Singapore has 27,000 taxis and one of the highest ratios of cabs to people among cities, but commuters still find it hard to get a cab when they need one.

Over the years, the taxi industry has improved its call booking technology, added new players, and raised fares. Yet, complaints about service abound. This week, the Government announced more measures to improve call book standards and plans to get more cabs on the road. But will they do the trick?

GOH CHIN LIAN and ROYSTON SIM look at the underlying issues.

**THE PROBLEM**

One of current CityCab’s driver problems, said Madam Ho, is the lack of cabs available when she wants them. As transport economist Michael Park Byung Joon, 40, suggests, “It’s very difficult to hail a cab in the morning when you need one.”

There’s a certain time of the day when Madam Allison Ho knows it’s no good trying to hail a taxi or waiting for the road to clear, as she lives near a main road. At 6.15am, she said, “it’s very hard to hail a cab from the road.”

As for taxis not stopping to pick up passengers, National Taxi Association president Wise Iam Kim noted that taxi drivers are “under-staffed to serve the varying needs of the public.”

A number of the cabs we spoke with said they had to operate between 7am and 7pm, and not be available for call bookings. “If it’s not a weekday, yet it’s so hard to hail a car,” said one.

**THE REASON**

One reason for this, said Ang Ramanathan, 48, is that commuting patterns have changed. “We used to see a lot of people coming off the road at a time, particularly in areas such as the Central Business District where demand is always high. But now, people are leaving earlier and returning later, and some are taking the street out of the city.”

Veteran cabbie Yap Koon Soo, who still drives, also said, “It’s not a good idea to send out so many drivers just to serve the morning peak demand.”

An industry observer noted that a large number of drivers also do not want to work odd hours such as midnight. “That’s why we see a lot of supply issues on the road. But will they do the trick?

**THE SOLUTION**

The Land Transport Authority (LTA) is currently studying regulatory measures to get more taxis on the road, particularly during peak hours. The six-month study will be completed later this year.

The LTA is exploring the possibility of mandating that a certain percentage of its fleet on the road, particularly during peak hours.

**FABRIC STRUCTURE**

One of the most common problems taxi drivers face is ‘narrow window’ for handover of shifts. This means longer hours behind the wheel, and more risks for the cabbies. They have to be woken up from eight in the morning, then continue their journey till the end of the day without much sleep.

Many cabbies choose to drive during hours when they can earn a daily income. While this means longer hours behind the wheel, and more risks for the cabbies, it also means that they can earn a daily income.

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