

LCQ11: Reduction of waste plastics

Following is a question by the Hon Kenneth Leung and a written reply by the Secretary for the Environment, Mr Wong Kam-sing, in the Legislative Council today (November 13):

Question:

The Environmental Protection Department (EPD) has indicated that as the disposal of plastic bags rose again in two consecutive years in 2016 and 2017, it will review the effectiveness (including the charge amount and exemption issues) of the existing Plastic Shopping Bag Charging Scheme (Charging Scheme). On the other hand, currently there is no legislation regulating the use of disposable plastic products (including packaging materials, tableware and containers). In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) of the respective quantities of waste plastics (i) disposed of at landfills and (ii) recovered, in each month between January last year and October this year, with a tabulated breakdown by type (including plastic bags, disposable tableware and packaging materials);
- (2) of the progress of the EPD's review of the Charging Scheme; whether the Government will consider taking measures which are more aggressive (e.g. a total ban on the use of plastic bags); if so, of the details and timetable; if not, the justifications for that;
- (3) as some green groups have pointed out that since the problem of abusive use of packaging materials is serious, and it is difficult to recover and reuse such materials, packaging materials inflict more harm on the environment than plastic bags do, whether the Government has formulated measures to reduce the use of plastic packaging materials; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;
- (4) whether it will consider including disposable plastic products in a producer responsibility scheme to require various parties such as manufacturers, sellers and consumers to share the cost of handling related waste, with a view to achieving reduction of waste plastics at source; if so, of the details; if not, the justifications for that; and
- (5) as it is learnt that quite a number of countries have implemented or will implement a timetable for a gradual ban on the use of plastic products which are disposable or difficult to recover, whether the Government will draw up a timetable on reduction of waste plastics; if so, of the details; if not, the justifications for that?

Reply:

President,

Environmental pollution by plastic products, in particular, marine pollution, has become a topic of concern in recent years. To alleviate its impact on ecology and environment, the Government will continue to adopt a multi-pronged approach by taking forward initiatives on various fronts, e.g. introducing legislation and policies, strengthening education on and support to community, etc., in order to promote a "plastic-free" culture, minimise the use of one-off disposable plastics and create a circular economy for plastic materials. To this end, concerted effort by the Government, various trades and the general public is required to achieve a more satisfactory outcome in tackling the challenges posed by waste plastics.

My reply to the question raised by the Hon Kenneth Leung is as follows:

(1) The Environmental Protection Department (EPD) compiles statistics on waste plastics disposed of at landfills based on findings of an annual survey. Due to limitation in data collection, we are unable to provide the disposal figures on a monthly basis and can only provide the average monthly figures. In 2017, the average monthly quantities of waste plastics disposed of were as follows:

Plastics	Average monthly disposal quantity (tonnes)
Plastic bags	24 120
Plastic tableware	5 040
Polyfoam – tableware	1 180
Polyfoam – others	1 350
Non-polyethylene terephthalate (PET) plastic bottles	2 190
PET plastic bottles	4 150
Others (Note)	26 560
Total	64 590

Note: Other waste plastics include packaging materials, toys, off-cuts, scrap, etc.

As for the quantities of waste plastics recovered, we maintain breakdown on plastic recyclables recovered for either local recycling or export, but not by their original uses, and are thus unable to provide the corresponding breakdown. In 2017, the average monthly quantity of waste plastics recovered was 9 640 tonnes.

Compilation of the statistics for 2018 is underway and the statistics are expected to be published by the end of this year.

(2) to (5) We are studying and formulating various initiatives to tackle the issue of waste plastics, but given the many variables in play, we are currently unable to formulate a specific target for gradually reducing the quantity of waste plastics disposed of at landfills and the timetable for

implementing the target. We would proactively take forward the works below:

(i) Under the Plastic Shopping Bag (PSB) Charging Scheme, the current minimum charge of 50 cents has remained unchanged for over ten years. There are views on whether the charge should be adjusted. There are also views that the current exemption over PSB used for food hygiene purposes, especially the use of PSB to carry frozen or chilled foodstuff, may need to be tightened to further encourage reducing the use of PSB. We are reviewing the operation and effectiveness of the charging scheme along these directions so as to consider the room for further improvement. We plan to consult the public in 2020 on the outcome of the review in order to map out the way forward.

(ii) Packaging reduction is a global trend. This subject has always been a concern to members of the public and green groups in Hong Kong. The Government plans to collaborate with the retail trade to explore and implement practical measures on promoting and encouraging the reduction of plastic packaging materials. We are now actively engaging the sector for commencing the work concerned.

(iii) The Government has indicated earlier to press ahead with the introduction of a producer responsibility scheme on plastic beverage containers first. We will consider, similar to the arrangement in other jurisdictions, providing an economic incentive to encourage the public to return used plastic beverage containers for recycling. The application of Reverse Vending Machines will also be explored to enhance recovery efficiency of used plastic beverage containers. Having regard to the consultant's proposal and stakeholders' views, we will map out the way forward for public consultation.

(iv) With reference to the research and development in other countries or places on the control of disposable plastic items, we are commencing a study on controlling or banning disposable plastic tableware to explore, inter alia, the necessity and feasibility of such control or ban, and the scope, regulatory mechanism and applicable substitutes concerned should such control or ban is deemed necessary and feasible. The study is scheduled for completion in late 2020.

(v) Starting from January 2019, the Government has taken the initiative in banning plastic straws and polyfoam food containers in canteens mainly serving government staff. Besides, when inviting tenders for new or renewing existing contracts, the Government will stipulate the requirement for restaurant operators in suitable government venues to avoid using disposable plastic tableware wherever practicable.

(vi) We also collaborate with the catering sector to promote and encourage reducing the use of disposable plastic tableware. Our efforts include formulating guidelines for the catering sector, co-organising the "Plastic-Free Takeaway, Use Reusable Tableware" campaign with the trade, encouraging customers to bring their own tableware, etc. The two phases of the campaign have saved a total of about 2.4 million sets of disposable tableware.

(vii) Green awareness has to be fostered from childhood. In this connection, we will step up our efforts in nurturing a "plastic-free" culture in schools. The EPD will work with the Education Bureau to launch a "Plastic-free" School Lunch Pilot Scheme, encouraging primary and secondary schools to use reusable lunch boxes in serving school lunch for their students, and cultivating students' green habit of bringing along their own reusable cutlery. We will also provide fridges, rice steamers, dish washers and sterilisers to schools in need, so as to encourage students to bring their own tableware. To inculcate the green habit of "bringing your own bottle" in the youth from their childhood, we will also invite about 80 primary and secondary schools to join a two-year pilot programme, under which smart water dispensers with their exteriors designed by these schools' students will be installed at the schools, and the schools are supported to carry out relevant education and experiential activities.

(viii) To enhance the recovery rate of waste plastics, the Government is preparing to provide free collection services for all sorts of waste plastics from non-commercial and non-industrial sources. The waste plastics so collected will be further treated and processed to become recycled raw materials or recycled products. A two-year Pilot Scheme on Collection and Recycling Services of Waste Plastics will be gradually rolled out in the Eastern District, Sha Tin and Kwun Tong by end of this year to the first half of 2020. Drawing from the practical experience gained under the Pilot Scheme, we will then gradually extend the services to cover the whole territory.