a well-rounded participatory experience. This mindset shift across various bureaux and departments not only enhances the travel experience for PWDs but also positions Hong Kong as a more attractive tourism destination overall. With the 12th National Games for Persons with Disabilities (NGD) and the 9th National Special Olympic Games (NSOG) being co-hosted by Hong Kong in December 2025, there is an urgent need to assess and improve Hong Kong's infrastructure, transport, accommodation, services, and digital tools to ensure Hong Kong becomes a more accessible destination.

2. **Budget for incorporating information on accessible tourism into existing travel information platform** is recommended. The EOC has observed that information on accessibility is fragmented across various government-managed and privately operated websites, including lists of barrier-free facilities in government premises and recreational guides published by NGOs. This fragmentation makes it challenging for unfamiliar visitors to gather the essential details needed for planning their stay and journeys. According to *the Blueprint*, Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTB) will develop Smart Itinerary Planner feature on Discover Hong Kong for personalised itinerary suggestions to tourists. The Government may consider allocating a budget to integrate accessible tourism information into the upcoming online resource services. Drawing inspiration from accessible travel portals developed by Tokyo,³ and Taiwan,⁴ the Smart Itinerary Planner could provide accessible travel routes to encourage visitors to explore more of Hong Kong. Information such as accessible transport options, numbers of accessible hotel guestrooms, accessible lifts along a chosen route, accessible toilets, family-friendly toilets and nursing rooms would greatly facilitate visitors in grasping the resources they need.

3. On top of the above suggestion, **budget to enhance the inclusiveness and accessibility of tourism-related products and services provided by the suppliers in the tourism sector** is recommended. The Government agreed in 2023 to top up the Information Technology Development Matching Fund with additional \$30 million for running the Fund Scheme for Travel Agents.⁵ Typical examples of eligible technologies include introduction of virtual reality and augmented reality to provide tourists convenience and enhance their user experience, optimization of websites to make them responsive to multiple mobile devices, and adoption of big data business solution to collect, analyse and interpret data to improve service delivery. The Government may also consider **injecting pilot allocation into the said Fund for travel agents to**

³ *Tokyo Sightseeing Accessibility Guide*. Retrieved from: <https://www.sangyo-rodol.metro.tokyo.lg.jp/tourism/accessible/en/>.

⁴ *Taiwan Waves of Wonder: Accessibility Travel*. Retrieved from: <https://eng.taiwan.net.tw/m1.aspx?sNo=0025070>

⁵ For Information Technology Development Matching Fund Scheme for Travel Agents. See: <https://www.tichk.org/en/subsidy-schemes/it-matching-fund>.

leverage technologies to enhance the service quality for travellers with diverse needs and at different stages of life in order to meet their recreational needs.

Targeted Accessibility Audit

4. Budget to conduct targeted accessibility audit on facilities and measures that support tourism is recommended. Accessibility of facilities and tourist spots is an integral part to tourists' experience. Targeted accessibility audit of the current state of accessibility levels in Hong Kong can fathom out the necessary improvements needed to boost the attractiveness to diverse groups of people. For instance, a study published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) revealed that improvements of accessibility at the tourist destinations are useful in attracting foreign tourists to visit European Union member states and the overall economic benefit of improved accessibility measures driven by the increased inbound tourism demand is enormous. The increase of economic benefits would be 28.9% with minimum improvements of accessibility, 53.3% with medium improvements of accessibility, and 74.9% with extensive improvements of accessibility respectively.⁶ In this connection, Hong Kong's accessibility level, constituted by its transportation network, sports and entertainment facilities, leisure and socialization venues, and accommodations, directly influences tourists' decisions to visit, stay and revisit Hong Kong. For example, silver-haired visitors and their companions prioritise barrier-free facilities such as accessible rooms in hotels and low-floor buses as much as PWDs and their companions. Meanwhile, family visitors attach great importance to family-friendly facilities such as babycare rooms and flat routes for prams. Efforts should be made to measure Hong Kong's current accessibility performance in order to devise more comprehensive plans to develop and deepen accessible tourism in Hong Kong.

