

LCQ6: Reducing the use of disposable plastic tableware

Following is a question by the Hon Chan Hak-kan and a reply by the Acting Secretary for Environment, Mr Tse Chin-wan, in the Legislative Council today (June 13):

Question:

During the decade from 2005 to 2015, plastic waste discarded at landfills increased by one quarter, and the proportion of plastic tableware in discarded plastic waste increased by 3 per cent to eight percentage points. The findings of a survey conducted last year by a green group have shown that two major fast food chains distributed disposable tableware to their customers, irrespective of whether they dined in or took away the food. Based on the survey, it is estimated that five major fast food chains handed out a total of more than 420 million pieces of disposable plastic tableware in 2016. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it will discuss with the operators of major fast food chains the setting of a target and an implementation timetable for reducing and ultimately ceasing the use of disposable plastic tableware; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) whether it will issue guidelines to small eateries to encourage and help them to reduce the use of disposable plastic tableware; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) given that the Environment Bureau set out in the Hong Kong Blueprint for Sustainable Use of Resources 2013-2022 published in 2013 a target to reduce the per-capita municipal solid waste disposal rate by 40 per cent by 2022 as compared with 2011, whether the Government has assessed how far the current situation is off target; of the measures in place to further encourage restaurants and members of the public to reduce the use of disposable plastic tableware, so as to achieve such target expeditiously?

Reply:

President,

The Hong Kong Blueprint for Sustainable Use of Resources 2013-2022 (Blueprint) formulated by the Government sets out the 10-year waste management strategies as well as the target of waste reduction by 40 per cent by 2022. Owing to factors such as the continuous growth of our economy, the tightening of import requirements for certain recyclables by the Mainland and the change in demand for recyclables in the global market, the quantity of local waste generation has shown a rising trend at this stage due to an increase in commercial and industrial waste generation despite slight reduction in domestic waste generation.

To achieve the Blueprint's waste reduction target, the Environmental Protection Department (EPD) has been implementing or initiating a number of measures. These include making various efforts to promote and educate the message of "use less, waste less", strengthening source separation and clean recycling of waste, implementing producer responsibility schemes progressively, exploring more technologies and means to process recyclables, assisting the recycling industry to upgrade their standards and capabilities through the Recycling Fund, making laws to implement municipal solid waste (MSW) charging, etc.

In terms of disposable plastic tableware, although they account for only about 2 per cent of the MSW disposed of locally, once entering the marine environment, these waste plastics will exist for a prolonged period of time and pose threats to marine organisms. There is no way that Hong Kong can remain aloof from the issue. To achieve a "plastic-free ocean", eliminating plastics at source is the most fundamental way. The Government is thus deeply concerned about the environmental impacts brought by disposable plastic tableware. We have been paying close attention to the research and development in other countries or regions on the control of disposable plastic tableware and the policies and measures proposed therein, as well as the various ways to reduce and even phase out disposable plastic tableware.

The EPD plans to commence a study within this financial year to obtain the in-depth knowledge about the mainstream proposals worldwide on the future control mechanism of disposable plastic tableware and their means of implementation, and consider whether it is suitable to implement the control on disposable plastic tableware in future having regard to the local situation. If any suitable proposal is identified, we will study the scope of control and various related matters, including such details as the types of tableware for control, the means of control, the applicable substitutes, etc. We will also look into the implications of such control on various sectors, including the public and the trades concerned, and consult the relevant trades and stakeholders. Based on the findings of our study and analysis, we will draw up a specific proposal that is suitable for implementation in Hong Kong.

As regards the catering sector, the Government has been providing various types of restaurants with guidelines and assistance to encourage them to implement green measures, and to reduce the use of disposable tableware. These measures include providing dine-in customers with only reusable tableware, avoiding the use of plastic foam food containers for keeping take-away food, welcoming customers to bring their own food containers for buying take-away food, etc. Under the Sustainable Development Fund, the Government has 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 reusable or plant-fibre tableware instead of disposable plastic ones. Through the annual Hong Kong Awards for Environmental Excellence, the EPD also commends restaurants that have excelled in waste reduction at source, such as those taking measures to encourage customers not to ask for disposable tableware.

The Government has taken the lead in adopting a green procurement policy, which includes avoiding the use of disposable tableware. Internal guidelines have been issued to advise all bureaux and departments to avoid the use of disposable items as far as practicable. In future, we will explore means to require canteen operators in government properties to, where circumstances permit, avoid offering plastic straws, avoid distributing disposable tableware to dine-in customers, avoid distributing disposable tableware sets for take-away food, avoid distributing any single-use tableware by default, and use tableware or lunch boxes made of greener materials (e.g. plant fibre) to replace disposable plastic tableware. In addition, we will consider launching voluntary schemes on using less plastic and disposable tableware in the food and beverage sector under the Food Wise Hong Kong Campaign. The EPD will take into consideration the experience gained in these voluntary schemes, as well as the stakeholders' views, in tandem in conducting the above-mentioned study on the control of disposable plastic tableware.

At the community level, the EPD is committed to facilitating the general public and various sectors to reduce the use of disposable plastic tableware, and to enhancing public awareness in environmental protection through proactive promotional and educational efforts. For instance, green lunch has been promoted in schools through the Environment and Conservation Fund (ECF). Local non-profit-making organisations have also been subsidised by the ECF to run community projects to inspire citizens and students to bring and use their own reusable tableware.

Avoiding the entry of plastic waste into the marine environment is a common challenge currently faced by the international community. To protect the nature and our next generation, the Government will keep on promoting waste reduction by encouraging every sector and citizen to treasure our resources, and as far as practicable minimise the use of disposable items, including disposable plastic tableware, thereby joining hands to build a cleaner and greener Hong Kong.

Thank you, President.