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Council for Sustainable Development's Public Engagement on Control of Single-use Plastics

PURPOSE

This paper seeks to brief Members on the public engagement (“PE”) on Control of Single-use Plastics conducted by the Council for Sustainable Development (“SDC”).

BACKGROUND

2. Plastics are light, inexpensive, and can be easily molded into a wide range of items. They are commonly used in our daily lives¹. However, their massive production and consumption have contributed greatly to plastic pollution, which impact our ecosystems, endanger animal lives and also threaten human health. Among different types of plastic item, the single-use ones are particularly harmful to the environment because they are usually made from low-value plastics that cannot be easily separated and sorted for recycling, making it relatively not cost effective to recycle them. Currently, only very few single-use plastic items are recycled properly and most of them end up in landfills or the natural environment. The popularisation of these items also encourage a wasteful lifestyle.

¹ Some of the most commonly found single-use plastic items include shopping bag, beverage bottle, food wrapper, sachet, packaging, straw, stirrer, and foam takeaway container.

3. In Hong Kong, plastic waste disposed of at landfills in Hong Kong increased by 36% from 2009 to 2019 whilst the population grew by only 7.5% over the same period. In 2019, around 2 320 tonnes of plastic wastes were disposed of at landfills per day, which is around the weight of 155 double-decker buses. The Government has been promoting a “plastic free” culture and waste reduction at source through various on-going initiatives. While the initiatives have been serving well their specific purpose, it is time to move ahead to draw up a long-term plan to manage single-use plastics in a holistic manner. The public has to be extensively engaged in the process with a view to collecting public views on the approach, scope, priorities and timeline. As such, the Government invited the SDC to carry out a PE exercise to solicit public views on the control of single-use plastics.

SDC’s PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

The Preparatory Phase

4. The SDC has formed a Strategy Sub-committee (“SSC”), chaired by Professor Jonathan Wong, to assist in the planning and implementation of the PE exercise. With the assistance of a Programme Director (i.e. the Hong Kong Productivity Council), the SSC held three focus group meetings in July this year with stakeholders from various sectors including retail and wholesale, delivery, logistic and e-commerce sectors; food outlets and pre-packaged food sectors; medical and health; chambers of commerce; recycling trade and suppliers for alternative materials; professional organisations; academics; green groups; and non-governmental organisations (“NGOs”). Nearly 70 participants from 61 organisations attended the focus group meetings.

5. Having considered the views of the focus groups, the SDC decided that the PE shall gather public opinion with focus on what and how non-essential and/or hard-to-recycle single-use plastic items to be controlled. It has also prepared a detailed document (the PE document, at **Annex A**) and a concise leaflet (**Annex B**) for this purpose.

The Public Engagement Document

6. The PE document consists of six chapters. The first chapter introduces key definitions and common single-use plastic items. This chapter also explains how single-use plastics can be harmful to the environment, which brings out the importance of introducing suitable control on these items.

7. The second chapter focuses on the problem of waste plastics in Hong Kong so as to help the public understand the urgent need to act now and reduce our reliance on single-use plastics in daily lives. The chapter also outlines some past initiatives and future targets / visions of the Government in the management of waste plastics.

8. The third chapter illustrates the objectives of the PE exercise, which include gathering public opinion on controlling non-essential and / or hard-to-recycle single-use plastic items, and ways to nurture a green lifestyle. This chapter also highlights that waste prevention should be the most preferred option to reduce our reliance on single-use plastics.

9. The fourth chapter analyses characteristics of various single-use plastic items with a view to facilitating the public's consideration of the suitable control approach for each of the items. Furthermore, control measures adopted by other places are quoted for reference. This chapter also invites the public to comment on the proposed enhancement options for the Plastic Shopping Bag (PSB) Charging Scheme, in particular, the scope of exemption and the charging level.

10. The fifth chapter provides green lifestyle tips to the public. It also provides background information on various emerging "green products" in the market, say, degradable products or products that claim to contain recycled content, and how such products are being managed in other places. This chapter aims at educating the public in choosing green products, and the views collected will not only facilitate policy formulation, but also drive businesses to adopt more plastic-free measures like the use of simple packaging or packaging with recycled content.

11. The last chapter is a summary of key issues outlined in previous chapters. The PE process, a list of Supporting Organisations and the Views Collection Form are included at Annexes.

The Public Interaction Phase

12. The SDC released the PE document and launched a three-month public interaction phase through a press conference on 30 September 2021. Activities in this phase include town hall meetings, visits to schools, consultations with relevant advisory bodies, meetings with different stakeholders including youth groups, NGOs, green groups, chambers of commerce and relevant trades etc.

13. The activities are being publicised through TV and Radio Announcements in the Public Interest (“API”); posters and promotional videos; dedicated website; social media (e.g. Big Waster’s Facebook and Instagram) as well as the networks of over 120 Supporting Organisations. Advertisements were placed via various media channels (e.g. newspapers, MTR stations and in-train of MTR and bus stops); and online publicity materials were distributed through over 500 secondary and primary schools, over 120 Supporting Organisations, over 100 Community Halls and 33 Recycling Stations and Stores of GREEN@COMMUNITY (the community recycling network managed by the Environmental Protection Department) to raise public awareness of this PE.

14. Following the public interaction phase, the Programme Director will help the SSC analyse all the views collected. The SSC will draft the findings and recommendations to be included in the report to the Government and submit the draft report to the SDC for consideration.

ADVICE SOUGHT

15. Members are invited to note the SDC’s work, and comment on the issues set out in the PE document.

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