Restructuring Current Subsidy Schemes to Increase Supply of Wheelchair-Accessible Taxis

5. The Government may consider providing financial incentives and increasing subsidies to taxi owners in order to speed up the phase-out of non-accessible taxis in order to enhance physical mobility of PWDs. As of October 2024, only about 5,100 taxis in Hong Kong are wheelchair-accessible⁷, accounting for less than 30% of the total number of 18,163 taxis.⁸ The Government proposed to earmark \$50 million to subsidise the trade to purchase wheelchair-accessible electric taxis ("e-taxis") in *The Chief Executive's 2023 Policy Address*.⁹ Meanwhile, the Government has

⁶ Rebstock, Markus. 2017. "Economic Benefits of Improved Accessibility to Transport Systems and the Role of Transport in Fostering Tourism for All." Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Retrieved from: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/economic-benefits-of-improved-accessibility-to-transport-systems-and-the-role-of-transport-in-fostering-tourism-for-all_b57673f4-en.html.

⁷ The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administration Region. "Planning and Provision of Support Services for Persons with Disabilities." 8 October, 2024. Retrieved from: https://www.legco.gov.hk/yr2023/english/hc/sub_com/hs53/papers/hs5320241008cb1-1291-01-e.pdf.

⁸ The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administration Region. "LCQ20: Barrier-free taxis." 27 March, 2024. Retrieved from: <https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/202403/27/P2024032600748.htm?fontSize=1>.

⁹ Paragraph 86(iii).

already reserved \$135 million under the Electric Taxis Subsidy Scheme of the New Energy Transport Fund (“NETF”) to subsidise the taxi owners to replace 3,000 old taxis with e-taxis,¹⁰ and the subsidy level for each taxi is equivalent to about 10% to 25% of the current market prices of e-taxis. To optimise the resources to promote green transformation of transport sector while taking into account the travel needs of different citizens, especially the elderly and PWDs, **taxi owners who intend to procure wheelchair-accessible e-taxis should be given higher priority in enjoying the subsidy quotas** under the current Subsidy Scheme. The Government may also consider **topping up the NETF to launch a comprehensive scheme under NETF to subsidise more taxi owners, and those who wish to procure wheelchair-accessible e-taxis can enjoy higher amount of subsidies to cover a larger percentage of the market prices of e-taxis.**

II. Exploring Economic Opportunities in an Inclusive Society

Assistive Technologies Fairs at the Community Level

6. **Assistive technologies fairs could be arranged at the community level** for people in need to get in touch easier with products that could improve their wellbeing and economic opportunities while enabling direct purchases in a business-to-consumer manner. At the same time, the fairs can promote the products and services of technological industries and retailers that target at individuals with special needs, and small business owners or employers as potential consumers. Assistive technologies and related infrastructures can largely provide convenience to the older persons and PWDs. Nonetheless existing channels of promoting assistive technologies seem to focus on transfer of relevant knowledge about products among businesses, professionals, non-governmental organizations, and social enterprises. In other words, the end-users currently have few channels to directly get in touch with assistive technologies.

7. In line with the Central People's Government's promulgation of the *Detailed Opinions of the General Office of the State Council on Developing the Silver Hair Economy and Enhancing the Welfare of the Elderly* (“国务院办公厅关于发展银发经济增进老年人福祉的意见”) which required the development of industrial clusters contributing to the silver hair economy, the Hong Kong Government's Advisory Panel on Silver Economy should devise plans to deepen cross-border cooperation including the cultivation of closer business to consumer relationships. Against the backdrop of Hong Kong's ageing population, Hong Kong is a good testing ground for many newly developed assistive technologies. By two sides of the same coin, assistive technologies developed in the mainland China can also generate possible low-cost solutions to the wellbeing and economic opportunities of Hong Kong's older persons and PWDs.

¹⁰ Environment and Ecology Bureau. 2024. Applications for Use - Electric Taxis Subsidy Scheme. Retrieved from: <https://www.eeb.gov.hk/en/new-energy-transport-fund/AU.html>.

