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Panel on Transport
Meeting on 21 June 2016

Background brief on increasing the seating capacity of public light buses

Purpose

This paper provides background information on increasing the seating capacity of public light buses ("PLBs") and summarizes the major views and concerns expressed by Legislative Council ("LegCo") Members on the subject.

Background

Role and operations of PLBs

2. Under the current public transport policy¹, railway is the backbone of the local public transport system complemented by other public transport services. PLBs provide feeder service to public transport interchanges, and serve areas where passenger demand is comparatively lower or the use of high-capacity transport modes is not suitable. With the opening of the West Island Line in December 2014 and four other new railway lines successively in the next few years, the role of railway in the public transport system will be enhanced. According to the Administration, the other public transport services, including PLB service, would then be coordinated to ensure their healthy development.

3. At present, there are 4 350 PLBs in Hong Kong². There are two types, i.e. green minibuses ("GMBs") and red minibuses ("RMBs"). GMBs provide scheduled service with fixed routes, fares, vehicle allocation and timetable

¹ Source: The Administration's press release on "LCQ11: Operation of public light buses" issued on 17 December 2014

² Source: The Administration's paper on "Public Transport Strategy Study – seating capacity of public light buses" issued in May 2015 [LC Paper No. CB(4)922/14-15(06)]

approved by the Transport Department. RMBs are not required to operate on fixed routes or timetable and can set their own fares, and are subject to certain restrictions on their service area under existing policy³. The Administration encourages RMBs to convert to GMBs through planning and introducing new GMB routes. According to the paper provided by the Administration⁴ in November 2015, the average daily total PLB patronage is approximately 1.8 million passenger trips. This corresponds to a generally stable share of around 15% of the public transport services market over the past five years. A detailed breakdown of patronage by year is at **Appendix I**.

Seating capacity of PLBs

4. According to the information provided by the Administration, the law⁵ provides that each PLB can carry 16 passengers at most. GMB trade has from time to time indicated to the Administration that its operating environment is becoming more difficult as the railway network expands. Since the start of 2014, GMB trade has proposed to the Administration to increase the seating capacity of PLBs from 16 to 20-24. Key justifications for the proposal are as follows:

- (a) an increase in the seating capacity of PLBs can help meet passenger demand and reduce waiting time during peak hours;
- (b) an increase in the seating capacity of PLBs can enable each vehicle to carry more passengers, thereby improving the financial position of the trade. This helps to facilitate the sustainable development of the trade and further enhancement of service quality; and

³ The Administration's established policy is to restrict the total number of PLBs and contain their service area. Taking into account the road congestion problem in Hong Kong and the objective to encourage the conversion of RMBs to GMBs, the Administration has imposed certain restrictions on RMB operation. RMBs can operate in their existing service area but are not allowed access to new towns or new housing developments. Besides, there are also restrictions on RMBs in using expressways.

⁴ Source: The Administration's paper on "Public Transport Strategy Study – statutory cap on the number of public light buses" issued in November 2015 [LC Paper No. CB(4)119/15-16(06)]

⁵ Section 27 of the Road Traffic (Construction and Maintenance of Vehicles) Regulations (Cap. 374A) regulates the maximum passenger seating capacity of different classes of vehicles. The passenger seating capacity for a Light Bus is set at 16 persons.

- (c) the pressure to increase fare can be alleviated if the financial viability of PLB service can be maintained.

5. Nevertheless, some RMB trade associations (particularly those representing frontline RMB drivers) have indicated that an increase in the seating capacity of all PLBs would lead to higher daily rental for RMBs as well as longer waiting time to fully load a vehicle. This might reduce service efficiency and its attractiveness to passengers. Moreover, some RMB trade representatives have suggested that the seating capacity of PLBs should only be increased to 18, instead of 20-24.

