

For information

Legislative Council Panel on Security

Installation of Driving Video Recording System on Vehicles of the Fire Services Department

Purpose

This paper aims to brief Members on the trial scheme of installing the Driving Video Recording System (DVRS) by the Fire Services Department (FSD) on its vehicles.

Background and reasons for the proposed trial scheme

2. There are over 940 vehicles in FSD's fleet, mainly for carrying out various types of fire-fighting and rescue operations and providing emergency ambulance services. With increasing service demand, heavier road traffic and a more complicated traffic network in Hong Kong, the number of traffic accidents involving FSD vehicles has been on a rising trend¹ over the past few years.

3. When traffic accidents happen, there might be injuries to the passengers of the vehicles (including FSD staff, patients, and other road users). Delay or destruction might be caused to FSD vehicles on the way to provide emergency service and other vehicles might need to be deployed to carry out the duty instead. The safety of those in need of help and the efficiency of the emergency operations might be affected to a certain extent. Moreover, in investigating traffic accidents involving FSD vehicles, the Department often has difficulty in finding out the actual situation at scene and ascertaining the cause of the accidents.

4. FSD has been striving to improve its driving training courses to enhance the driving skills of its staff with a view to reducing traffic accidents. In order to obtain in a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the actual circumstances and causes of such traffic accidents for improvement purpose, FSD has conducted a comprehensive study and made reference to overseas experience. It is learnt that DVRS has been installed on emergency vehicles in certain overseas cities² to facilitate investigation into causes of traffic accidents and to enhance drivers' driving standard and safety awareness. Positive results were observed.

¹ In 2008, the number of traffic accidents involving FSD vehicles was 248 and the number was 471 for the year 2012.

² Those include police vehicles, fire appliances and ambulances in the US, UK, Canada and Russia, etc. The devices on some of those ambulances also capture images inside the vehicles.

5. In the light of the above, FSD is preparing a trial scheme to install DVRS on the external body of a few fire appliances and ambulances. Each vehicle will be installed with 5 cameras (1 front-view camera, 1 rear-view camera, 1 reversing camera, and 1 camera each on the left and right side of the vehicle respectively). DVRS will capture the views outside the vehicle³ automatically when the vehicle is running. In case a traffic accident occurs, FSD could make use of the concerned video clips to find out the causes for the accidents and conduct review. The review findings would be provided to the Fire Services Driving Training School for formulating more comprehensive driving manuals and guidelines. Target training would also be provided for FSD drivers to enhance their driving skills and ability to cope with emergency, so as to reduce the number of traffic accidents and to ensure safety of FSD staff, the public and other road users.

The mode of operation of DVRS and the handling of information

6. As traffic accidents usually happen unexpectedly, drivers are unlikely to be able to activate DVRS in time. Therefore, the DVRS will be activated by the ignition key, meaning that it will be activated automatically once the engine of the vehicle has been switched on by the ignition key and will stop once the engine is switched off. The DVRS will only capture views⁴ outside the vehicle, but not those of the driver and passengers (including patients) inside the vehicle. There will only be the video recording function as the built-in audio recording function will be removed. DVRS will also provide offside, nearside and rear views correspondingly when a fire appliance/ambulance turns right, left or reverses. It will help to reduce blind spots and improve driving safety. DVRS has other ancillary functions such as recording the situation at scene during an emergency operation to facilitate future investigation where necessary. In case other road users fail to give way⁵ to a FSD vehicle rushing to the incident scene and result in an unnecessary delay, the video clips recorded by DVRS could facilitate Police investigation and serve as corroborating evidence for frontline staff.

³ Generally speaking, when a vehicle runs on the road, DVRS will record views captured by the front-view camera, the rear-view camera and the 2 cameras on the 2 sides of the vehicle automatically while the reversing camera will not be activated. When the vehicle moves backwards, DVRS will record views captured by the rear-view camera, reversing camera and the 2 cameras on the 2 sides of the vehicle while the front-view camera will stop capturing views.

⁴ The front-view and rear-view cameras of the vehicle can provide clear images at about 3m in front of and behind the vehicle, and those cameras at the left and right side mainly provide images to the left and right side of the vehicle body. The reversing camera can provide images to facilitate reverse of the vehicle.

