

LCQ21: Supporting development of public light bus trade

Following is a question by the Hon Luk Chung-hung and a written reply by the Secretary for Transport and Logistics, Ms Mable Chan, in the Legislative Council today (February 19):

Question:

It is learnt that public light buses (PLBs) are an important supplementary feeder transport means in Hong Kong, with an average daily patronage in the millions. However, some members of the trade have pointed out that due to factors such as rising fuel expenses and the increase in Cross-Harbour Tunnel (CHT) tolls resulting from the rationalisation of traffic flow among the three road harbour crossings (RHCs), the operating costs of PLBs have increased, thereby affecting the livelihood of drivers. Regarding the support for the development of the PLB trade, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) whether it has compiled statistics on the average monthly number of red minibuses using CHT in the two years before and one year after the rationalisation of traffic flow among RHCs; whether the average monthly number of red minibuses using CHT has decreased after the rationalisation of traffic flow at CHT;
- (2) whether it will consider the trade's request to lower the RHC toll for PLBs to \$25 to bring it in line with that for taxis; if so, of the relevant adjustment arrangements; if not, the reasons for that;
- (3) whether it will consider opening up the bus-only lanes and drop-off points for tunnels to PLBs; if so, of the relevant arrangements; if not, the reasons for that; and
- (4) whether it has plans to introduce other measures to support the development of the PLB trade?

Reply:

President,

In consultation with the Transport Department (TD), our reply to the question raised by the Hon Luk Chung-hung, is as follows:

- (1) As the toll collection systems only record the use of tunnels by vehicle type "light bus" (including private light buses and public light buses (PLBs)), the TD does not have figures on the use of tunnels by red minibuses (RMBs).

Since the implementation of time-varying tolls, taking December 2024 as an example, there is no significant change in the total weekday cross-harbour

light bus (including private light buses and PLBs) traffic compared with that before the implementation. Some of the light bus traffic at the Cross-Harbour Tunnel has been diverted to the Western Harbour Crossing (WHC), thus resulting in a more even distribution of cross-harbour traffic of light bus among the three road harbour crossings (RHCs).

(2) Generally speaking, the tolls for commercial vehicles (CVs) (including goods vehicles, light buses and buses) are generally higher than that for private cars as CVs take up more road space and cause more wear and tear to road surfaces. With the implementation of time-varying tolls, the Government has taken into account the "efficiency first" principle, the passenger-carrying efficiency and the socio-economic benefits of CVs in the past, and has brought the higher tolls for CVs closer to a level comparable to that for private cars during busy hours. The tolls for PLBs using WHC have been substantially reduced compared to the previous tolls (from \$85 to \$50, a reduction of about 41 per cent), and the tolls are comparable to the average tolls of the three RHCs in the past (about \$44). For taxis, journeys are mainly passenger-driven and passengers are required to pay the tolls for both the outward and return cross-harbour journeys, i.e. a total of \$50, which is in line with the CHT tolls for PLBs.

With the implementation of time-varying tolls, the distribution of cross-harbour traffic is becoming more even and the capacity of the three RHCs can be better utilised. The overall traffic queues and congestion at the tunnel portals has also been alleviated, thus effectively improving the overall cross-harbour traffic. RMBs have been operating with a high degree of flexibility in terms of routeings, frequencies and fares. In planning cross-harbour routes for PLBs, most operators will take into account a number of factors besides tolls. These factors include target passengers, routeings and destinations, accessibility and journey time. With the implementation of time-varying tolls, the overall cross-harbour traffic has improved, saving cross-harbour travel time and helping to reduce fuel costs. It will also enhance the efficiency of PLB services and attractiveness of PLBs to passengers.

The Government is now collecting and consolidating the cross-harbour traffic data of 2024, including data on the traffic flow, speed and queues of the three RHCs at different times of the day/quarters/directions, as well as the distribution of traffic flow by vehicle types, so as to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the impact of the time-varying tolls on the cross-harbour traffic, and then examine whether the toll levels of various vehicle types need to be adjusted. The review is expected to be completed by mid-2025.

(3) As road-based mass carriers with high patronage, buses have relatively higher passenger carrying capacity and efficiency. Therefore, the TD will give priority to buses in the use of roads as far as practicable, such as providing bus-only lanes and designated bus gate to optimise the capacity of busy roads. If bus-only lanes are opened for use by other vehicles, the effectiveness of bus-only lanes and the journey time of buses may be affected. Therefore, the TD currently has no plan to open bus-only lanes for

use by other vehicles.

At present, there are bus stops for a number of cross-harbour bus routes near the entrances and exits of the RHCs. Their usage has reached saturation. To avoid affecting bus operation and passengers' boarding and alighting, the TD has no plan to open the cross-harbour tunnel bus stops as drop-off points for PLBs.

(4) The Government has been paying close attention to the operating situation of the PLB trade and has implemented various measures to help improve the operating environment. In respect of day-to-day operations, the TD provides appropriate and practicable support on the request of the trade to meet operational needs, for example, suitably relaxing or rescinding some passenger pick-up/drop-off restricted zones or prohibited zones for RMBs, taking into account the actual road conditions of individual locations; and permitting overnight parking of PLBs at designated PLB stands where it does not impact road safety or other road users, with a view to meeting operational needs of the PLB trade.

The Government also noted that the PLB sector has been facing continuous and acute shortage of drivers. To this end, the Government launched the Labour Importation Scheme for Transport Sector – PLB/Coach Trade in July 2023, to allow importation of non-local drivers by eligible PLB operators on the premise of safeguarding the employment priority for local workers. A total of 900 quotas for imported PLB drivers have been approved under two rounds of application. As of end January 2025, over 600 imported drivers have successfully obtained the driver license required and have been deployed to services. In addition, the TD and the Employees Retraining Board (ERB) have introduced a pilot placement scheme in late 2024. The placement-tied driving training scheme, using the PLB trade as pilot, is jointly launched by the ERB, green minibus (GMB) operators and third-party training organisations to encourage local workers to join the PLB trade.

On the other hand, it has been the Government's established policy to encourage the conversion of RMBs to GMB operations, which has a wider catchment area and a relatively stable operating environment, with a view to improving their operating conditions and allowing for more effective monitoring by the TD to ensure the service quality. To align with this policy, the TD has been planning and developing new GMB route packages in light of district development and passenger demand and has been inviting applications from interested parties (including RMB operators) to run these routes through the annual GMB Operators Selection exercise. At the same time, in August 2024, the TD invited operators of 11 selected RMB routes meeting specific conditions to apply for conversion to GMB route operations. The operators of the two approved RMB routes have started the gearing-up work for conversion to GMB route operations. The two routes are expected to commence service in March 2025.

The Government will continue to closely monitor the operation of PLB trade and maintain close communication with relevant stakeholders to explore more feasible measures to improve the operating environment of the trade.