

LCQ15: Public transport services

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 (September 8):

Question:

Some operators of public transport (PT) services have relayed that against a backdrop of continuous expansion of the railway network, various PT services other than heavy rail (i.e. franchised buses (FBs), Light Rail, public light buses, non-FBs, taxis, trams and ferries) have seen a continuous drop in patronage in recent years, with their room for survival diminishing gradually. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) how the distribution forecast of average daily PT patronage in 2021 set out in the Public Transport Strategy Study (PTSS) published in 2017 compares with the actual distribution at present; if there are discrepancies, whether it has assessed the causes for that;

(2) given that PTSS put forward a number of improvement measures to enhance the strategic arrangements of PT services and promote the sustainable development of PT services other than heavy rail, of the (i) latest implementation situation and (ii) effectiveness of such measures, and whether such measures have improved the business environment of PT services other than heavy rail;

(3) whether it will consider entrusting the provision of feeder bus services in Northwest New Territories, currently operated by the MTR Corporation Limited, to operators of FBs and green minibuses instead, so as to increase the room for survival of the latter; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(4) given that the Government recently gave approval for FB operators to introduce long-haul bus services featuring no space for standees and plying routes similar to those of the existing residents' buses, which has resulted in vicious competition and an increase in the number of buses on roads, whether the Government has changed its policy of avoiding duplication of transport resources and maintaining a balance in the PT services ecology; if so, of the details and reasons for that; if not, whether it will review the aforesaid arrangement;

(5) given that the Government has given approval in recent years for FB operators to operate short-haul shuttle bus routes between districts in the New Territories with relatively low population densities and transport nodes using mid-sized single-deck buses, but such type of routes has all along been plied by green minibuses, of the Government's latest positioning for the latter; and

(6) whether it will review afresh the demand for as well as the role and

positioning of PT services other than heavy rail, and formulate policies on promoting the sustainable development of such services; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

â€‹ The Government published the Public Transport Strategy Study report (the Study Report) in June 2017, which examined the roles and positioning of various public transport services, including franchised buses, Light Rail, public light buses (PLBs), non-franchised buses (NFBs), taxis, trams and ferries, under further expansion of the heavy rail network. The Study Report affirmed that the prevailing roles and positioning of various public transport services remain valid, i.e. heavy rail is the backbone of the public transport system; franchised buses are road-based mass carriers; Light Rail is an important road-based and at-grade transport mode in Northwest New Territories; while the remaining public transport services play an important supplementary role, in particular serving areas inaccessible by railway and providing feeder services to railway.

â€‹ My reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Frankie Yick is as follows:

(1) Based on the data available at the time of the Study Report, it was estimated that the overall public transport passenger trips would increase from 12.6 million per day in 2016 to around 13.2 million per day in 2021. According to the latest provisional figures from the Transport Department (TD), the average daily patronage on public transport services in the first half of 2021 was much lower than the forecast in the Study Report due to the significant drop in the number of visitors to Hong Kong as a result of the COVID-19 and decrease in the number of commuters owing to various anti-epidemic and social distancing measures. The January 2021 figure was 8.5 million passenger trips while the June 2021 figure was 10.8 million passenger trips. As the epidemic situation stabilises in Hong Kong, we anticipate that demand for local public transport services will gradually increase and resume to near pre-epidemic level.

â€‹ The distribution of passenger trips among different public transport services in the first half of 2021 is set out in the table below.

Public Transport Services	Distribution forecast of average daily patronage in 2021 under the Study Report (%)	Actual distribution of average daily patronage in the first half of 2021 (%)
Heavy Rail	39%	36%
Franchised buses (Note)	30%	35%
PLBs	15%	14%
Taxis	8%	7%

Light Rail	4%	4%
Trams	1%	1%
Ferries	1%	1%
NFBs providing residents' services	2%	2%
Total	100%	100%

Note: For the purpose of the above table, the average daily patronage of franchised buses includes passengers of Mass Transit Railway (MTR) bus services.

