

LegCo Panel on Transport

Policy on Public Light Buses

Purpose

This paper informs Members of the current policy on Public Light Buses (PLBs).

Background

2. PLBs were introduced in 1969 to regulate the illegal minibus trade at that time. All PLBs are operated under passenger service licences issued by the Commissioner for Transport. There are two types of PLB operations - Red Minibuses (RMBs) and Green Minibuses (GMBs).

3. RMBs operate on non-scheduled routes in response to market demands. They provide an alternative service for people who are prepared to pay higher fares in return for a more flexible and relatively more convenient service than buses.

4. GMBs were introduced in 1972 through the conversion of RMBs. They operate scheduled services on fixed routes at fares approved and regulated by the Commissioner for Transport. Their primary function is to provide supplementary transport services along routes which do not justify a normal franchised bus service or in areas where access by other modes of public transport is limited.

5. At present, there are a total of 2,357 GMBs (about 54% of the total PLB fleet) which operate in 319 GMB routes, and 1,993 RMBs operating in about 140 RMB routes. The average daily patronage of GMBs and RMBs are about 1,045,000 and 558,000 respectively.

Government's Policy on PLBs

6. The existing policy framework on PLBs is spelt out in the 1990 White Paper on Transport entitled "Moving into the 21st Century", which stated that "PLBs are a less efficient road user than buses. The way in which RMBs operate also makes them a contributor to road congestion. To expand the fleet or its activities beyond present limits would only aggravate traffic congestion. In corridors already served by a well developed rail and

bus network, the operation of PLBs should continue to be restricted.” Since PLBs play a supplementary role in the provision of public transport services, Government’s policy is to limit their total numbers and to maintain their activities at the existing level. At the same time, the conversion of RMBs to GMBs is encouraged.

7. The size of the PLB fleet has been frozen at 4 350 since 1976 by a Gazette notice made by the Executive Council. The limitation notice has been extended from time to time since then through resolutions passed by the Legislative Council. The limitation notice was last extended in June 1999 for two years up to 20 June 2001.

8. As a measure to encourage conversion of RMBs to GMB services, the Transport Department identify suitable new GMB routes which are grouped into packages based on geography as well as the profitability of the routes. New route packages are published in the Gazette to invite applications.

9. In 1998 and 1999, the Transport Department conducted a series of consultancy studies on GMB operations on Hong Kong Island, Kowloon and New Territories East respectively with a view to identifying suitable new GMB routes for these service areas and enhancing the role of GMBs in providing feeder services. Since 1999, a total of 16 new GMB routes have been introduced.

10. Under the existing policy, the operation of RMBs is confined to existing service areas. RMBs are not allowed to have access to new towns and new housing developments, and there are restrictions on RMBs using new expressways. On the other hand, local stopping restrictions and local prohibition zones are imposed to reduce traffic congestion. The rationale for imposing restrictions on RMB operation on expressways is set out in the Secretary for Transport’s reply to a Legislative Council oral question on 22 November 2000 concerning the subject, a copy of which is attached.

Future Direction

11. The above policy on PLBs was reviewed and reaffirmed by the Transport Advisory Committee in its 1997 Public Light Bus Policy Review. The Legislative Council Panel on Transport was briefed on 21 February 1997 on the findings of that review. There has been no change to the policy since then.

12. The current transport strategy promulgated in 1999 also reaffirmed that the numbers and supplementary role of PLBs should be maintained. Looking to the future, we will continue to allow PLBs to operate within the framework of the existing policy.

Improvements to the PLB operation

13. A trial of alternative fuel light buses is being conducted to test the suitability of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) and electric light buses for local commercial operation. There are 11 LPG and 4 electric light buses operating on six GMB routes and one RMB route. The trial started in stages since early June 2000 and is scheduled to complete in early 2001. The feasibility of replacing diesel PLBs with LPG/electric PLBs will be examined carefully having regard to the results of the trial and the provision of supporting infrastructure. The PLB trade will be consulted on any conversion scheme before the Administration finalizes its proposal.

14. In 2000, the Transport Department organized six workshops on customer service and safe driving for PLB operators and drivers to improve the quality of PLB service. Three more workshops will be conducted for PLB operators and drivers in 2001. A quality PLB driver scheme is being planned to start in early 2001 to promote PLB drivers' awareness of customer service. The Transport Department will also consider new initiatives to promote the provision of better customer service by PLB operators.

Transport Bureau
December 2000

LegCo Question No. 4
(Oral Reply)

Asked by : Hon LEUNG Fu-wah

Date of meeting : 22 November 2000

Replied by : Secretary for Transport

Question :

Will the Government inform this Council of the reasons for prohibiting red minibuses from using expressways for many years and whether it plans to relax this stipulation; if so, of the implementation date; if not, the reasons for it?

Reply:

Madam President,

Public light buses (“PLBs”) perform a supplementary role in the public transport system in Hong Kong, mainly serving areas where patronage does not justify the provision of high capacity modes. Therefore the role and development of PLBs are subject to certain limitations in comparison with the mass carriers. For example, the size of the PLB fleet has been frozen at 4,350 in the past years.

2. Within this framework, the Administration’s established policy is to encourage the provision of scheduled PLB service in the form of green minibuses (“GMBs”) to supplement the mass carriers such as railways and buses. Red minibuses (“RMBs”) are allowed to continue to operate within their existing service areas, providing service flexibly under suitable restrictions.

3. We encourage the conversion of RMBs to GMBs, as the operation of GMBs is under the direct monitoring of Transport Department which could better ensure the quality of service. If there is a need to introduce new PLB routes, we will issue operating licences to GMBs to provide the service.

4. Since expressways mainly link up new development areas in different districts and normally the provision of public transport services in these areas have been planned during the planning stage, in general PLBs will not be allowed to operate on expressways. In implementing the relevant policy, we will take into account the actual circumstances and service demand. If there is a practical need to introduce new PLB service to operate on individual expressways and if it is considered suitable to do, the Transport Department will consider carefully and conduct consultation on the proposed

new service and design suitable routeings for operation by GMBs.