

LCQ6: Disposable plastic tableware

Following is a question by the Hon Paul Tse and a written reply by the Secretary for the Environment, Mr Wong Kam-sing, in the Legislative Council today (May 9):

Question:

The results of a study have shown that the disposable plastic food containers used by quite a number of fast food chains would have an overall migration exceeding the limit resulting in food contamination when they were used to hold food with temperatures of over 100 degrees Celsius. On the other hand, the results of a sampling test on local wild flathead grey mullets have shown that 60 per cent of the samples contained plastic fragments, the constituents of which are commonly used in the making of disposable plastic tableware. Some green groups have pointed out that the persistent organic pollutants (POPs) adhered to microplastics can cause cancer after entering the human body via the food chain. In addition, the governments of France and Taiwan have decided to ban the use of disposable plastic tableware in 2020 and 2030 respectively. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) whether it has studied and assessed, among the new confirmed cases of cancers in the past three years, the percentages of those which were related to POPs;
- (2) whether it has investigated (i) restaurants' use of disposable plastic food containers which have an overall migration exceeding the limit when coming into contact with high temperatures, and (ii) restaurants' massive use of disposable plastic food containers;
- (3) whether it formulated policies and measures in the past three years to encourage school lunch box suppliers as well as operators of restaurant chains and canteens in government office buildings to give greater consideration from the perspectives of reducing microplastics entering the food chain, protecting the environment and safeguarding public health, and switch to the use of reusable food containers or plastic-free disposable food containers;
- (4) whether it formulated policies and measures in the past three years to (i) change the restaurants' undesirable practice of massively using disposable plastic food containers, and (ii) develop among members of the public a habit from childhood to bring their own tableware and avoid using disposable plastic food containers; and
- (5) in view of the results of a study by an American university which showed that more than 90 per cent of the samples of bottled water contained microplastic particles which can cause cancer, whether the Government will (i) step up its efforts to persuade members of the public to purchase less bottled water and to switch to bringing their own water bottles and using the

drinking fountains provided in public places instead, and (ii) install in places with high pedestrian flow higher-grade drinking fountains (such as those adopting medical-grade and reverse osmosis filtration technologies) so as to provide members of the public with drinking water that meets high water quality standards?

Reply:

President,

Having consulted the Food and Health Bureau (FHB), the Education Bureau, the Financial Services and the Treasury Bureau, the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD), the Department of Health (DH), the Government Property Agency (GPA) and the Hospital Authority (HA), our consolidated reply to the question raised by the Hon Paul Tse is as follows:

(1) According to the DH, cancer is generally multifactorial and some common causes include ageing, unhealthy lifestyle, genetic and environmental factors, etc. As for the impact of microplastics on the ecological environment, it is an emerging topic of global concern and scientists worldwide are still exploring and studying the issue. The FHB has not commissioned any studies on this specific topic. Neither does the HA keep any statistics on the relation between new cancer cases and plastic pollution. On the other hand, while scientists have yet to fully understand the impacts of microplastics on human health including its carcinogenicity, the international understanding is that precautionary measures should be put in place as early as possible to reduce plastics entering the environment.

(2) No study has been carried out by the Government on restaurants' provision of plastic food containers to customers. That said, the Environment and Conservation Fund (ECF) has sponsored a green group to conduct a survey in 2018-19 on the provision of plastic containers and tableware by specific restaurants to customers. The project is underway and estimated for completion in October 2018.

(3) and (4) The Government has been striving to promote green lunch in schools. The Environmental Protection Department (EPD) holds talks for schools and provides them with practical guidelines and circulars, and advises lunch suppliers to use washable and reusable food containers instead of disposable ones. Under the Food Wise Hong Kong Campaign, the EPD has also issued the Food Waste Reduction Good Practice Guide for Educational Sector, encouraging schools to, inter alia, facilitate students to bring and use reusable tableware, containers and water bottles, thereby reducing the use of disposable plastic food containers and tableware. To further nurture the habit of waste reduction at source among students, the EPD has implemented the On-site Meal Portioning Funding (OMPF) Scheme since 2009, under which the ECF has earmarked \$150 million to subsidise schools to conduct basic conversion works and install facilities necessary for implementing on-site meal portioning on campus, thereby promoting the "food wise" culture, as well as reducing food waste and the use of disposable plastic food containers and tableware. So far, over 120 schools have been subsidised to run OMPF projects.

