

LCQ11: Reduction of waste

Following is a question by the Hon Kwok Wai-keung and a written reply by the Secretary for Environment, Mr Wong Kam-sing, in the Legislative Council today (December 16):

Question:

Under the impacts of the epidemic, most members of the public have in recent months dined out less frequently and made takeaway orders instead, resulting in a surge in the use of disposable paper and plastic tableware. Such tableware, which is difficult to degrade naturally, has been discarded as household waste, putting a heavy burden on the ecological environment. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) whether it has studied imposing regulation on disposable tableware in respect of the materials used, its use etc., for instance, requiring restaurants to use tableware made of naturally degradable materials only;
- (2) whether any policy is currently in place to properly deal with discarded disposable tableware; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;
- (3) whether it has studied the difficulties that may be encountered in implementing a disposable tableware recycling scheme; and
- (4) whether it has evaluated the effectiveness of the measures, which are currently implemented by the Government in support of the recycling industry, on creating jobs; whether it will further promote the development of the recycling industry (such as launching a disposable tableware recycling scheme) in order to reduce the quantity of discarded waste and create more employment opportunities?

Reply:

President,

My reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Kwok Wai-keung is as follows:

- (1) The Government has been committed to promoting the "disposable-free" culture by stepping up publicity and education efforts to progressively change public behaviour. We understand that to avoid going out and maintain social distancing amid the epidemic, members of the public will choose more to order takeaways and use disposable tableware. In view of this, the Environmental Protection Department (EPD) and the Environmental Campaign Committee have put forward a number of promotion initiatives since March this year. Through various platforms such as tram and bus bodies, bus and railway stations, outdoor advertisements, news and social media online platforms and mobile applications, etc., we appeal to the public to fight the epidemic, and at the same time to minimise the use of disposable tableware.

Moreover, the catering sector has made efforts in promoting the "plastic-and-disposable-free" culture. Many restaurants and takeaway platforms have already implemented relevant green measures to reduce the use of disposable tableware, such as not distributing tableware by default. Some takeaway platforms even set "no tableware" as the default option to facilitate customers to "skip tableware".

We will also continue to proactively co-operate with the catering sector and other stakeholders by encouraging restaurants to adopt various measures to enhance waste management and reduce the use of disposable plastic tableware. These measures include providing customers with reusable tableware, welcoming customers to bring their own food/beverage containers for their takeaways, etc. If the use of disposable tableware is unavoidable, more environmentally friendly tableware made of non-plastic materials such as paper or plant-fibre should be used instead of disposable plastic ones to help reduce plastic pollution.

Plastics are difficult to decompose naturally and the process is also lengthy. We are conducting a study on the feasibility, scope and mechanism of controlling or banning disposable plastic tableware, with a view to formulating a suitable strategy for Hong Kong. We will consult the public and the catering sector in 2021 on the recommendations of the consultancy study to map out the way forward.

(2) and (3) Used disposable tableware is mostly contaminated with food residues and grease, and hence not suitable for recycling unless thoroughly cleaned beforehand. Otherwise, it will contaminate other recyclables collected and affect their quality, and may even cause environmental hygiene problems during storage. Therefore, the Government on one hand encourages the catering sector and members of the public to treasure our resources and minimise the use of disposable items including plastic tableware, and at the same time strives to promote the participation by all in source separation of waste and clean recycling. This can help reduce the chance of recyclables being contaminated or mixed with large amount of materials that are not suitable for recycling, thereby facilitating the subsequent recycling process and identification of outlets for the recyclables.

To strengthen on-site support for recycling, the EPD has set up the Green Outreach to provide outreaching services, encouraging and assisting members of the public to practise source separation of waste and clean recycling, as well as disseminating the latest information on waste management to the community. We also launched the "Reduce and Recycle 2.0" Campaign in mid-2020. Apart from educating the public on different types of recyclables to facilitate waste reduction at source, the Campaign also promotes the newly enhanced community recycling network comprising nine Recycling Stations (formerly known as Community Green Stations), 22 Recycling Stores, and over 100 Recycling Spots which operate regularly at designated locations. These collection outlets accept various types of common recyclables. Members of the public can practise the green living concept of "Save More, Recycle More" by taking clean recyclables including takeaway plastic tableware and containers to the community recycling network for recycling.

Furthermore, to complement public education, promote behavioural and habitual changes and improve recovery rate of waste plastics, the EPD has also commenced a waste plastics recycling pilot scheme progressively in three districts (Eastern District, Kwun Tong and Sha Tin) since January 2020 collecting all types of plastic recyclables from non-commercial and non-industrial sources for proper treatment. A wide range of plastic recyclables would be collected including plastic containers, plastic tableware and plastic straws etc.

(4) The Government has been adopting a multi-pronged approach to support the development of the recycling industry, including implementation of producer responsibility schemes, development and operation of recycling facilities, establishment of the \$1 billion Recycling Fund, the EcoPark and the short-term tenancy sites for use by the recycling industry, enhancement of the community recycling network and betterment of publicity and public education etc. Resources have been allocated to enhance source separation of waste and clean recycling to raise the overall quality and quantity of recyclable materials for a more sustainable recycling industry. The above measures have achieved considerable results supporting the employment of more than 1 000 recycling practitioners directly or indirectly. We still need to further promote waste reduction, in which the municipal solid waste charging is an important part of the waste management strategy.

The Environment Bureau is also taking various new environmental protection measures to support green recovery, such as expanding the recycling network in all 18 districts in Hong Kong, implementing territory-wide waste paper collection service contracts, implementing pilot schemes to provide free collection services of waste plastics from non-commercial and non-industrial sources, and food waste from some Government and public organisations, schools and private housing estates. This can continuously improve local recycling and also create green jobs and economic opportunities. It is anticipated that as a result, hundreds of more jobs will be created for the recycling industry.