(2) The Study Report set out 67 recommended measures to enhance the arrangement of public transport. As at August 2021, 44 measures have been successfully implemented, which include increasing the maximum seating capacity of PLBs, implementing the long-term operation model of outlying island ferry routes, replacing the tram tracks, relaxing the period required for holding a private car or light goods vehicle driving licence before a person can apply for a commercial driving licence, extending the validity period of PLB and taxi driver identity plates to ten years, encouraging public transport operators to provide more fare concessions as appropriate, etc. These measures help reinforce the roles played by various public transport services in the public transport system as well as promote the complementarity among different modes, so that the public can enjoy more efficient, convenient and diversified public transport services. The Government will continue to actively take forward the implementation of the remaining measures.

(3) The TD has been continuously enhancing the public transport network having regard to local developments, demographic changes, completion of transport infrastructure, and the operation and service levels of public transport services in the districts, etc. The MTR Corporation Limited currently operates bus service in the Northwest New Territories, plying between Light Rail and Tuen Ma Line stations, and some of the housing estates as well as rural areas in the district. With interchange concessions, passengers are provided with convenient and affordable, or even free, feeder services. At the same time, franchised bus and green minibus (GMB) operators also operate intra-district feeder routes or cross-district routes in the Northwest New Territories, providing different public transport options for passengers. The TD will continue to keep in view the change in public transport demand in various districts and formulate suitable public transport arrangements so as to meet passengers' needs.

(4) The Government has been coordinating various public transport service arrangements to enhance the efficiency of the overall transport network and to avoid duplication of transport resources. The Study Report recommended that franchised bus companies may attempt to open up new services, including the introduction of new long-haul bus services on a trial basis, with a view to providing passengers with more diversified choices and meeting various needs of the community. In this regard, the TD and a franchised bus company

introduced the routes P960 (Siu Hong Station (North) – Wan Chai (North)) and P968 (Yuen Long (West) – Causeway Bay (Tin Hau)) in July 2021 to provide passengers with more comfortable and speedier long-haul bus services. The bus compartments are also equipped with more passenger amenities. On the other hand, residents' services play a supplementary role in the public transport system to serve passengers of individual residential developments with a view to relieving the demand for regular public transport services primarily during the peak hours and filling the service gaps which cannot be met by regular public transport services.

(5) The Study Report examined and affirmed that the roles and positioning of various public transport modes (such as PLBs, including GMBs) remain valid. GMBs provide supplementary feeder service in areas with relatively lower passenger demand or where the use of high-capacity transport modes is not suitable, such as operating shuttle routes between residential areas in New Territories with relatively lower population density and transport nodes.

â€‹ The Study Report suggested the Government and the franchised bus companies examine the feasibility of introducing mid-sized single-deck buses, and conduct a trial of these buses to provide short-haul shuttle services in areas with relatively lower population density but with growth potential. The TD and the franchised bus companies have completed the relevant feasibility study, which indicates that there is currently no mid-sized single-deck bus model in the market that is suitable for use in Hong Kong, nor is there any bus route(s) suitable for deployment of mid-sized single-deck bus for the time being.

(6) The Chief Executive announced in the 2020 Policy Address that the Government would conduct a comprehensive Traffic and Transport Strategy Study (TTSS), which includes surveying the latest travel patterns of the public, making reference to and introducing suitable innovative transport modes and technologies to promote green transport and reduce emission with a view to making Hong Kong a more livable city. Besides, the TTSS will also explore the enhancement of public transport services and encourage the public to use public transport, thereby relieving the traffic congestion situation. Our goal is to set out forward-looking long-term traffic and transport strategies for ensuring that Hong Kong's traffic and transport system will not only be safe, reliable, environmentally friendly and efficient in the future, but also be able to support the sustainable social and economic development of Hong Kong and facilitate the flow of people and goods in the Greater Bay Area.

â€‹ At present, the TD is formulating the scope and the detailed arrangements of the TTSS and is planning to conduct a travel characteristics survey in 2022. Data collected from the survey will be used for enhancing the Comprehensive Transport Study Model in 2024. During the course of the entire study, the TD will conduct topical studies in parallel with a view to formulating future traffic and transport policies and implementing suitable traffic management strategies and measures.