

LCQ1: Disposal of waste furniture

Following is a question by the Hon Luk Chung-hung and a reply by the Secretary for Environment and Ecology, Mr Tse Chin-wan, in the Legislative Council today (November 6):

Question:

There are views that most waste furniture is reusable, and for Hong Kong, collaborating with the Mainland in waste treatment is not only a superior mode of co-operation leveraging on the strong support of the motherland, but also crucial to the city's efforts in reducing waste generation, turning waste into resources, and promoting environmental protection and sustainable development. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the quantity of waste furniture disposal as measured by weight in the past five years, together with a breakdown by household furniture and commercial furniture;

(2) as some members of the public have relayed that at present, they have to deliver waste furniture to public refuse collection points themselves, which is very physically demanding, whether the Government will, by drawing reference from the practice of treating and recycling waste electrical and electronic equipment, introduce a producer responsibility scheme on furniture, and commission contractors to provide services for to-the-door collection of waste furniture and the delivery of used furniture in suitable conditions as a donation to the underprivileged groups, so as to assist members of the public in the disposal of waste furniture and promote the turning of waste into resources; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) as it is learnt that Hong Kong will explore with the Mainland the integration of waste resources in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area, whether the Government will consider collaborating with the Mainland in creating new green industries for the treatment of household or commercial waste furniture that has a value and is reusable, and establishing a "green lane" for exporting waste furniture to the Mainland with the provision of tax incentives; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

The Government has all along been attaching great importance to promoting the culture of "use less, waste less", and vigorously promoting community-wide participation in waste reduction at source and clean recycling, with a view to achieving full utilisation of materials and minimisation of resources wastage. The Government's support to the recycling

industry is primarily based on the principles of market economy and fair competition. Meanwhile, consideration is also given to the feasibility of converting different types of waste into energy or resources, as well as the cost effectiveness of recycling, when determining priority and appropriate measures for various types of recyclables. In view of the diverse types of waste, in order to optimise the use of government resources, the priority of Government's support measures will be accorded to the treatment of two types of wastes, including (i) wastes containing hazardous substances, which will pose hazards to the environment and human health (such as waste electrical and electronic products), and (ii) wastes of relatively large quantities that will be more cost-effective in alleviating burden on the landfills (such as waste plastics and food waste). For these two types of wastes, we will fill the gaps in the market through appropriate measures based on the relative economic value and environmental benefits of recycling. As regards recyclables with stable market value or items with an active second-hand market, the Government will allow the recycling industry and the private market to handle them in accordance with market principles which will be conducive to enhancing the economic value of recovery and recycling, thereby building a circular economy in the long run.

On the handling of used furniture, the second-hand market and trading platforms for used furniture are active in Hong Kong, and members of the public are aware of the mode of operation of the relevant market. For example, members of the public could arrange for the proper disposal of used furniture through furniture companies or trading platforms, or arrange for door-to-door collection by themselves in the course of purchasing new furniture.

The reply to the question raised by the Hon Luk Chung-hung is as follows:

(1) The Environmental Protection Department (EPD) does not keep separate statistics on the amount of furniture disposed of and thus is unable to provide relevant figures.

(2) At present, there are different channels and platforms in the market for second-hand sale, exchange, donation, refurbishment, and facilitating the reuse of furniture, including commercial organisations, social enterprises, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and social media, to assist members of the public to handle used furniture. The public may choose suitable channels for trading, exchanging or donating their used furniture according to different circumstances and needs, such as the quality and quantity of the furniture, as well as their district of residence.

If members of the public need to dispose of used furniture, there are companies that provide furniture disposal services, the charges of which depend on the size, type and weight of individual furniture, as well as the relevant removal condition and the districts concerned. On the other hand, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) and its contractors collect domestic waste, including disposed furniture, from its public refuse collection points, as well as the refuse collection points in public and

private housing estates. Some residential buildings employ their own contractors to deliver disposed furniture by their residents, from the refuse collection points of their residential buildings to the public refuse collection points under the FEHD, or directly to the refuse transfer stations or landfills under the EPD for disposal. The arrangement for relevant disposal services has been operating effectively, and is generally in line with the "polluter pays" principle. Therefore, at present, we do not consider it necessary for the Government to provide door-to-door disposal services for used furniture for the public through a designated operator.

As most of the furniture is made of composite materials, containing a wide range of substances, such as plastics, wood trimmings, wood or other plant fibres, these composite materials are difficult to be separated into single materials for recycling by simple means, leading to very high cost of recycling and relatively higher carbon footprint in the process of recycling. Therefore, recycling is generally not a suitable outlet for used furniture. Encouraging members of the public to reuse the used furniture would better comply with the environmental principles and should be more cost-effective than recovery and recycling through producer responsibility schemes or other measures.

(3) We will continue to promote waste reduction at different levels of the community, maintain communication with the trade and stakeholders and join hands to publicise and promote the culture of "use less, waste less", so as to cultivate a culture and habit of reusing, exchanging and donating used furniture in the society. Specific measures include collaborating with NGOs to explore ways to step up publicity and education on the donation or exchange of second-hand furniture at the community level, promoting the culture of "use less, waste less" through the Big Waster's social media platform and the Government's "Hong Kong Waste Reduction Website", as well as further disseminating the relevant message at the district level through the community network of the "Green Outreach".

As for the co-operation with the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area, the "Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area Ecological Environmental Protection Plan" promulgated by the Ministry of Ecology and Environment vigorously promotes the development of a "Zero Waste" Bay Area. With this opportunity, Guangdong and Hong Kong have established a close co-operation and exchange mechanism on environmental issues to jointly explore the capacity and modes for developing a circular economy in the region, leveraging the competitive advantages of the two places, complementing each other's strengths, and mutually developing green industries, green energy and related facilities. We believe that this will bring greater opportunities for the recycling industry in Hong Kong in the future.

We will continue to monitor the market situation and maintain communication with the trade, with a view to further fostering a culture of "use less, waste less" in the community and encouraging the reuse and donation of used furniture.

Thank you, President.