

LCQ15: Manpower situation of transport industry

Following is a question by the Hon Frankie Yick and a written reply by the Secretary for Transport and Housing, Mr Frank Chan Fan, in the Legislative Council today (January 23):

Question:

Some public light bus (PLB) trade organisations have relayed that they are unable to recruit sufficient PLB drivers. As a result, the succession and ageing problems of the drivers (whose current average age is 69) have become increasingly serious, and more than 10 per cent of PLBs are left idle due to a lack of drivers, thereby affecting PLB services. Regarding the shortage of PLB drivers, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the number of holders of valid PLB driving licences and, among them, the number of those who were new holders of the driving licence, at the end of each of the past five years, with a tabulated breakdown of such numbers by the age group (i.e. 29 or below, 30 to 39, 40 to 49, 50 to 59, 60 to 69, 70 to 79 and 80 or above) to which the holders belonged at that time;

(2) whether it will provide subsidies for the fees of PLB driving courses, PLB driving tests and the pre-service course for PLB drivers, so as to attract new blood for the industry;

(3) of the measures taken by the Government in the past three years to assist PLB operators in recruiting drivers, as well as the details and effectiveness of each of such measures; and

(4) whether it will consider, as a short-term measure to address the problem of manpower shortage of drivers, allowing the PLB trade to import, at salaries not lower than those of local PLB drivers, drivers from outside Hong Kong to drive green minibuses; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

The Government has been highly concerned about the manpower situation of the transport industry, including the public light bus (PLB) trade, and has been striving to assist the trade in improving the working environment and remuneration packages so as to attract new blood and alleviate the problem of manpower shortage. My reply to the various parts of the Hon Frankie Yick's question is as follows:

(1) The number of holders and new holders of public light bus driving licences by age group as at December 31 in each of the past five years is

tabulated at Annex.

(2) to (4) As at December 31, 2018, there are a total of 3 295 green minibuses (GMBs) and 1 028 red minibuses (RMBs) in Hong Kong, while there are a total of around 175 000 holders of a valid full driving licence for PLB. Holders of a valid full driving licence for PLB may work as a GMB or RMB driver. The key to alleviating the problem of manpower shortage in the PLB trade lies in how to attract more people (especially younger people) to the trade.

In this connection, the GMB operators have been attracting new blood through different means, including improving salaries and benefits, and hiring part-time drivers to meet service demand during peak hours, etc. Meanwhile, the Government is committed to facilitating the overall development of the industry and assisting the trade in recruiting drivers. The Transport Department (TD) has been proactively coordinating GMB operators to participate in job fairs organised by the Labour Department (LD) since 2013. So far, about 21 such job fairs have been held. The TD also assists in liaising with relevant support organisations and the Correctional Services Department with a view to encouraging the operators to employ members of the ethnic minorities and rehabilitated persons.

The rest time arrangements for drivers are equally important. In mid-August 2017, the TD put into effect an updated version of the Guidelines on Working Hours of Green Minibus Drivers (Guidelines), providing guidance on the daily maximum duty hours and driving hours for drivers. From time to time, the TD reminds operators of the importance of drawing up work arrangements for their drivers according to the Guidelines.

Moreover, the TD also strives to improve the operating environment for the trade with a view to enabling the trade to offer better remuneration packages to attract new blood. Measures include increasing the maximum seating capacity of PLBs so as to raise the overall carrying capacity; relaxing or rescinding passenger pick-up/drop-off restricted zones and prohibited zones at certain locations in the light of the actual situation of the trade; allowing PLBs to park at PLB stands during non-peak periods; and extending the validity period of the PLB driver identity plates, etc. These measures aim to improve the overall operating environment of the trade. If the PLB operators have to apply for fare increase on the account of rising costs (including cost of salaries), the TD will consider the applications on individual merits.

Meanwhile, to attract more young drivers to join the industry, the Government proposes to relax the current requirement for applications of learners' or full driving licences for commercial vehicles to have held a valid driving license of private car (PC) or light goods vehicle (LGV) for a period of at least three years to at least one year (Note). Earlier on, the Government consulted the transport industry, the Panel on Transport of the Legislative Council (LegCo) and the Road Safety Council on the proposal and their views were generally positive. The Government will introduce the relevant legislative proposal into the LegCo within 2018-19 legislative session.

At present, the Employees Retraining Board runs a Pre-service Course for PLB Drivers under its "Skills Upgrading Scheme Plus". Eligible low-income applicants may apply for course fee subsidy under the Scheme.

On the suggestion to import labour, to ensure local workers enjoy priority in employment and to safeguard their salaries and benefits, in the event that employers are genuinely unable to recruit the necessary workforce locally, they may apply under the "Supplementary Labour Scheme" administered by the LD to import workers at technician level or below. As the proposal to import labour will have implications on the livelihood of local drivers and the difference in the driving culture of foreign drivers may have potential implications on road safety, we must consider the case carefully.

The Government is willing to formulate strategies together with the trade, and will facilitate the trade at policy level where practicable and desirable. We also hope that the trade will strive to improve the working environment and remuneration packages to improve the manpower situation.

Note: If an applicant needs to undergo the probationary driving period, he/she will be eligible to apply for a learner's or full driving licence for commercial vehicles immediately upon issue of the full driving licence for PC or LGV after completion of the minimum one-year probationary driving period; if the applicant does not need to undergo probationary driving period (for example, persons who obtained full driving licences by direct issue), he will be eligible to apply for the two aforementioned types of commercial driving licences after having held the full driving licence for PC or LGV for at least one year.