

LCQ22: Introduction of electric public transport modes

Following is a question by the Hon Jimmy Ng and a written reply by the Secretary for Environment and Ecology, Mr Tse Chin-wan, in the Legislative Council today (May 22):

Question:

For the sake of attaining the goal of zero vehicular emissions before 2050, the Government has launched a number of measures in recent years to promote trials of various public transport modes and commercial vehicles running on electricity, and has set the target of introducing about 700 electric buses and around 3 000 electric taxis by the end of 2027. The relevant sectors have expressed concern whether the Government will roll out more measures to encourage their introduction of more electric public transport modes. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) given that the target was set to subsidise about 40 electric public light buses (e-PLBs) for trials for about 12 months in 2023 when the authorities planned to launch the Pilot Scheme for Electric Public Light Buses (the Pilot Scheme), but in the end only four applications from PLB operators have been received under the Pilot Scheme and two operators have been subsidised, with each of them purchasing one e-PLB, whether the authorities have examined the reasons why the Pilot Scheme has failed to meet its target;

(2) of the time when the authorities will launch the next round for applications under the Pilot Scheme; whether consideration will be given to raising the proportion of the subsidy level to the purchase price of e-PLBs and raising the cap on the number of subsidised e-PLBs to be acquired by PLB operators;

(3) of the progress made by the authorities in installing quick charging facilities at Yuen Long Station (North) Public Transport Interchange (PTI) and identifying a suitable PTI in the eastern part of Hong Kong Island for installation of such facilities;

(4) given that the New Energy Transport Fund includes trial projects on e-taxi charging mode, which subsidise the trade to set up dedicated e-taxi quick charging facilities and mobile charging systems, of the respective numbers of applications from the taxi trade which have been received and approved by the authorities since the launch of those projects;

(5) of the latest number of electric franchised buses first registered in Hong Kong, and whether the Government has assessed if its target of introducing about 700 electric buses by the end of 2027 can be achieved ahead of schedule; and

(6) as the Government has announced in the 2023 Policy Address that it will formulate a citywide green transformation roadmap and timetable for public buses and taxis in the first half of 2024, of the time when the Government will release the said roadmap and timetable?

Reply:

President,

My reply to the question raised by the Hon Jimmy Ng is as follows:

(1) The primary purpose of the Pilot Scheme for Electric Public Light Buses (the Pilot Scheme) launched by the Government is to test different models of electric public light buses (e-PLBs), evaluate the feasibility of their application in Hong Kong and the relevant charging facilities' operation and performance, as well as conduct operational trials in different PLB routes.

The Government provides economic incentives to encourage green minibus operators (operators) to participate in the Pilot Scheme. Operators who have succeeded in their applications are provided with a subsidy equal to 80 per cent of the vehicle cost for each e-PLB participating in the Pilot Scheme. The first round of the Pilot Scheme accepted applications from October 27 2023 to November 17 2023, and received a total of four applications from two operators who respectively applied for one and three e-PLBs of the THOR model provided by the supplier Green Mobility Innovations Limited. After vetting in accordance with the application rules, the Government entered into agreements with these two operators to subsidise each of them the purchase of an e-PLB to participate in the trial. The two e-PLBs have started operational trial since late March 2024.

To our understanding, the main reason for the operators not actively participating in the first round of the Pilot Scheme is due to the challenging business environment in operating green minibuses in recent years. Many operators have adopted a wait-and-see attitude, and need to observe and understand more about the actual operation and performance of e-PLBs and the associated charging facilities before making a decision.

(2) and (3) The vehicle costs of the three models of e-PLBs made available to operators for selection in the first round application range from \$1.38 million to \$2 million. The Government will provide operators who have succeeded in their applications with a subsidy equal to 80 per cent of the vehicle cost for each e-PLB participating in the Pilot Scheme. Operators will only need to pay 20 per cent of the vehicle cost (i.e. \$280,000 to \$400,000), which is already much lower than the current vehicle cost (around \$700,000) of a new diesel PLB. Therefore, the current subsidy level is already very attractive to operators. The Government has no plan to further increase the subsidy level.

The Environmental Protection Department adopted the Kwun Tong Yue Man Square and Kowloon Tong (Suffolk Road) Public Transport Interchanges (PTIs) as the initial trial points for installing quick charge facilities. The

Government is currently reviewing the detailed arrangements of the first round of the Pilot Scheme and considering optimising the Pilot Scheme with reference to the feedback from operators so as to enhance the attractiveness of the Pilot Scheme and encourage more operators to participate. The Government will finalise the relevant optimised arrangements as soon as possible, and announce in due course the second round Pilot Scheme as well as the plan to install quick charge facilities in other PTIs.

(4) We are working on the funding and implementation details of the trial projects on electric taxi charging mode. We target to invite applications by mid-2024.

(5) Currently, the cost of electric buses is still higher than that of diesel buses. The Government is discussing with the franchised bus companies to understand their actual needs and views, including relevant information such as the bus replacement schedule, so as to tie in with our target of introducing about 700 electric buses by end-2027. According to the information provided by the Transport Department, as at end-April 2024, there are 90 electric franchised buses, including hydrogen fuel cell vehicles, registered in Hong Kong.

(6) The green transformation of public buses and taxis across the territory is a complex process. On one hand, it involves a considerable number of vehicles and the trade must be given sufficient time for budgeting and technical preparation; on the other hand, we must ensure that there are sufficient suitable vehicle models available for application in Hong Kong at reasonable prices, as well as adequate charging facilities to support the implementation of the transformation. Furthermore, we shall avoid disruptions to the daily commuting of the general public during the process of transformation. Therefore, a smooth transition would hinge on the co-operation of the trade and the development of relevant technologies.

As for the green transformation roadmap and timetable for public buses and taxis, the Government is engaging in detailed discussions with stakeholders, including the taxi trade, franchised bus companies and public vehicle importers, to understand their actual needs and views. This is to ensure that the green transformation of public buses and taxis across the territory can be completed in an orderly manner on the condition that relevant transport services will not be affected. We will finalise a practicable proposal as soon as possible, and target to announce a roadmap and timetable within this year.