

LCQ22: Protection of animal rights, interests and welfare

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 (November 14):

Question:

Regarding the protection of animal rights, interests and welfare, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) given that the Police will roll out the "Animal Watchers Scheme" in the next financial year, of the details of the scheme (including the specific work initiatives and timetable, manpower required, estimated expenditure, and what types of persons may take part in the scheme);
- (2) of the Government's initiatives for protecting animal rights, interests and welfare as well as the expenditure involved, in each of the past three years and in the coming year (set out by work initiative);
- (3) as the Government plans to amend to section 56 of the Road Traffic Ordinance (Cap 374) (which provides that where an accident involving a vehicle on a road occurs whereby damage is caused to an animal, the driver of that vehicle shall stop and report the accident to the Police as soon as possible) to bring cats and dogs within the ambit of the section, of the relevant details (including the legislative timetable); whether it will (i) set up a hotline for drivers to report to the Police such accidents or for eyewitnesses to report to the Police hit-and-run drivers involved in such accidents, and (ii) enhance its support for the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Hong Kong) in handling injured animals;
- (4) as a study report has pointed out that the number of cats and dogs kept as pets in Hong Kong will increase from about 297 100 in 2005 to about 545 600 in 2019, whether the Government will explore the establishment of a public hospital for animals, so as to provide pet owners with an option other than private veterinary clinics;
- (5) as the Police announced in April this year that dedicated investigation teams had been set up in the 22 Police districts across the territory with criminal investigation teams to handle cases of animal cruelty, of (i) the training received by members of such teams and (ii) the number of cases that such teams have handled so far; and
- (6) whether it will consider afresh the proposal to establish an animal police team and, by way of amending the relevant legislation, vest in the Police more power to handle cases of animal cruelty; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

The Government attaches great importance to promoting and safeguarding animal welfare, and has been adopting a multi-pronged approach in this regard. Having consulted the Security Bureau, my reply to various parts of the question is as follows:

(1) To enlist public support and assistance in combatting acts of cruelty to animals, the Police will implement the "Animal Watchers" Scheme in the financial year 2019-20, with a view to agglomerating the strengths of animal lovers at the community level in four directions of education, publicity, investigation and intelligence-gathering; raising public awareness on prevention of cruelty to animals; and encouraging the public to report in a timely manner as well as providing information that could help investigations. Participants of the Scheme could disseminate to the community the messages of caring for animals and preventing cruelty to animals through organising and participating in various activities promoting animal welfare. In addition, the Police will co-ordinate and deepen the co-operation among stakeholders, including relevant government departments, animal welfare organisations (AWOs) and animal lovers.

The Police will liaise with stakeholders shortly on the planning and implementation of the Scheme, with a view to finalising the details within next year.

(2) The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) has been implementing measures and work to safeguard and promote animal welfare. In the past three years, AFCD has been:

(i) implementing and strengthening public education and publicity programme and enhancing their website to promote responsible pet ownership and proper care of animals, advising against abandonment and needless surrendering of pets to the Government, and championing the need for dog licensing and rabies vaccination as well as the benefits of neutering;

(ii) implementing the new licensing regime under the Public Health (Animals and Birds) (Animal Traders) Regulations (Cap 139B) to regulate pet trading and dog breeding and sale;

(iii) devising codes of practices for the proper trading, breeding and keeping of pets and other animals;

(iv) strengthening enforcement action against pet owners and traders in contravention of relevant legislation;

(v) improving the handling of reports or complaints on cruelty to animals through the inter-departmental special working group comprising representatives of the relevant government departments and the Society for

the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA);

(vi) strengthening collaboration with, and providing technical and financial support to, AWOs in animal adoption and carrying out activities relating to animal welfare and management; and

(vii) assisting the AWOs concerned in implementing the trap-neuter-return trial programme for stray dogs.

