

LCQ18: Working dogs under the various government departments

Following is a question by the Hon Chan Hak-kan and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (May 29):

Question:

At present, some foreign governments have made arrangements about the use of working dogs by government departments, such as work conditions (e.g. weekly working hours), retirement ages and the protection for post-retirement living. Regarding the working dogs under the various government departments, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) of the government departments which currently use working dogs to perform duties, and set out the numbers of dogs by name of government department;
- (2) of the details of the guidelines formulated by the various government departments on the use of working dogs to perform duties;
- (3) of the details of the duties performed by working dogs under the various government departments;
- (4) of the general weekly working hours for working dogs under the various government departments;
- (5) whether the various government departments have set retirement ages for their working dogs; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;
- (6) of the relevant expenditures incurred on and manpower deployed for managing working dogs by the various government departments in each of the past five years;
- (7) of the numbers of working dogs euthanised in each of the past five years, and the reasons for that;
- (8) of the current number of retired working dogs; whether the Government has provided them with support in their living (e.g. medical services); if so, of the details and the relevant expenditure in each of the past five years; if not, the reasons for that; and
- (9) given that the Government plans to amend the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Ordinance (Cap. 169) to impose a "duty of care" on persons responsible for animals to look after their animals well, whether the Government will bring dog handlers of the various government departments within the scope of regulation; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

Having consulted other departments, the Food and Health Bureau's reply to the various parts of the question is as follows:

(1) to (4) Currently, six government departments, namely the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD), Customs and Excise Department (C&ED), Correctional Services Department (CSD), Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD), Fire Services Department (FSD) and Hong Kong Police Force (HKPF), have set up working dog units, assisting officers of the departments in performing various duties pertaining to the maintenance of law and order and the protection of public safety. These include quarantine and inspection, narcotics interdiction, search operation, investigation and patrol. The number of working dogs in the six departments is tabulated below:

	AFCD	C&ED	CSD	FEHD	FSD	HKPF
Number of working dogs	11	68	67	7	6	121

Having regard to the duties of its working dogs and the actual circumstances, each department has formulated guidelines for managing and taking care of its working dogs, covering the scope of their daily duties, meal arrangements, rest schedules, management of their rest stations and their retirement plans. Working dogs of AFCD, C&ED, CSD, FEHD and HKPF work three to eight hours a day in general. Working dogs of FSD are responsible for providing support in fire investigation and assisting in the search for trapped victims or missing persons in rubble or mountainous areas during rescue operations. Given the special nature of their duties, FSD's working dogs and their respective dog handlers work on a "24 hours on, 24/48 hours off" shift system on a team basis.

(5) The above-mentioned departments have drawn up retirement plans for their working dogs. Depending on the health conditions of individual working dogs and the veterinary advice, a working dog usually retires at the age of eight to nine.

(6) The average annual expenditures (including the salaries of dog handlers and supervisors, dog food and medical expenses) and the manpower involved in managing working dogs for the above six departments over the past five years are as follows:

	AFCD	C&ED	CSD	FEHD	FSD	HKPF
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Average annual expenditure (\$0,000)	250	2,180	1,210	240	230	/(Note)
Average annual manpower involved (number of staff)	12	66	28	6	6	146

Note: HKPF does not keep a breakdown of the expenditure on the management of police dogs.

(7) On average, three working dogs were euthanised by veterinary surgeons due to serious illness in each of the past five years.

(8) In general, handlers of working dogs will have priority over others when applying for adopting the retired working dogs. However, not every handler is able to adopt the dog due to personal reasons or constraints of his/her living environment. Some of the retired dogs are adopted by interested parties, subject to the assessment of the relevant department. Working dogs awaiting for adoption or those that are not adopted will be arranged to live their full span in the relevant departments. In the past five years, there were a total of 213 retired working dogs in the above six departments. The Government does not keep a breakdown of the expenditure involved in keeping retired working dogs.

(9) The Government is now consulting the public on proposals for strengthening the protection of animal welfare, including imposing a duty of care on a person responsible for an animal. As the persons responsible for their working dogs, dog handlers in the relevant departments also have the responsibility to take reasonable steps to ensure that the welfare needs of their dogs are met. We will finalise the details of the proposals in the light of the views received during the consultation period.