⁵ According to Section 46(b) of the Road Traffic (Traffic Control) Regulations (Cap 374G), the driver of a vehicle on a road shall give way and take all possible action to make way for the passage of any police vehicle, fire appliance, ambulance or customs and excise service vehicle which is sounding a bell, siren or gong or displaying a flashing beacon.

7. FSD stresses that the installation of DVRS is not intended for collecting data of any particular person. During the trial scheme, FSD will only authorize members of the dedicated DVRS study group⁶ to retrieve the data memory card of DVRS and handle the video information recorded. The video recorded by the DVRS will be stored in a built-in data memory card which can store images up to about 13 hours in length. Subsequent video recorded will overwrite the preceding ones. However, if traffic accidents or other incidents occur, FSD will retain the relevant video information to facilitate investigation into the accidents or incidents. Such video information will also be analysed for the purpose of improving the driving skills of FSD staff. The information will be destroyed upon completion of the investigation and legal procedures or analysis work. In addition, if FSD considers it appropriate to use some of the video information for driving improvement training, the Department will retain the relevant video information for internal training after removing and destroying all images that involve personal data or that may be considered disturbing or embarrassing. The Department would put in place a mechanism and develop guidelines to ensure proper storage and handling of the recorded video.

The proposed trial scheme and the consultation

8. Prior to the preparation of the trial scheme, FSD has conducted a comprehensive study and made reference to overseas experience, and set up a dedicated study group to carry out the preparatory work. Since July 2012, the proposal of the installation of video cameras has been introduced and discussed at meetings of various levels (including Commands/Divisions/fire stations and ambulance depots) within the Department.

9. In late November 2012, FSD also held 2 staff briefings for relevant operational units, representatives of relevant staff unions and frontline staff on the proposed installation of DVRS and demonstrated its functions. Staff members did not raise any objection at the briefings. FSD also met and exchanged views with the Alliance for Patient's Mutual Help Organizations regarding the proposed installation of DVRS on the external body of FSD vehicles and informed them that the DVRS would not record views of patients on board. The Alliance did not raise objection to the trial scheme proposed by the Department. Moreover, FSD met with representatives from the HKFSD Ambulancemen's Union in January 2013 and briefed them on the background and purposes of the trial scheme. The Department also indicated that the trial scheme would only be launched after legal advice had been obtained.

⁶ The study group has 7 members and is led by 1 Assistant Divisional Officer. Members are from relevant units including the Recruitment, Training and Examination Group, Fleet Management Unit of Ambulance Command, Information Technology Management Unit and Procurement and Logistics Group.

10. Currently, a total of 8 FSD vehicles in various districts, including 6 fire appliances and 2 ambulances, have been installed with DVRS, but none of them have been put into operation.

Advice of Department of Justice and the Office of the Privacy Commissioner for Personal Data

11. FSD has consulted the Department of Justice (DoJ) and the Office of the Privacy Commissioner for Personal Data (PCPD) regarding the proposed trial scheme. DoJ advised that the proposed trial scheme will not contravene the relevant legislation, and suggested FSD develop a code of practice for the trial scheme to ensure that the DVRS will be properly and appropriately used and the concerned video information will be duly handled and stored. DoJ also suggested that before commencement of the scheme, FSD should promulgate to the public the details and the intended usage of the data collected. They should also display prominent signs on vehicles installed with DVRS in order to put other road users and pedestrians on notice. PCPD has also gathered the details of the proposed trial scheme from FSD and advised that there is no need for an investigation for the time being.

Way Forward

12. FSD will conduct staff briefings again and will fully implement DoJ's recommendations above before commencing the trial scheme at an appropriate time. Before implementing the trial scheme, the Department will upload the details of the scheme and the intended usage of the data collected onto the Department's website for public reference. FSD will also display prominent signs on vehicles installed with DVRS so that the public can identify them.

13. FSD will continue to listen to the views from staff at different levels and the public and refine various arrangements of the trial scheme. The Department will review the results of the trial scheme in considering whether or not to expand or fully implement it.

14. Members are invited to note the information above.

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