

LCQ10: Pet-friendly measures

Following is a question by the Hon Benson Luk and a written reply by the Secretary for Environment and Ecology, Mr Tse Chin-wan, in the Legislative Council today (February 21):

Question:

Section 10B of the Food Business Regulation (Cap. 132X) stipulates that no person shall bring any dog onto any food premises, and no person engaged in any food business shall knowingly suffer or permit the presence of any dog on any food premises. In addition, with the exception of Inclusive Parks for Pets, dogs are not allowed on most of the facilities (including rest gardens or ball courts facilities) of the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD). However, it is learnt that in recent years, the concept of pet-friendliness has been growing both globally and in Hong Kong, with various places successively introducing a range of relevant measures. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it has plans to amend the relevant legislation or requirements to relax the restrictions on the entry of dogs into restaurants and various public facilities under the LCSD; if so, of the specific details (including the timetable); if not, the reasons for that;

(2) whether it will, by drawing reference from pet-friendly policies in other places, further relax various restrictions related to dogs (including boarding public transport with dogs, going in and out of public facilities and private shopping malls with dogs) on a pilot basis and in an orderly manner; if so, of the specific directions; if not, the reasons for that;

(3) as it has been reported that some airlines in the Mainland have already introduced a "pet cabin" service, which allows pet owners to register prior to departure in order to take their pets in cages with them into the cabin, thus avoiding cumbersome application procedures, whether the authorities have plans to draw reference from the Mainland's practices and introduce a similar pet transport arrangement that is simple and convenient; if so, of the specific details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(4) given that the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department currently classifies source places of imported cats/dogs into three groups, with those from Group III places (including regions such as the Mainland, Macao, South-East Asia and the Middle East) subject to a 120-day quarantine, and it is learnt that due to the limited number and area of the quarantine facilities, there is usually a waiting period of five to seven months before a place becomes available, causing great inconvenience to talents who intend to come to Hong Kong for work or settlement, whether the authorities have plans to streamline the quarantine procedures for cats/dogs from Group III places; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

Having consulted the Transport and Logistics Bureau, Culture, Sports and Tourism Bureau, the Development Bureau, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department and the Housing Department, my reply to the question of the Hon Benson Luk is as follows:

(1) As pet keeping has become increasingly common in Hong Kong, there has been more attention in society to bringing animals to use public facilities and other animal-related measures. In general, the Government needs to take into account different factors when considering whether to relax certain restrictions on dogs, to achieve the policy objective of facilitating animals and people to co-exist harmoniously.

Regarding bringing dogs into food premises, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) has from time to time received complaints about certain food premises allowing customers who bring pet dogs inside. On the other hand, in recent years, there are also views in the society hoping to bring along pet dogs to dine in food premises. The existing regulatory requirement prohibiting dogs (except guide dogs) from entering food premises have been in place for close to 30 years. The Government understands that there has been changes in the societal culture but would also have to strike a balance on the need to safeguard public health and hygiene, etc. The Environment and Ecology Bureau, together with the FEHD, is reviewing the current situation as well as the existing policy and legislation with reference to the experiences in other places and the views of the public. It is expected that the review will take around one year.

As for public facilities under the LCSD, the LCSD currently manages more than 1 600 public pleasure grounds in Hong Kong. In recent years, the LCSD has actively responded to requests for opening up individual parks to members of the public for use with their pets, and has been liaising with District Councils from time to time, to select suitable locations as pet gardens. Pet gardens are specially designed for use by pets and are normally provided with fences and double pet gates to prevent pets from running away. Depending on the actual environment, ancillary facilities provided normally include dog latrines/dog excreta collection bins and hand-washing facilities. Since 2010, the number of pet gardens under the LCSD has increased from 19 to 52.

Furthermore, to satisfy the public's need for opening up more parks, to allow members of the public to bring their pets into parks, the LCSD launched Inclusive Park for Pets in 2019, with the objecting of enabling park users and pets to use park facilities together in an inclusive environment. To keep in line with the concept of enabling the shared use of park facilities among different users, members of the public are required to keep their pets on a leash and under proper control in the venues, so as to avoid causing nuisance to other users and dogs. There are currently already more than 170 Inclusive Parks for Pets. In general, with the support of the local community, the new parks completed by the LCSD in recent years have all been opened up for

public use as Inclusive Parks for Pets. The LCSD is open and proactive to opening up more of its venues as Inclusive Parks for Pets.

Regarding cultural venues, in view of the different natures of the venues and facilities from public pleasure grounds, according to relevant regulations, members of the public are generally not allowed to bring dogs into the venues of civic centres, museums and libraries under the LCSD, except for the visually impaired bringing guide dogs along into the venue facilities. The LCSD will balance the views of different stakeholders and users of venues and facilities and review relevant arrangements from time to time.

