

LCQ6: Improving taxi services

Following is a question by the Hon Chan Han-pan and a reply by the Secretary for Transport and Housing, Mr Frank Chan Fan, in the Legislative Council today (September 8):

Question:

Some members of the taxi trade have pointed out that in recent years, taxi business has been reeling from the double blows of economic downturns and the rampant activities of using private cars for illegal carriage of passengers for hire and reward (illegal carriage of passengers). As a result, taxi drivers have suffered a reduction of income, and service quality has been deteriorating. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) given that most of the taxi drivers place several mobile phones on the dashboard in order to use several online ride-hailing applications, whether the Government will stipulate that such applications may send taxi-hailing messages only to those taxis stopping and waiting for customers or empty taxis, so as to avoid taxi drivers being distracted while driving, thereby minimising traffic accidents; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) whether it will study afresh the implementation of a premium taxi service scheme to enhance the quality of taxi service through means such as licensed taxis forming fleets, employing vehicles of new models with better facilities, and improving the remuneration and training for drivers, so that those members of the public who are willing to pay a higher fare can choose taxi service which is of higher quality and safer; if so, of the details and the timetable; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) whether it will expedite the legislative work on raising the penalties for illegal carriage of passengers, and introduce new measures to step up efforts in combating such activities; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

My reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Chan Han-pan is as follows:

The Government has always attached great importance to road safety, and has been ensuring the safety of road users through regulation by law and promoting attentive driving through education and publicity. At present, if a motorist uses a mobile phone or other smart device while driving in such a way as to affect his driving, he may have committed the offence of "dangerous

driving" or "careless driving", irrespective of whether his driving has caused a traffic accident. In addition, if a motor vehicle being driven by a motorist is in motion, it is an offence for the motorist to use a mobile phone by holding it in his hand or between his head and shoulder. The Road Users' Code has also issued clear guidelines to motorists that they should avoid using mobile phones or other smart devices as far as possible while driving, and should drive attentively.

The Government notes the public's concern about motorists, particularly taxi drivers, placing several mobile phones on the dashboard while driving. The Government also understands that motorists may have practical needs to use mobile phones or other devices for, for instance, obtaining information about navigation, real-time traffic conditions and parking space, etc. As to whether further restrictions should be imposed on the use or placement of mobile phones and other devices while driving, the first and foremost consideration is road safety while taking into account practical needs. The Transport Department (TD) is conducting a study and will consider the direction of regulating the number and location of mobile phone devices placed by motorists, as well as the mode of use and purpose of using the devices, etc., having regard to the technological development and changes in the usage habits of mobile phones and vehicle devices. To this end, the TD is making reference to the regulations and practices in other jurisdictions, observing the situation on usage of mobile phones and other devices on vehicles by motorists, and considering various factors such as whether motorists would switch between multiple mobile applications if restriction is imposed on the number of mobile phones placed on the dashboard while driving. Upon the formulation of concrete proposals, the Government will consult stakeholders in due course.

The Government has all along endorsed the general direction of centralising the management of taxi service quality through professional fleet management. We understand that currently some taxi operators are running taxi services as fleets, providing passengers with more spacious vehicle models and compartments equipped with free Wi-Fi and electronic payment systems, etc. They also provide various channels for passengers to make suggestions and lodge complaints on taxi services so as to monitor drivers' performance. In addition, some taxi operators have enhanced pre-service training for drivers, and will issue warning or provide training to drivers who have been involved in improper driving behaviour or bad service attitude. The TD has also collaborated with the Committee on Taxi Service Quality to organise the Taxi Service Commendation Scheme to recognise outstanding taxi drivers and taxi service management teams so as to continuously improve the professional image of taxi industry. The Government is also carefully examining different options on how to provide passengers with better taxi service quality through fleet management. In formulating the proposal, we will take into account the views on the Franchised Taxi Services Bill (the Bill) expressed earlier by the Bills Committee, the public and the taxi trade.

The Government introduced the Bill into the Legislative Council (LegCo) in May 2019. The bill aimed to introduce franchised taxi services to meet the

demand in the community for personalised and point-to-point public transport services of higher quality with "online-hailing" feature. However, the relevant Bills Committee decided to discontinue the scrutiny of the Bill in June 2020. Having regard to the economic situation at that time and the views of the Bills Committee, the Government considered that then was not an opportune time to introduce franchised taxis and withdrew the Bill in November 2020. The Government would review the franchised taxi proposal and the way forward in the light of public views and relevant circumstances.

The Government has been combating the illegal carriage of passengers for hire or reward by motor vehicles through enforcement as well as education and publicity.

The Police closely monitor the relevant illegal acts by collecting intelligence as well as conducting investigation and follow-up actions on complaint cases. Suitable actions will be taken should there be sufficient evidence. To strengthen the deterrent effect and enhance the safety protection for passengers and road users, the TD has conducted a review on the penalties for related offences, and undertaken consultation regarding proposals of raising the fine as well as lengthening the period for suspension of vehicle licence and impoundment of vehicles. The legislative amendment exercise is underway, which will be submitted by the Government to the LegCo for consideration in due course.

In addition, the TD has put in place a number of measures to further enhance public awareness of legal hire car services; and encourage members of the public to enquire with the service operators or make use of the TD's online checking system to check the vehicle permit before the journey starts.

Thank you, President.