

LCQ21: Policy on public light buses

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 15):

Question:

Since mid-1970s, the Government has prohibited red minibuses (RMBs) from providing service in newly developed areas with a comprehensive rail and bus network or on newly commissioned expressways. The aforesaid restrictions, coupled with the incessant expansion of the railway network in recent years, have resulted in the service areas of RMBs shrinking gradually and their patronage declining continuously. On the other hand, the Government introduced in 1972 green minibuses (GMBs) scheduled services with fixed routes, schedules and fares, and has encouraged the conversion of RMBs into GMBs. However, some members of the public light buses (PLBs) trade have pointed out that there are currently 400 to 500 RMBs the operators of which have all along been intending to convert such RMBs into GMBs over the years, but they were unable to do so due to various reasons. Regarding the policy on PLBs, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) of the details of the new GMB routes that the Government plans to introduce in the coming three years, and the expected number of RMBs which can be converted into GMBs upon the introduction of such routes;
- (2) as some PLB operators have pointed out that some RMBs are currently operating in a mode consistent with that of GMBs, whether the Government will allow the relevant routes to change to GMB routes, so that the RMBs can be converted into GMBs; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;
- (3) as some PLB operators have pointed out that the room for business for RMBs has been shrinking continuously as a result of the aforesaid restrictions, of the Government's new measures in place to increase the room for business for the trade;
- (4) given that the primary function of GMBs is to provide supplementary transport services in areas where the patronage does not justify franchised bus service or access by other modes of public transport is limited, but the Public Transport Strategy Study released by the Government in 2017 recommended the introduction of routes to be plied by mid-sized single-deck buses by franchised bus operators to those areas in the New Territories with relatively lower population density but with growth potential, whether the Government has assessed if such an arrangement will impede the conversion of RMBs into GMBs; if it has, of the details; if not, the reasons for that, and the measures in place to expedite the conversion of RMBs into GMBs; and
- (5) given that it has been more than two decades since the Transport Advisory Committee conducted the last PLB policy review in 1997, whether the Government will conduct in the near future a comprehensive review of the

policy on PLBs; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

My reply to the various parts of the Hon Frankie Yick's question is as follows:

(1) The Transport Department (TD) has all along been planning and developing new green minibus (GMB) route packages having regard to the demand for transport services resulting from district developments and inviting tenders through the annual Green Minibus Operators Selection exercise. Under the 2021 selection exercise, the TD will invite tenders for three GMB routes scheduled to be put into service in 2022. The details are as follows:

(a) a new GMB route plying between Sheung Shui and Sha Tin involving 10 GMBs; and

(b) two existing GMB routes serving Whampoa Garden to be re-tendered, and the number of minibuses required is to be determined.

The Government expects quite some public and private housing estates to be completed in the next few years. In response to the new district developments and changes in the demand for public transport services, the TD will look into the need and feasibility of launching new GMB services in the coming two years so as to introduce new route packages suitable for GMB operation, and will consult the local community and the industry on the proposed GMB routes as appropriate.

(2) It has been the Government's established policy to encourage the conversion of red minibus (RMB) to GMBs to ensure service quality level and achieve effective monitoring. To align with the relevant policy, the TD plans and develops new GMB route packages and invites application from interested parties (including RMB operators) to run these routes through the annual Green Minibus Operators Selection exercise. Suitable operators will be selected by the Green Minibus Operators Selection Board in accordance with a set of selection criteria and prescribed marking scheme. Besides, to encourage RMBs to convert to GMBs, applicants who are new entrants to the GMB trade (including the existing RMB operators) will be given extra marks under the existing marking scheme. The entire selection process is open, fair and just. If some RMB routes were allowed to directly convert to GMB routes, other operators (including GMB operators, new operators interested in joining the public light bus (PLB) industry, and other RMB operators, etc.) would be deprived of the opportunity to apply for the operation of the routes concerned, which may run counter to the principle of fair competition.

(3) RMBs are currently allowed to operate across the territory except restricted zones for RMBs, and their route, headway and fare are not subject to any regulation. To help improve the operating environment of the RMBs, the TD has implemented a host of measures. For instance, having regard to the requests of the RMB trade and taking into account the actual situation of

individual locations, the TD has relaxed or rescinded some passenger pick-up/drop-off restricted zones and prohibited zones for RMBs where feasible. Moreover, some RMB routes have been included in the Public Transport Fare Subsidy Scheme. In order to help address the shortage of RMB drivers, the minimum licence-holding period of private car and light goods vehicle driving licence for the applicant for the commercial vehicle driving licence has been shortened from three years to a year. The TD will continue to liaise with the trade to explore other possible measures.

(4) The Public Transport Strategy Study report, published by the Government in June 2017, has recommended that the Government and the franchised bus companies should 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 study, which indicates that there is currently no mid-sized single-deck bus model in the market 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. Hence the Government does not plan to launch any mid-sized single deck bus service at present.

On encouraging RMBs to convert to GMBs, applicants who are new entrants to the GMB trade (including the existing RMB operators), as abovementioned, are awarded extra points under the prevailing marking scheme. A total of 322 RMBs have been converted into GMBs over the past decade. The TD will continue to work closely with the trade and explore other feasible measures in promoting the conversion of RMBs into GMBs.

(5) 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, exploring the enhancement of public transport services, including PLB, and encouraging 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 can maintain a safe, reliable, environmentally friendly and efficient traffic and transport system in the future. This will not only cater to the economic, social and leisure needs of the community, but also support the sustainable development of Hong Kong and facilitate the flow of people and goods in the Greater Bay Area.

At present, the TD is formulating the scope and the detailed arrangements of the TTSS and is planning to conduct a territory-wide 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.