III. Supporting Persons with Mental Health Needs

Clinical Social Work (CSW) System to Enhance Care for Persons with Mental Health Needs

8. The Government may consider setting aside a **budget to develop the Clinical Social Work (CSW) system to achieve timely treatment for the growing number of people with mental health needs.** In 2024, the Government launched the Healthy Mind Pilot Project at three District Health Centres and District Health Centre Expresses, providing free initial mental health assessments to the public. Persons with mild symptoms of depression or anxiety will be referred for further support. However, the shortage of professionals remains a significant issue; for instance, there were only 381 psychiatric doctors and 111 clinical psychologists in 2022-23 working in the Hospital Authority. In view of the actual needs in community, the CSW system could train current and future social workers in psychiatry, psychological counseling, and health care to cater to the increasing demands for services. After completing their training and certification, professionals can provide essential services to those in need, including not only mental health assessments but also psychotherapy and personalised rehabilitation plans. This approach helps deliver appropriate services to people in need at an early stage.

IV. Enhancing Childcare and Childbirth

Benchmarking the Availability of Baby Care and Lactation Facilities in Hong Kong

9. **A budget can be considered for investigating the availability and distribution of baby care and lactation facilities across districts in Hong Kong to better meet the needs of breastfeeding women.** *The Study on Breastfeeding at Publicly Accessible Premises* in Hong Kong released by the EOC in 2024 revealed that 81% of respondents who had breastfed or expressed milk believed that more breastfeeding or milk-expressing facilities are needed in public places. Further, it was found that a significant portion of establishments established in 2000 or earlier did not provide breastfeeding and lactation rooms. In order to benchmark an optimal level of facility availability, which would direct the establishment of appropriate and relevant facilities in the community, a stocktaking exercise is recommended. The proposed investigation would identify service gaps and provide recommendations for improvement. By enhancing these provisions, the government can support maternal and child health and promote breastfeeding while also enhancing a family-friendly community and supportive environment for childcare.

Expand Tax Deduction to Enhance Birthrate

10. **Expand the scope of tax deductible items for individuals receiving reproductive technology to include counseling, storage of gametes, and related medical treatments.** In line with the government's policies to boost efforts to

encourage childbirth, including new born baby cash bonus and tax deduction for couples who are infertile or receiving reproductive technology (RT) procedures under specified medical needs, this recommendation aims to create an environment conducive to childbearing in Hong Kong. Parenthood decisions are often a package of considerations rather than merely an issue of infertility, not to mention infertility may be related to psychological factors or lead to psychological adversities, and therefore require more support than fertility treatment. Taking the example of the US, it is possible to report items such as costs related to counseling for fertility treatment, storage of gametes, and acupuncture to increase fertility for deduction of personal income tax with regards to different headings under *Publication 502 (2024), Medical and Dental Expenses*.¹¹ Similarly, Ireland allows tax deduction on expenses on maternity care,¹² while Canada allows tax deduction on medical expenses paid in respect of a surrogate mother or gamete donor.¹³

11. On the one hand, the willingness to give birth hinges on multiple factors, and a low birthrate can also be attributed to a personal choice as a lifestyle rather than merely medical infertility. Personal aspirations can also hinder people from becoming parents. To boost birth rates, the Government should consider comprehensively the decision-making process, the hurdles, and the pinpointing solutions to mitigate hurdles related to parenthood. On the other hand, to enhance the rights of women to pursue career advancement while becoming parent, options for women should be left open regarding mechanisms to manage the fear for drawbacks such as motherhood penalty and postnatal conditions affecting work performance. One way to liberate women in their career ambitions is for them to manage their time of starting parenthood. The option to freeze gametes during prime age without being infertile is thus crucial to giving women control over their career and life planning. In other words, the option boosts potential birthrates by giving individuals more time to make a prepared decision. The Government should encourage more budgetary options for prospective parents to embark on parenthood at the right time by helping them balance both work and family.

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¹¹ The Internal Revenue Service of the United States of America. *Publication 502 (2024), Medical and Dental Expenses*. Retrieved from: https://www.irs.gov/publications/p502#en_US_2022_publink1000179007.

¹² Citizens Information of Ireland. "Tax relief on medical expenses." Retrieved from: <https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/money-and-tax/tax/income-tax-credits-and-reliefs/taxation-and-medical-expenses>.

¹³ Government of Canada. "Medical Expense Tax Credit (METC) for Surrogacy and Other Expenses." Retrieved from: <https://www.canada.ca/en/revenue-agency/programs/about-canada-revenue-agency-cra/federal-government-budgets/budget-2022-plan-grow-economy-make-life-more-affordable/medical-expense-tax-credit-surrogacy-other-expenses.html>.