

LCQ9: Monitoring service frequencies of franchised buses

Following is a question by the Hon Luk Chung-hung and a written reply by the Secretary for Transport and Logistics, Mr Lam Sai-hung, in the Legislative Council today (November 29):

Question:

Some members of the public have relayed that the lost trip problem of franchised buses has been worsening in recent months, and the Transport Department (TD) does not regularly publish the lost trip rates of individual franchised bus routes, making it difficult for members of the public to monitor the service performance of franchised bus companies. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of TD's definitions for the "lost trip rate" and "delay rate" of franchised buses;

(2) of the lost trip rates and delay rates of all franchised bus routes across the territory from January to June this year (together with a breakdown by route (including all special departures));

(3) of the levels that the lost trip rates and/or delay rates of franchised bus routes are required to reach before TD will take follow-up actions, and the details of the relevant actions;

(4) whether TD took the follow-up actions mentioned in (3) in the past five years; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(5) given that TD has reviewed the definition of lost trip rate and the sanction mechanism for franchised bus companies in the light of the recommendations in the direct investigation report on "Mechanism for Monitoring the Frequencies of Franchised Bus Services" published by the Office of The Ombudsman, Hong Kong in January 2014, whether TD will, in response to the worsening lost trip problem of franchised buses in recent months, review again and improve the relevant mechanism; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

There is a rigorous and fair established mechanism for the Government to evaluate the services provided by franchised bus operators. Each franchised bus route is governed by a Schedule of Service issued by the Transport Department (TD) which stipulates the details of the service that shall be provided by the franchised bus operator, including the routing, service hours, headway, and bus allocation. The TD closely monitors the service level and regularity through various means, including inspecting and reviewing the

operating records and data from the operators regularly, conducting on-site surveys, and analysing complaints and suggestions made by members of the public regarding lost trips of buses.

My reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Luk Chung-hung is as follows:

(1) Irregularities of bus services maybe broadly categorised into "lost trips" and "deviations from schedule". "Lost trip" refers to the situation where an operator has not operated a scheduled departure, while "deviation from schedule" (including premature and delayed departures) refers to the situation that an operator has operated a scheduled departure but earlier or later than the scheduled time (Note 1). There are numerous factors that may contribute to irregularities of bus services, with some of them within the control of operators (e.g. journey time, vehicle breakdown or shortage, and manpower deployment) and some not (e.g. inclement weather, traffic congestion and road accidents).

Generally speaking, "lost trips" have a greater impact on passengers. When assessing the overall regularity of franchised bus service, the TD also uses "lost trip rate" as the major metric. "Lost trip rate" is calculated as the percentage of "lost trips" against the total number of scheduled departures in the Schedule of Service over a given period of time.

"Deviations from schedule" are generally attributable to unstable travelling time, and the impact on passengers may vary depending on the extent of premature or delayed departure. Although the TD does not compute rates of "deviations from schedule", the department will monitor punctuality and journey time data. If it is observed that there have been recurrent "deviations from schedule", the TD would take appropriate follow up actions with the franchised bus operator to maintain the regularity of service.

Note 1: The timetable stipulated in a Schedule of Service is based on departures at the terminus. The actual time of arrival at intermediate bus stops may be affected by traffic conditions en route and the number of passengers boarding and alighting at various stops.

(2) Records of departures of individual routes provided by franchised bus operators to the TD to facilitate the monitoring of bus services are for internal use. As bus routes are operated under different modes (such as whole-day service, peak-only service, or services for weekends and public holidays), the "lost trip rates" of individual routes would also vary depending on the number of scheduled departures of the route concerned and may not be suitable to be disclosed for individual comparison. The overall "lost trip rates" by bus franchise may be of better reference value. The overall "lost trip rates" of services of the different bus franchises from January to June in 2023 are tabulated below:

Bus franchise	Lost trip rate
Kowloon Motor Bus Company (1933) Limited	2.6 per cent

Citybus Limited (Franchise for Hong Kong Island and Cross-Harbour bus network)#	2.4 per cent
Citybus Limited (Franchise for the Airport and North Lantau bus network)	1.8 per cent
New World First Bus Services Limited#	4.5 per cent
Long Win Bus Company Limited	2.1 per cent
New Lantao Bus Company (1973) Limited	0.4 per cent
Overall	2.7 per cent

#The Citybus Limited (Franchise for Hong Kong Island and Cross-Harbour bus network) merged with the franchise of the New World First Bus Services Limited on July 1, 2023. The new franchise is named Citybus Limited (Franchise for the Urban and New Territories bus network).

(3) and (5) As mentioned above, the TD has been closely monitoring the level and regularity of franchised bus services, and will examine the causes of service irregularities and follow up in a serious manner. It will not wait for the "lost trip rates" to reach a particular level before taking action. In response to the Ombudsman's recommendations in 2014, the TD has implemented a series of improvements, including requiring franchised bus operators to give a more detailed categorisation of the causes of lost trips and to calculate "lost trip rates" based on segregated time periods, with a view to identifying solutions having regard to the causes of lost trips and situation in different time periods in a more effective manner.

In case a franchised bus operator fails to provide service according to the requirements of the TD, the TD would follow up with the operator and clearly set out the improvements needed by formally issuing reminding letter. If the operator is unable to give a reasonable explanation or make improvements, the TD will then issue advisory letter to remind the operator that it shall comply with the requirements and implement improvement measures by a specified time. Depending on the persistence of situation and severity of each case, the TD may also issue warning letter to the operator in respect of the lost trips of individual routes or the overall lost trip situation. When the TD issues warning letter to an operator, it will also serve a written notice to the operator's board of directors to raise the management's awareness of the lost trip issue. When handling fare increase applications from franchised bus operators, the Government would also take into account the lost trip situation of the operator concerned.

If "lost trip rates" of a franchised bus operator remain persistently high and no effective mitigating measures have been taken, the Government will consider invoking the power conferred to the Chief Executive in Council (CE in C) by the Public Bus Services Ordinance (Cap. 230) to impose penalty on the operator. In extreme cases, the CE in C may also consider revoking the operator's operating right of individual routes or even the entire franchise.

Past experience shows that the above mechanism is effective. When franchised bus operators receive reminding, advisory letters or warning letters, they would usually follow up actively and seriously with a view to

improving the lost trip issue. Furthermore, real-time arrival information systems have been introduced by various operators over the past few years, which allow passengers to better grasp the headway and arrival time of buses, thereby shortening waiting time and enhancing their travel experience.

(4) During the period between 2019 and June 2023, on average the TD issued to franchised bus operators a total of about 400 reminding/advisory letters each year. The TD also issued one warning letter to an individual operator for lost trips arising from failure to adjust its bus services in a timely manner after relaxation of social distancing measures between end-2020 and early 2021.