

**For discussion
23 March 2007**

Legislative Council Panel on Transport

Measures to Enhance Safety of Public Light Buses and School Private Light Buses

Purpose

This paper informs Members of the progress of implementation of different measures to enhance safety of public light buses (PLBs) and school private light buses.

Background

2. We updated Members in June 2006 on the progress of implementation of measures to enhance safety of PLB operation. Separately in April 2004, we consulted Members on our proposals to enhance safety of school private light buses. The latest development of these measures is set out in the following paragraphs.

Public Light Buses

Retrofitting of Passenger Seat Belts and High Back Seats

3. To better protect PLB passengers in traffic accidents, the law requires all PLBs to be equipped with seat belts and high back seats with effect from 1 August 2004 and that PLB passengers have to wear seat belts, if such are available. By 1 March 2007, 1 840 PLBs (42% of all PLBs) have been equipped with seat belts and high back seats.

4. To assist owners of PLBs registered before 1 August 2004 (without high back seats and seat belts) to retrofit such facilities, the Transport Department (TD) has completed four sets of retrofitting design plans that meet the safety requirements and briefed the trade on the details in September 2006. Since then, 32 PLBs have been retrofitted with passenger seat belts and high back seats. Also, some green minibus (GMB) operators are now implementing their retrofitting programmes with TD's technical advice and assistance. We expect around 80 more GMBs to be retrofitted with such facilities in the coming months.

5. Currently, about 1 145 PLBs have served for eight or more years. As the Administration will shortly be launching a subsidy scheme, where vehicle owners replacing their pre-Euro and Euro I diesel commercial vehicles (including PLBs) with Euro IV models will be given an one-off grant, we believe the majority of these old PLBs will be replaced in the coming year.

Installation of Vehicle Monitoring System

6. The vehicle monitoring system is essentially a "blackbox" which can keep a full record of the operating conditions of the vehicle for a period of time. Since 2004, TD has been engaging suppliers to carry out trials of such devices on PLBs. The first trial in 2004 was unsuccessful. A further trial carried out by another supplier in the second half of 2006 was also unsuccessful because the device suffered from data loss and damages. TD has since managed to engage a third supplier, who started a six-month trial in October 2006 and installed the system on 23 GMBs running different routes. So far, the trial has been in good progress.

7. In parallel, we have sought the expert advice from the Automotive Industry Development Division of the Hong Kong Productivity Council on the feasibility of retrofitting vehicle monitoring system onto PLBs in Hong Kong. We understand the Panel Secretariat has also written to the universities for advice. We are awaiting the advice and information from these institutions. Meanwhile, we will continue to liaise with various organisations, keep in view overseas practice and explore the feasibility of installing such devices on PLBs.

Display of Safety Charter inside PLBs

8. In March 2005, we helped the trade to launch the Safety Charter. So far, about 2 800 PLB drivers have signed the Charter, demonstrating their commitment to safe driving. As suggested by Members and with the support from the trade, TD has designed a simplified version of the Safety Charter in the form of a sticker for displaying inside the PLBs. The stickers have been distributed to all PLB operators. Over 300 GMBs are now posted with Safety Charter stickers, and we expect 500 more GMBs to be posted with the stickers in the coming weeks. TD will continue to encourage GMB operators as well as red minibus drivers and owners to post the stickers.

Installation of Speed Display Devices (SDDs)

9. SDDs are primarily used to facilitate monitoring by PLB passengers and caution PLB drivers against speeding. In April 2005, mandatory installation of SDDs on PLBs was made a new vehicle licence condition upon issue or renewal of a PLB licence. By now, all PLBs have installed such a device. Meanwhile, we are finalising legislative proposals to make SDDs a standard requirement on PLBs and to make misuse or malfunctioning of the devices an offence. We plan to introduce the relevant legislation into LegCo in the coming quarter.

Mandatory Display of PLB Driver Name and Complaint Hotline

10. PLB drivers are now required under the Passenger Service Licence conditions to display their name plates at the front of the vehicles while they are on duty. We are finalising the legislative proposal to make it mandatory to display driver's name plate, and plan to introduce the relevant legislation into LegCo in the next quarter.

11. Since November 2005, PLB operators are required under the Passenger Service Licence conditions to display the Transport Complaint Unit hotline inside the PLBs. This new requirement has effectively increased public awareness of the complaint channel. About 90% of the complaints against PLBs are now made via the hotline.

Pre-service Training for Applicants of PLB driving licence

12. With the in-principle support of the PLB trade, we are formulating the details of the proposal to require applicants for PLB licences to attend pre-service training courses that focus on driving behaviour and attitude. We will further consult the trade on the details and prepare the required legislative amendments in due course.

School Private Light Buses

13. At present, there are 1 056 registered school private light buses (commonly known as “nanny vans”) in Hong Kong. While the safety record of nanny vans has been generally satisfactory¹, we consider it important to further enhance their safety, given that the passengers are mostly young children who may not be able to take good care of themselves, particularly in emergency situations. To this end, we consulted this Panel in April 2004 on our proposals to make provision of escorts compulsory for school public light buses with 16 seats or less serving kindergartens, and to require newly registered school transport vehicles to be equipped with safer seats. The latest development is set out below.

Mandatory Provision of Escorts

14. Escorts can help monitor the behaviour of school children when a school vehicle is in motion. They also provide assistance to the children whenever such is necessary, such as during boarding and alighting. Since February 1997, we have put in place a mandatory requirement for the provision of escorts on school buses with a seating capacity of more than 16 that serve kindergartens and primary schools. Having considered the safety benefits of escorts and the views of parents/guardians, and having consulted the trade, we extended this requirement to nanny vans serving kindergartens with a seating capacity of 16 or less. With effect from 1 September 2005, compulsory provision of escorts is stipulated as a condition in the Passenger Service Licences issued to nanny van operators. The measure has been working well and is generally welcome by parents.

¹ In the past five years, the average number of accidents involving nanny vans on school trips was 9 per year, accounting for 0.06% of the total.

Installation of Safer Seats

15. Safer seats refer to strong, closely spaced seats with strong floor anchorage, high energy-absorbing seat back and fire-resistant seating upholstery, which would more effectively protect the passengers in the event of an accident. To improve the safety of school buses and nanny vans, TD commissioned a study on the use of safer seats in late 2002/early 2003. Having consulted the trades on the proposal to require newly registered school buses and nanny vans to be equipped with safer seats in accordance with specified standards, we are finalising the required legislative amendments and plan to introduce them into LegCo in the coming quarter.

Advice Sought

16. Members are requested to note the content of this paper.

Environment, Transport and Works Bureau
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