

## LCQ22: Non-plastic disposable tableware

Following is a question by the Hon Chan Siu-hung and a written reply by the Secretary for Environment and Ecology, Mr Tse Chin-wan, in the Legislative Council today (May 8):

Question:

It has been reported that the findings of a multinational survey on the presence of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) in food packaging materials published by a global environmental group at the end of last year indicated that of the 119 samples tested, 64 were found to contain these substances. The food packaging materials concerned include plant fibre food containers, cardboard boxes for greasy food and grease-resistant paper bags, etc. These substances are difficult to excrete, and their accumulation in the human body may even lead to health problems such as liver damage, infertility and cancer. Regarding non-plastic disposable tableware, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) given that at present, tableware suppliers wishing to enrol their non-plastic disposable tableware on the Green Tableware Platform under the Environmental Protection Department are only required to demonstrate the compliance of the tableware with the relevant non-plastic requirements when submitting their applications, whether the authorities will, in the light of the aforesaid survey findings, consider requiring suppliers to also provide the relevant safety test reports in respect of their non-plastic disposable tableware when submitting applications via the Green Tableware Platform; if not, whether the authorities will take the initiative to test the safety of such tableware;

(2) as the Government indicated in its paper submitted to the Panel on Environmental Affairs of this Council in February this year that it will continue to, through different channels (such as supporting community programmes that offer reusable meal box lending services), promote various "plastic-free" campaigns which aim at reducing the use of disposable plastic tableware and encouraging the use of reusable ones, of the details of the relevant support programmes; whether the Government has plans to develop centralised meal box lending services in the future; and

(3) as it has been reported that some restaurants consider biodegradable disposable plastic tableware more environmentally-friendly and choose to use it as an alternative for disposable plastic tableware, but biodegradable disposable plastic tableware requires a specific environment to degrade and cannot be recycled and processed with other plastics, and the catering industry can still provide biodegradable disposable plastic cups and plastic food containers to takeaway customers during the first phase of implementation of the relevant legislation on regulating disposable plastic

tableware, whether the authorities have studied how to reduce the amount of biodegradable disposable plastic tableware being sent to landfills before the second phase of implementation of the relevant legislation; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

To minimise micro-plastic pollution brought about by the difficulty of decomposing plastics in the natural environment, as well as its threat and harm posed to ecological environment and 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 regulation of disposable plastic tableware and other plastic products has been implemented since April 22 this year (Earth Day) to regulate disposable plastic tableware and other plastic products at source and from their supply.

The reply to the question raised by the Hon Chan Siu-hung is as follows:

(1) Establishing the Green Tableware Platform (the Platform) ([www.greentableware.hk](http://www.greentableware.hk)) aims to provide the trade with information on alternatives that meet the requirements of the new legislation on the regulation of disposable plastic products, with a view to assisting the trade in the early adoption of more environmental-friendly non-plastic tableware. At present, the secretariat of the Platform (Hong Kong Quality Assurance Agency) has not required suppliers to submit information on per- and polyfluoro alkyl substances (PFAS). We notice that there are many public concerns about the quality and safety of non-plastic tableware in the market. To provide better services to the public and the trade, the Government will consider inviting suppliers to voluntarily submit relevant certificates or documents, and listing out non-plastic tableware with these certificates or documents for reference.

As regards the health risks of PFAS, PFAS is a general term for a large group of chemically synthetic substances that are widely found in a wide range of artificial products, especially those with surface coatings, such as clothes, food packaging materials, cooking utensils and various plastic products, etc. According to information from international scientific research and regulatory organisations, although some products contain a small amount of PFAS, the risk to human health associated with exposure from these products is very low. It has been recently reported that a research team from the Universiteit Antwerpen in Belgium conducted a study on the PFAS content in straws made of different materials, and its findings showed that PFAS was detected in paper, bamboo, plastic and glass straws available in the Belgian market, and yet there was no statistically significant difference in the total PFAS content in these paper, bamboo, plastic and glass straws. Based on the data in the report, it is projected that the public would need to consume a significant amount of all PFAS contents in straws for a continuous period (about 300 straws per person per week) to exceed the tolerable intake level

of PFAS set by the European Food Safety Authority. Under normal circumstances, hence, there is no need to be worried.