Public Transport Strategy Study

6. The Administration⁶ has commenced the Public Transport Strategy Study ("PTSS")⁷, which is a comprehensive and systematic review of the roles and positioning of various public transport services to enhance their complementarity. Eight topical issues would be covered by the Topical Study under PTSS, and one of the issues being the seating capacity of PLBs. The Administration would assess the present situation and listen to views of Members and the trade. The views so collected would be analysed under the Role and Positioning Review ("RPR") to see if the proposal is feasible and desirable, having regard to the long-term operational and financial implications for PLB trade, other public transport services and road traffic management.

7. According to the Administration, if the seating capacity of all PLBs increases from 16 to 20-24, it would represent an increase of 25% to 50% in passenger capacity. This would be equivalent to an addition of about 1 087 to 2 175 16-seat PLBs. Any increase in seating capacity would also require legislative amendments. The Administration plans to report the progress of the review on PLB service to the Panel on Transport ("the Panel") by mid-2016, and strives to complete the review by the third quarter of 2016.

Major views and concerns of Members

8. At the Council meetings and the Panel meetings held in the Fifth LegCo,

⁶ Source: The Administration's paper on "Public Transport Strategy Study – work plan" issued in November 2014 [LC Paper No. CB(1)238/14-15(06)]

⁷ PTSS comprises two parts, namely the Role and Positioning Review and the Topical Study. The former would review the roles and positioning of various public transport services, while the latter would look into important topics that are of concern to LegCo members, the public and the public transport trades.

Members expressed views and concerns about seating capacity of PLBs. Their major views and concerns are summarized in the ensuing paragraphs.

Impact of increasing the seating capacity of PLBs

9. Some Members supported the proposal to increase the seating capacity of PLBs as it would bring about an increase in the overall public transport capacity without increasing vehicle number, thus more environmental-friendly. Some Members considered the proposal could make more efficient use of the existing PLB capacity, reduce passengers' waiting time during peak hours and enhance the financial viability of PLB trade, resulting in a higher income for drivers and alleviating the pressure on fare increase.

10. Notwithstanding this, some Members opined that the proposal to increase the seating capacity of PLBs might have an adverse impact on other public transport services. Therefore, the Administration should review holistically the impact of the proposal. The Administration should listen to the views of other public transport trades in working out a proposal which would be acceptable to all stakeholders concerned.

11. In response, the Administration advised that if the seating capacity of a PLB was increased from 16 to 20 and the seating capacity of all PLBs increased accordingly, it would represent an increase of 25% in total passenger capacity, which was equivalent to an addition of 1 087 16-seat PLBs. Increasing the number of passenger seats would consequentially increase the overall capacity of PLBs. In considering whether the suggestion was feasible and desirable or not, the Administration said it had to study the long-term operational and financial implications for PLB trade and the impact on other public transport services and road traffic management. One of the issues of concern would be the overall supply of and demand for public transport services as well as the division of labour among the different modes.

Time required for the review of the seating capacity of PLBs

12. Some Members expressed that the time required by the Administration to study the proposal to increase the seating capacity of PLBs too long. During the period when the Administration was assessing the proposal, PLB trade might shelve all the plans to replace their existing fleet. They therefore urged the Administration to expedite the relevant assessment and decide whether to increase the seating capacity of PLBs as soon as practicable.

13. The Administration then advised that it had accorded priority to the review of PLB service under PTSS and would strive to complete the review on

PLB service by the third quarter of 2016.

Policy on PLB service

14. Some Members considered that the existing transport policy on PLB service was outdated and inadequate for the sustainable development of the trade. Even though there was an emerging demand for PLB service arising from the development of new towns, the role of PLBs as providing supplementary feeder service had not changed over the years. They opined that the Administration did not have any long-term planning on how to maximize the supplementary role and functions of PLBs against the expanding railway network. Therefore, they called on the Administration to conduct a comprehensive review of the policy.