On the other hand, the EPD is committed to facilitating the general public and different sectors of the community to reduce the use of disposable food containers and plastic tableware. For example, the EPD engages the catering sector from time to time to encourage restaurants to phase in green measures, such as providing dine-in customers with only reusable food containers and tableware, avoiding the use of styrofoam food containers for take-away food and welcoming customers to bring their own food containers for take-away food. Under the Sustainable Development Fund, the Government has also earlier supported the food and beverage sector to formulate guidelines on green procurement by the trade, with the aim of encouraging various types of restaurants and eateries to practise green procurement, including the use of recyclable or plant-fibre tableware instead of disposable plastic ones to help reduce plastic pollution. Furthermore, under the Hong Kong Awards for Environmental Excellence and the Hong Kong Green Organisation Certification, the EPD appeals to food and beverage caterers to take measures to encourage customers not to ask for disposable tableware and food containers. The ECF also subsidises local non-profit-making organisations run various projects to promote less use of disposable tableware and food containers in the community, thereby inspiring citizens and students to use reusable tableware and food containers.

At present, the tenancies entered into by the GPA for government departments with operators of canteens in government properties would also generally prescribe that the operator shall use decomposable lunch boxes for take-away services.

The Government will continue to take the lead in adopting a green procurement policy, such as avoiding the use of single-use disposable items (including tableware and food containers) and purchasing products with improved recyclability, higher recycled contents, less packaging and greater durability as far as practicable.

In addition, the Government strives to take forward the implementation of relevant policies and regulations in order to rise up to the challenge of waste management. It is expected that the future implementation of municipal solid waste charging scheme could effectively, through economic incentives, drive behavioural change to reduce waste generation, thereby reducing the overall waste disposal quantity.

(5) To create a social environment where the public is encouraged to cultivate the habit of bringing their own reusable water bottles with a view to promoting waste reduction at source, the Government has required all policy bureaux and departments to gradually cease the sale of water in plastic bottles (measuring 1 litre or less) through automatic vending machines at government venues under their purview (e.g. sports complexes, performance venues, government offices, parks, country parks, government car parks, public transport interchanges or ferry piers). The arrangement took effect on February 20, 2018 and is applicable to relevant contracts, tenancies/tenancy agreements or permits tendered on or after that date. As for existing automatic beverage vending machines at such premises, the policy bureaux and departments will discuss with the suppliers/operators concerned and ask them to voluntarily implement the new arrangement of ceased sale as

early as possible.

The AFCD promotes waste reduction and a responsible attitude towards the environment through the "Take Your Litter Home" public education programme. Members of the public are encouraged to plan ahead before visiting the country parks, such as to bring along reusable water bottles and food containers so as to avoid and reduce the generation of waste, and take away their waste after visiting the country parks. In addition, the AFCD has launched the "Bring Your Own Water Bottle" Reward Scheme since 2014 to encourage country park visitors to reduce waste at source and avoid consumption of one-off bottled drinks. Country park visitors who have brought along their reusable water bottles will be given stamps for redemption of souvenirs as reward.

Meanwhile, the EPD is co-ordinating with various policy bureaux and departments to install additional water dispensers as necessary at new government venues and suitable existing government venues when conducting renovation works, subject to actual circumstances and technical feasibility. Water quality and hygiene of such dispensers will be maintained in accordance with relevant guidelines by the various policy bureaux and departments.

In addition, in December 2017, the EPD launched a Waste Reduction Guidebook for Large Scale Event Organisers (Guidebook), which provides clear information and practical examples to assist event organisers and participants in achieving waste reduction at source. The Guidebook recommends, among other things, that organisers set up on-site water refilling stations at the event venues and encourage participants to bring their own bottles. We also encourage government departments to set a role model by making reference to the Guidebook and implementing the recommended measures therein as far as practicable.