(2) To motivate the public to reduce waste at source and go "plastic-free", the Environmental Protection Department (EPD) has been encouraging the trade and the public to use reusable tableware through various means, including promoting rental schemes for reusable containers or cutlery, encouraging eateries to accept customers to use their own containers when ordering takeaways, cultivating the habit of bringing their own containers and cutlery, and encouraging the public to make use of the "Plastic-Free Rewards" mobile application to collect stamps and redeem reusable tableware.

In collaboration with the Environmental Campaign Committee (ECC), the EPD has launched the "Reusable Tableware Lending Programme for Large-scale Events" since December 2018 to provide free-of-charge reusable tableware lending services for organisers of large-scale events, including delivery, collection and cleaning services of reusable tableware. The EPD and the ECC also launched a free meal container lending programme in two phases in 2021 and 2022 respectively, with the pilot scheme of the second phase covering seven local universities. By lending meal containers to the public in a convenient way, the objective of the pilot scheme is to encourage the public to build a good habit of bringing their own reusable meal containers when ordering takeaways. Meanwhile, it also serves as a demonstration for organisations such as private companies and schools.

Furthermore, the Government is supporting community waste reduction projects on the reusable tableware rentals through the Environment and Conservation Fund (ECF). Starting from October 2022, the ECF has provided funding support for a green group to collaborate with a takeaway platform to launch a two-phased 22-month reusable food container rental scheme with restaurant partners in various districts on Hong Kong Island, thereby promoting the culture of reusable tableware rental in a more extensive manner. Since the commissioning of the scheme, positive responses have been received with a total reduction of more than 25 000 disposable food containers.

To further encourage the public to bring their own containers when ordering takeaways, the EPD launched the Bring Your Own Containers (BYOC) Eateries Scheme in September 2023. Eateries participating in the scheme are required to accept customers to use their own containers (i.e. food containers or beverage cups) when ordering takeaways, or provide customers with reusable container lending services. The relevant eateries will be given the BYOC Eateries stickers for easy identification by customers. Currently, over 470 eateries have joined the scheme.

The EPD also collaborated with the catering industry to organise the third "Plastic-free Takeaway, Use Reusable Tableware" large-scale publicity and public education campaign. The campaign started from November 2023 and will be extended until October this year. Members of the public can collect stamps and redeem rewards through the "Plastic-Free Rewards" mobile application by opting out disposable tableware or containers when ordering

takeaways from more than 750 participating eateries. During May 5 to June 5 this year, a time-limited promotion has been launched on the "Plastic-Free Rewards" mobile application under which users who have collected three stamps will be able to redeem a set of reusable tableware.

Establishment of a centralised food container lending programme would require consideration of various factors including market demand and supply, habits of the public, operational feasibility, and cost-effectiveness, etc. The Government has no plan to develop a centralised food container lending services programme at present. We will continue to promote "plastic-free" practices and environmental awareness on reuse in the community through the various channels mentioned above.

(3) The regulation of disposable plastic tableware for takeaway is closely related to people's daily lives, and the actual situation in Hong Kong is of utmost importance. Taking into account the supply, availability and affordability of alternatives to plastic cups and food containers commonly used by the public for takeaways, the first phase of the regulation only prohibits the use of expanded polystyrene cups and food containers but not other disposable plastic cups and food containers, so as to avoid causing excessive impact on their daily lives. As we are adopting a progressive regulatory approach, there are no specific requirements to reduce the use of biodegradable disposable plastic tableware at this stage. At the same time, we have been proactively encouraging the reduction of the use of disposable tableware at source through "plastic-free" measures. At present, many citizens begin to opt out disposable cutlery when ordering takeaways. By doing so, a healthy "plastic-free" culture will soon be developed.

The second phase of the regulation covers plastic cups and food containers commonly used for takeaways. We will introduce the second phase only after giving due consideration to the availability and affordability of the relevant non-plastic alternatives, as well as both the trade and the public's adaptation to the first phase regulation. There is no implementation timetable at present.