15. Some Members also expressed concern about the operating difficulties faced by PLB trade as many PLB routes were operating at a loss due to the shortage of drivers, difficulties in increasing fares for GMBs, restrictions on their operating areas and direct competition from new railway lines. They urged the Administration to consider implementing immediate measures that could address the operating difficulties faced by the trade. Some of the suggestions included introducing new GMB routes in new districts where there was a keen demand for public transport services; relaxing restricted or prohibited zones in busy districts to allow PLBs to pick up and drop off passengers; gauging the views of the trade when considering the rationalization of GMB routes; and enhancing the financial viability of those loss-making routes.

Latest development

16. The Administration plans to report to the Panel the progress of the study on increasing the seating capacity of PLBs, as mentioned in paragraphs 6 and 7, at the Panel meeting to be held on 21 June 2016.

Relevant papers

17. A list of relevant papers is at **Appendix II**.

**Changes in Patronage of Public Light Buses (“PLBs”)
from 2011 to 2015**

Year	Green Minibuses (a)		Red Minibuses (b)		PLBs (a) + (b)		Average daily total passenger trips for all public transport services ('000)
	Average daily patronage ('000)	Share in the public transport service market	Average daily patronage ('000)	Share in the public transport service market	Average daily patronage ('000)	Share in the public transport service market	
2011	1 531.6	12.9%	363.4	3.1%	1 895.0	15.9%	11 898.4
2012	1 526.8	12.6%	353.3	2.9%	1 880.1	15.6%	12 078.6
2013	1 512.3	12.2%	351.8	2.8%	1 864.1	15.1%	12 350.2
2014	1 510.8	12.1%	349.0	2.8%	1 859.9	14.9%	12 519.0
2015*	1 505.7	12.1%	340.7	2.7%	1 846.4	14.8%	12 461.8

* Provisional figures as at July 2015.

Source: The Administration's paper on "Public Transport Strategy Study - statutory cap on the number of public light buses" issued in November 2015 [LC Paper No. CB(4)119/15-16(06)] (Annex 2)

Increasing the seating capacity of public light bus

List of relevant papers

Date of meeting	Panel/ Committee	Minutes/Paper	LC Paper No.
17.12.2014	Council meeting	Hon Michael TIEN Puk-sun raised a question on the operation of public light buses	http://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/201412/17/P201412170436.htm
25.11.2014 & 5.5.2015	Panel on Transport	Administration's paper on the Public Transport Strategy Study – work plan	CB(1)238/14-15(06) http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr14-15/english/panels/tp/papers/tp20141125cb1-238-6-e.pdf
		Minutes of meeting	CB(4)437/14-15 http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr14-15/english/panels/tp/minutes/tp20141125.pdf CB(4)209/15-16 http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr14-15/english/panels/tp/minutes/tp20150505.pdf
16.1.2015	Panel on Transport	Administration's paper on transport-related policy initiatives of the Transport and Housing Bureau under the 2015 Policy Agenda	CB(4)349/14-15(04) http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr14-15/english/panels/tp/papers/tp20150116cb4-349-4-e.pdf
12.5.2015	Panel on Transport	Administration's paper on Public Transport Strategy Study – seating capacity of public light buses	CB(4)922/14-15(06) http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr14-15/english/panels/tp/papers/tp20150512cb4-922-6-e.pdf

Date of meeting	Panel/ Committee	Minutes/Paper	LC Paper No.
		Minutes of meeting	CB(4)85/15-16 http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr14-15/english/panels/tp/minutes/tp20150512.pdf
6.11.2015	Panel on Transport	Administration's paper on Public Transport Strategy Study Topical Study – review on the statutory cap on the number of public light buses	CB(4)119/15-16(06) http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr15-16/english/panels/tp/papers/tp20151106cb4-119-6-e.pdf
		Administration's supplementary information on Public Transport Strategy Study Topical Study – review on the statutory cap on the number of public light buses and Taxi service (follow-up paper)	CB(4)267/15-16(01) http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr15-16/chinese/panels/tp/papers/tp20151106cb4-267-1-c.pdf
		Minutes of meeting	CB(4)513/15-16 http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr15-16/english/panels/tp/minutes/tp20151106.pdf