

## LCQ1: Pet-friendly policy

Following is a question by the Hon Maggie Chan and a reply by the Under Secretary for Environment and Ecology, Miss Diane Wong, in the Legislative Council today (April 2):

Question:

There are views that the existing legislation has impeded the development potential of Hong Kong's pet industry, and there is still substantial room for improvement in the pet-friendly policy of Hong Kong. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) given that in the reply to a question from a Member of this Council on June 12 last year, the Government indicated that it would conduct research on practices and experiences in other places regarding bringing dogs into food premises and consider reviewing the existing legislation, of the progress and details of the relevant work, including whether it will establish a licensing regime for pet-friendly food premises and devise supporting insurance solutions, open up outdoor dining areas for entry of pets on a trial basis, and implement a tiered access system based on the size of food premises, indoor and outdoor space, or types of dog;

(2) as it is learnt that the Government is studying the introduction of ISO microchips for pets, of the progress and details of the relevant work; and

(3) whether it has studied including other Mainland cities in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area in Group IIIA countries or places concerning the quarantine-related arrangements for cats and dogs, and shortening the quarantine period for cats and dogs imported from countries or places in the Group to less than 30 days, as well as assessed the technical barriers and risks involved; if so, of the details and progress; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

As pet keeping has become increasingly common in Hong Kong, there has been more attention in society to bringing animals to enter different premises and use public facilities. In general, the Government needs to take into account different factors when considering whether to further relax existing arrangements, including the nature of individual facilities, whether ancillary facilities are in place and the degree of social acceptance, to achieve the policy objective of facilitating animals and people to co-exist harmoniously.

On the questions raised by the Hon Maggie Chan, I would like to reply to the question as follows:

(1) Regarding bringing dogs into food premises, the Food Business Regulation (Cap. 132X) currently prohibits dogs (except guide dogs) from entering food premises. The existing regulatory requirements have been in place for close to 30 years. The Government understands that there has been changes in the societal culture but would also have to strike a balance on the need to safeguard public health and hygiene, etc, including food premises in Hong Kong are generally cramped, the need to consider the reaction of pet dogs in a crowded and cramped environment (possibly with different types of dogs), as well as the potential impact on other diners.

The society is divided over this subject. On the one hand, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) has from time to time received complaints about certain food premises allowing customers who bring pet dogs inside, expressing concerns on pet dogs entering restaurants. On the other hand, in recent years, there are views in society hoping to bring along pet dogs to dine in food premises.

The Government needs to take into account different factors when considering whether to relax certain restrictions on pet dogs entering food premises, including public health, the operating environment of food premises and social acceptance. The Environment and Ecology Bureau, together with the FEHD, are conducting research on practices and experiences in other places, and would carefully consider whether there is room for relaxing the relevant restrictions.

(2) To effectively prevent and control the spread of rabies in Hong Kong, the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) requires all dogs over five months of age to be vaccinated against rabies and implanted with a microchip in the AVID format (microchip), which serves as a proof of rabies vaccination and licencing. Each microchip carries a unique identification number for identifying the pet, and can be used to assist the owner in locating their dogs if they are accidentally lost.

Considering the widespread use of ISO microchips in many other countries and regions, to further facilitate the movements of dogs into and out of Hong Kong, the AFCD has completed a feasibility study and proposed to introduce ISO microchips in addition to the existing AVID microchips. The AFCD has consulted relevant stakeholders, including licensed animal traders, animal welfare organisations, pet transport agents, veterinary clinics and animal-related organisations on the proposal, and the trade is generally supportive. The Government expects to consult the relevant Legislative Council (LegCo) Panel on the proposal in the second quarter of this year. If the proposal is supported by the Panel, the Government will introduce the proposed amendments to the relevant subsidiary legislation into the LegCo in due course.

(3) On the quarantine arrangement for the import of cats and dogs, the AFCD currently regulates the import of live animals through a permit system, and controls the import of cats and dogs under the Public Health (Animals and Birds) Regulations (Cap. 139A) and the Rabies Regulation (Cap. 421A), aiming to prevent the transmission of animal diseases including rabies into Hong Kong, and safeguard the health of the public.

The AFCD classifies places into different groups according to different risk of rabies, with reference to information about the surveillance of animal diseases from the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH). Group I includes rabies-free places (i.e. where rabies has been absent for a long time); Group II includes places where rabies cases are few and under effective control. Since Groups I and II places are considered of lower risk of rabies, cats and dogs imported from these places are exempted from quarantine upon fulfilling relevant requirements (such as providing Animal Health Certificate, Residence Certificate and Anti-rabies Vaccination Certificate). Furthermore, Group IIIA includes places that do not meet the requirements of Group II but have satisfactory regulation of veterinary services and official controls on health certification; whereas Group IIIB includes places where rabies cases are reported and not under effective control. In general, places that do not meet the requirements of Group I, II, or IIIA (or their situations cannot be determined) will be included in Group IIIB. Since the incubation period of rabies can be up to several months, to prevent the transmission of rabies into Hong Kong, the AFCD requires a quarantine period of no less than 120 days for the cats and dogs imported from Group IIIB places.

Group IIIA has been introduced since December 2024 to facilitate animal owners in bringing their pet cats and dogs to Hong Kong. The quarantine period for cats and dogs of the relevant places will be significantly shortened from the current 120 days to 30 days upon their arrival in Hong Kong, provided that they meet the relevant quarantine requirements including that the animals must be vaccinated against rabies, have a satisfactory rabies neutralising antibody titre test and have an animal health certificate issued or endorsed by a government veterinary officer of the place of export. The AFCD has proactively contacted some Group IIIB places which do not meet the requirements of Group II but have satisfactory regulation of veterinary services and official controls on health certification to discuss the relevant quarantine arrangements and, upon reaching an agreement, to include them in Group IIIA to shorten the quarantine period for dogs and cats upon arrival in Hong Kong. Among Group IIIA places, the Macao Special Administrative Region has implemented the new arrangements since December last year. On extending the new arrangement to other cities of the Greater Bay Area, the AFCD is actively discussing the details of the arrangement with the relevant Mainland authorities with a view to implement the new arrangement as soon as possible.

The current arrangement of a 30-day quarantine period for Group IIIA places is formulated with reference to the risk assessment conducted by the expert consultant in light of the actual situation in Hong Kong. The AFCD will continue to make close reference to the latest situation of animal diseases published by the WOAH and timely review whether the relevant quarantine requirements can be enhanced in the light of factors such as operational experience, views of stakeholders and risk assessment.