(2) Currently, operators of some of the public transport services, including ferries, public light bus and non-franchised buses, may decide at their discretion whether to allow passengers to board with pets. As regards the Mass Transit Railway and franchised buses with high daily patronage and limited compartment spaces, passengers are currently prohibited from travelling with pets except for guide dogs accompanying the visually impaired. When considering whether to relax the restriction on passengers travelling with pets for these public transport services, the Government shall consider and balance different factors, including the space and carrying capacity of the compartments, reaction of the pets in the travelling environment, as well as the potential impact on other passengers. The Government will continue to keep in view relevant suggestions for considering whether a change to the existing arrangement is necessary.

Regarding public facilities, apart from the aforementioned LCSD facilities, to facilitate access for tenants and visitors with special needs, guide dogs are welcome in premises of the Hong Kong Housing Authority, including domestic premises, shopping centres and other facilities. The Art Park of the West Kowloon Cultural District also provides pet-friendly space. Apart from welcoming visitors to bring their pets, the Art Park provides facilities such as designated pet zone and pet waste bins etc., to create an inclusive environment for pets. The West Kowloon Cultural District Authority will continue to adopt a welcoming and accessible-for-all approach for managing the Art Park and enhance the facilities and services offered in the Art Park through different measures.

Regarding private premises, land leases generally do not restrict on bringing animals (including dogs) in or out of private properties. The property owner may decide whether animals are allowed in their premises and privately operated common space.

(3) The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) requires that all animals imported into Hong Kong must be transported as manifested cargo. Animal owners travelling to Hong Kong by plane cannot bring their animals into the cabin. This requirement aims to reduce the risk of introducing rabies into Hong Kong, safeguarding public health. Rabies is a contagious disease, causing fatality to mammals (including humans). Nearly 60 000 people die of rabies globally every year. Manifested cargo helps clearly track the transportation of animals from the exporting country to Hong Kong.

Furthermore, animals imported from different sources have varying risks of rabies. Hence, animals must be placed in cages at all times during transportation, ensuring that they have no contact with other animals. If animals are transported in the cabin or as carry-on luggage, one cannot rule out the possibility of the animals coming into contact with other animals of unknown health status during transportation (including waiting to board and during transit).

As for departing flights, the AFCD does not impose restrictions on the method of transportation of animals. Individual airlines may decide, based on commercial operations, whether to provide "pet cabin" services, but the transportation arrangements should cater for the welfare needs of the animals concerned. When formulating service conditions related to animal transportation, airlines (including those that are not registered in Hong Kong) would generally make reference to the relevant legislations of the place where the plane is registered and/or relevant regulations of the International Air Transport Association. Individual airlines may have different regulations regarding passengers bringing animals on flights.

(4) According to the Public Health (Animals and Birds) Regulations (Cap. 139A) and the Rabies Regulation (Cap. 421A), the AFCD regulates the import of cats and dogs from other places through a permit system, with a view to preventing the transmission of animal diseases including rabies into Hong Kong.

For importation of cats and dogs, the AFCD classifies places into three groups according to different risk of rabies, with reference to information about the surveillance of animal diseases provided by the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH). Group I includes rabies-free places (i.e. where rabies has been absent for a long time); Group II includes places where rabies cases are few and under effective control; and Group III includes places where rabies cases are reported and not under effective control. In general, the places that do not meet the requirements of Group I or II (or their situations cannot be determined) will be included in Group III.

Since Groups I and II places are considered of lower risk of rabies, cats and dogs imported from these places are exempt from quarantine, provided that relevant requirements can be fulfilled. The risk of rabies is higher or uncertain in Group III places. Since the incubation period of rabies in animals can be up to several months, to prevent the transmission of rabies into Hong Kong, the AFCD generally requires a quarantine period of no less than 120 days for the cats and dogs imported from these places. The AFCD has kept in view WOA's notifications on latest developments in animal diseases and refined the quarantine requirements concerned when necessary. As biotechnology has developed in recent years, the AFCD is conducting a risk review, to explore the feasibility of shortening the quarantine period for cats and dogs imported from some Group III places (including the Mainland), by measures such as rabies vaccination and rabies antibody titer testing. The review aims to refine the prevailing quarantine regime and related risk-management measures, of cats and dogs imported from Group III places.

At the same time, the AFCD's Animal Management and Animal Welfare Building Complex in Kai Tak is expected to come into operation in August 2024. The complex will provide several animal quarantine facilities, thereby reducing the waiting time for quarantine facilities for cats and dogs and enhancing the AFCD's quarantine work for imported cats and dogs.