

# LCQ1: Regulating disposable plastic tableware and other plastic products

Following is a question by the Hon Chan Hak-kan and a reply by the Secretary for Environment and Ecology, Mr Tse Chin-wan, in the Legislative Council today (March 13):

Question:

The first-phase regulation of disposable plastic tableware and other plastic products will commence on the 22nd of next month, prohibiting the sale of specified disposable plastic tableware and the provision of such tableware to takeaway customers as well as the provision of nine types of disposable plastic tableware to dine-in customers at catering premises, and banning the sale and free distribution of a series of disposable plastic products. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) as it has been reported that a wave of panic buying of cotton buds and floss picks emerged in the community earlier on since many members of the public were mistaken that they could no longer buy such products after the commencement of the relevant regulation, whether the Government will learn from the experience and step up efforts to disseminate the correct messages to members of the public at an early stage before the commencement of the second-phase regulation;

(2) as it has been reported that some operators of small and medium eateries are worried about an increase in their operating costs as a result of the need to shift to non-plastic tableware for the purpose of going "plastic-free", whether the Government has gained an understanding from them of the implication of going plastic-free on their operating costs, and assessed if eateries' shift to paper or bamboo tableware will in effect lead to another kind of wastage; if it has, of the details, including the extent of the increase in their operating costs; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) of the expenditure incurred by and the number of downloads of the "Plastic-Free Rewards" mobile application; whether the Government will consider combining it with another application "GREEN\$" in order to reduce expenditure and enhance efficiency?

Reply:

President,

Plastics are difficult to decompose and can remain in the natural environment for over a hundred years. In recent years, scientists have even started to discover micro-plastics in human blood, which gradually threaten human health. "Plastic reduction" and "plastic-free" have become an international consensus in recent years. Different places around the world

have implemented measures to regulate disposable plastic products one after another.

In Hong Kong, the relevant legislation for regulating disposable plastic tableware and other plastic products was passed by the Legislative Council in October last year, and will come into effect on April 22 this year. The entire scheme seeks to regulate disposable plastic tableware and other plastic products at source and from their supply. The new legislation is therefore not targeted at the general public. The Environmental Protection Department (EPD) has launched a series of promotion and training to enhance the understanding of the relevant trades as well as the public on the regulation. The first six months following the implementation of the regulation on April 22 will also be designated as an adaptation period during which the EPD will arrange staff to proactively inspect the operation of relevant business premises, and will focus on promotion and education, as well as to provide appropriate advice to help businesses comply with the requirements under the new legislation.

The reply to the question raised by the Hon Chan Hak-kan is set out below:

(1) To let all sectors of the society understand the content of the regulation, our promotion and education efforts are not only targeted at specific trades but also at the general public.

We have launched the "Cut Plastic Use" thematic website, which provides one-stop information for the public and the trades, including information on the legislation and the various options of alternatives to plastic products. In addition, starting from February 1 this year, we have released the relevant information through various channels (including television and radio) to enhance public understanding of the regulation.

We are aware that there are some misconceptions and concerns on the regulation in the society. In this connection, the EPD has taken proactive and prompt actions to clarify via various government websites and social media platforms, created infographics to address common questions from the public in a lively and easy-to-understand manner, and has established a hotline to address enquiries from the public and the trades.

For the trades, we have been maintaining close communication with various trades and providing appropriate assistance and support. Since different trades have various concerns about the details of the regulation, since January this year, the EPD has been organising a total of 50 online and offline training sessions targeting at different sectors to provide them with comprehensive and focused training.

We will wait until there are sufficient alternatives available in the market before implementing the second phase of the regulation, and there is no implementation timetable at present. Besides, we will learn from the experience of promotion and explanation for the first phase of the regulation, and take into account factors including the effectiveness of

implementing the first phase of the regulation, the adaptability of the public, as well as the prevalence and affordability of other alternatives to plastic products, before deciding on the time of implementation of the next phase and the relevant preparatory work, with a view to achieving better results.

(2) When determining the types of disposable plastic tableware to be regulated, the Government has fully considered whether the supply of relevant alternatives is mature, available and affordable. Based on the recent market data collected, the prices of non-plastic straws, stirrers, knives, forks, spoons and plates are now comparable to those of ordinary plastic tableware. Many restaurants and eateries have already switched to non-plastic tableware even before the regulation comes into effect.

To assist the trades in procuring compliant alternatives, we have engaged the Hong Kong Quality Assurance Agency (HKQAA) to establish a "Green Tableware Platform" (the Platform) early in January 2022. Currently, the Platform has enlisted more than 60 tableware suppliers and more than 720 compliant non-plastic tableware products verified by the HKQAA.

The EPD has been deploying staff to progressively conduct compliance surveys through on-site visits to some 20 000 small and medium-sized eateries with a view to assisting them in understanding the content of the regulation and adjusting their mode of operation for complying with the regulatory requirements. Besides, the Environment and Conservation Fund has also subsidised local/environmental organisations to visit around 7 000 small-sized eateries from March to April this year to reinforce promotion and education, and give out non-plastic tableware for free for their trial use to assist them in making a smooth transition.

There are views that switching to non-plastic tableware is just another form of waste. However, in fact, the main objective of "plastic-free" is to minimise the damage brought to the environment and ecology as well as human health by plastics that fail to decompose over a long period of time and turn into micro-plastics when they are broken down. Non-plastic materials (such as paper and bamboo) will not cause the problem of micro-plastics. Of course, the Government will also continue to encourage the public and eateries to actively use reusable tableware and promote waste reduction and recycling through different publicity and education campaigns.

(3) The development cost of the "Plastic-Free Rewards" mobile application is \$1.4 million. As at end February this year, the number of downloads of the mobile application is around 3 000. "Plastic-Free Rewards" has collaborated with the GREEN\$ mobile application to allow the public to convert electronic stamps to GREEN\$ points or GREEN\$ e-coupons through the "Plastic-Free Rewards" mobile application for redeeming reusable tableware sets or other daily commodities at the GREEN@COMMUNITY network. There are around 20 000 times of stamp collection and gift redemption via the mobile application.

Since the number of downloads of the GREEN\$ mobile application has reached 500 000, we will explore merging the "Plastic-Free Rewards" mobile

application with the GREEN\$ mobile application, with a view to expanding its coverage and also allowing the public to practise "waste reduction" and go "plastic-free" in a one-stop manner.

Thank you, President.