The Government will continue to carry out the work on safeguarding animal welfare in the coming year. In addition, the Government is mapping out the major direction and drawing up preliminary proposals for amending and implementing the legislation related to animal welfare, with a view to consulting the public early next year. The proposals include introducing animal keepers' responsibility of positive duty of care of animals and exploring raising the penalties for acts of cruelty to animals.

The expenditures and estimates involved for carrying out the above work by AFCD over the past three years and in the financial year 2018-19 are as follows:

Financial year	Expenditure (\$ million)
2015-16	50.5
2016-17	53.7
2017-18 (revised estimate)	57.7
2018-19 (estimate)	57.7

AFCD does not have the breakdowns of expenditures involved for carrying out the above work and measures.

(3) AFCD completed in late September 2018 a public consultation on the responsibility requirement for a driver to stop in case of a traffic accident involving injury to an animal. The Government is considering the views received and drafting the legislative amendment proposal, with a view to submitting the proposed amendments to the Legislative Council in the first quarter of next year.

In the event of a traffic accident involving animals, members of the public could report the case to the Police by calling the 999 hotline. After receiving the report, the Police will handle the case in accordance with established procedures, and notify the relevant departments or SPCA to provide assistance as necessary.

The Government has been providing funding to SPCA to carry out work on safeguarding animal welfare, including enhancing the rescue services for

handling injured animals.

(4) The number of registered veterinary surgeons in Hong Kong has been increasing in recent years, now amounting to 970. Around 140 veterinary clinics are present in Hong Kong, providing general and specialist consultation services. Furthermore, the clinic established by the City University of Hong Kong (CityU) also provides animal emergency services, and CityU is establishing an animal health centre to provide treatment for various animal diseases. Hence, there are currently sufficient clinics in Hong Kong offering various veterinary services. In addition, as mentioned above, AFCD has been providing subventions to AWOs on their work on safeguarding animal welfare, including the provision of veterinary services. Currently, the Government has no plan to establish a public animal hospital.

(5) and (6) On case investigation, in the light of public demand for the setting up of dedicated criminal investigation teams in Police districts to handle animal cruelty cases, the Police announced in mid-April this year that dedicated investigation teams, comprising officers with experience and skills in investigating and handling other serious crimes, have been set up in the 22 Police districts with criminal investigation teams across the territory. A platform is in place for dedicated investigation teams of various districts to exchange their experience in investigations. The Police also provide relevant officers with training on handling animal cruelty cases to ensure that they are able to conduct thorough investigations into such cases. In addition, the Police, AFCD and SPCA have established a co-operation mechanism, whereby officers of AFCD and SPCA will provide professional advice and assist in the investigation at the scenes of animal cruelty cases where necessary.

From April to September this year, the dedicated investigation teams in various Police districts handled 57 suspected animal cruelty cases, amongst which 22 have been detected. In the first six months of 2018, the Police initiated prosecution against a total of 11 cases under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Ordinance (Cap 169). The convicted persons concerned were sentenced to imprisonment of two months to one year. The Police will continue to monitor the crime trend of animal cruelty and step up enforcement in this respect.

On education and training, the Police from time to time invite officers from AFCD and SPCA to explain the multi-agency approach for the investigation of animal cruelty cases to Police officers participating in foundation training and criminal investigation courses. The handling of animal cruelty has also been incorporated in the training days of various Police districts, so that frontline officers can have a better grasp of the latest situation and trend of animal cruelty.

In addition, the Police invite relevant officers to share their experience at seminars organised from time to time. A veterinary officer from AFCD, an officer from SPCA, a professor from the College of Veterinary Medicine and Life Sciences of CityU and officers from dedicated investigation teams with rich experience in handling relevant cases were invited to share

their experience at a large-scale seminar on the handling of animal cruelty cases held at the Police Headquarters in July this year, with a view to enhancing the professionalism and capability of officers in handling such cases. Two overseas experts were also invited to talk about animal welfare and share experience in veterinary forensics at another seminar organised by the Police at the end of October.