

COUNCIL FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Public Engagement on the Management of Single-use Plastics by the Council for Sustainable Development

Purpose

The Environment Bureau and Environmental Protection Department (ENB/EPD) invite the Council for Sustainable Development (SDC) to consider conducting a public engagement exercise on the management of single-use plastics with a view to making recommendations on the approach to minimise their impact on the environment and sustainable development. This paper sets out ENB/EPD's proposals on the objective and scope of the proposed public engagement for Members' consideration.

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 impacts our ecosystems, endangers animal lives and also threatens 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

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.

wasteful lifestyle.

3. Many jurisdictions have already put the management of single-use plastics on top of their agenda and put forward plans to tackle them. A summary of recent moves of various jurisdictions on the management of single-use plastics is at **Annex A**.

4. In Hong Kong, plastic wastes 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. A list of on-going initiatives relating to single-use plastics are at **Annex B**. While these initiatives have been serving well their specific purposes, 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. We propose SDC to carry out a public engagement exercise to solicit public views on the management of single-use plastics.

Content of the SDC Public Engagement

5. Some key issues relating to management of single-use plastics for public engagement are suggested below for SDC’s consideration –

(i) Should the use of single-use plastic items be controlled?

6. There are many types of single-use plastic items being used in our daily lives. In Hong Kong, the top three, in terms of disposal weight at landfill, are plastic bag, plastic dining ware and plastic beverage bottle. We are one of the first movers in the region to manage waste plastic by implementing the Plastic Shopping Bag (PSB) Charging Scheme under the Product Eco-responsibility Ordinance (Cap. 603) over a decade ago, which mandates at least \$0.5 per PSB distributed be charged in the retail sales of goods. The Government has completed a review on enhancing the Scheme to ensure its effectiveness in reducing the use of PSBs. Besides,

the Government is already engaging the public or relevant trade on the management of two types of single-use plastic items. These include: (a) plastic beverage bottles, on which a 3-month public consultation on introducing a producer responsibility scheme was launched on 22 February 2021; and (b) disposable plastic dining ware (i.e. forks, spoons, knives, chopsticks, cups, food containers, plates, bowls, lids, straws and stirrers from all food and beverage (F&B) outlets), the banning of the use of which is under discussion with the F&B sector. The general regulatory approaches for these two types of single-use plastic items have already been mapped out and they can be implemented after ironing out the details in consultation with the stakeholders. There are also other trade-driven and non-regulatory measures, e.g. the “plastic-and-disposable-free” publicity and education campaign, in place.

7. Apart from those single-use plastic items mentioned above, there are still many others that are widely in use. For example, plastic bottles of non-beverage products; delivery, logistics and e-commerce packaging; use of plastic in personal care and cosmetic items; food and beverage related packaging; industry-specific items like toiletries provided by hotels and promotional items from the retail and marketing sector; festive and entertainment items like wrapping, decorations and other celebratory items, etc. Controlling the use of these items, with the ultimate goal of phasing some of them out, is a common approach adopted in other places. Having said that, we have to acknowledge that certain items cannot be phased out, at least in the near future, for reasons such as their use in protecting human health and well-being (e.g. medical syringe, personal protective equipment (PPE) items), in particular when the whole world is combating against the COVID-19 pandemic, or there being no reasonable alternative. To make the approach to control single-use plastic items more palatable, it is important to define the scope of control in a pragmatic manner with input from the public. The community has to understand that the purpose of controlling the use of single-use plastic items is not to impose a total ban on plastics, but their excessive and indiscriminate use.

8. For identifying single-use plastic items that should be tackled, it is recommended to draw up a list of assessment criteria. Considerations can be given to the example below –

Criteria	Elaboration	Example
(a) Availability of alternatives	In some cases, reasonable alternatives are available to replace plastic as production material.	The use of cotton bag instead of single-use plastic bag
(b) Chance of littering / exposure to marine environment	Handy, light-weighted single-use plastic items are more likely to be littered, hence posing a bigger threat to the marine environment.	Plastic bags and packaging are common marine plastic waste items
(c) Operational need	To certain industries, the use of single-use plastic items may be essential to fulfill their basic operational needs.	Plastic wrapping of copper wire, plastic pipe, plastic container for chemicals
(d) Health impact	Due to hygiene reasons, it may be more difficult to phase out medical-related single-use plastic items.	Mask, syringe, PPE
(e) Recyclability and recycling outlets	Some single-use plastic items are made from low-value and hard-to-recycle plastics, and cannot be easily separated and sorted for recycling.	Plastic packaging

(ii) What should be the approach for managing single-use plastic items?

9. Based on the list of criteria drawn up under *(i)*, a pool of single-use plastic items to be tackled can be identified (referred below as “targeted items”). Given the large number of the types of single-use plastic items involved, priorities have to be set to allow time for the public to gradually change their habit of using them. In this part of the public engagement, we suggest collecting public views on -

- (a) the approach (voluntary vs regulatory) on the management of single-use plastic items identified under *(i)*;
- (b) which plastic items should require early attention (e.g. those with higher disposal volume at landfills); and
- (c) which plastic items are more readily be brought under control.

10. For every targeted item identified under *(i)*, the community would need to consider if it should be controlled through regulatory measures (usually involve charging, ban, certain requirements on the products, etc.), or non-regulatory measures (e.g. voluntary charter, education campaign), or a phased approach that starts with non-regulatory measures and gradually migrates to regulatory ones. Experiences of other places show that regulatory measures are more common for controlling items such as PSB, plastic beverage bottles, single-use toiletries in hotels, oxo-degradable plastics, etc. However, it should be noted that putting in place regulatory measures normally take a much longer time.

11. As mentioned in paragraph 6 above, a regulatory regime has already been put in place for PSB. While there is a 25% reduction on the number of PSB disposed of in the landfill since the full implementation of the PSB Charging Scheme in 2015, we propose making use of this public engagement to solicit public views on how the current scheme can be enhanced (e.g. reviewing the current scope of exemption and the current charging level of \$0.5 per PSB) in order to maintain its effectiveness.

(iii) Green lifestyle – the degree of public acceptance

12. After years of publicity and education, the public in general is well aware of the concept of “use less, waste less” and is willing to adopt a greener lifestyle. “Bring Your Own Bag (BYOB)” is one of the most deep-rooted green concepts being practised. “Bring Your Own water bottle” (using reusable water bottles and water dispensers), instead of buying packaged drinks, is another habit that is gradually gaining popularity. We propose taking the opportunity to further promote green lifestyle.

13. The above BYO initiatives do not require the public to bear any additional cost (or at most minimal cost). In fact, the possibility of paying extra is seldom highlighted in the promotion of green lifestyle (except for the PSB levy which serves as a financial disincentive to discourage people from using PSB). However, in the case of single-use plastic items, it is highly likely that additional cost may arise as a result of using other raw materials or replacing them with alternative products. In fact, the low production cost of plastics is the reason for the prevalence of single-use plastic items in the market. When we engage the public on the control of single-use plastic items, they need to be aware of the cost implication. In this part of the public engagement, we suggest gauging the public’s views on the following “cost-related” issues arising from the approach considered under *(ii)* and adoption of green lifestyle in general:

- (a) whether the public is willing to bear the additional cost for reducing the use of single-use plastic items, which may be in the form of statutory levy or the cost of using alternative raw materials/products;
- (b) if affirmative, what is the acceptable range of additional cost; and
- (c) consumers’ considerations when choosing “greener” products (e.g. whether the product can be re-used, whether “green material” is used, whether the product adopts green packaging, the brand’s “green responsibility”).

14. The responses to the above questions are closely relevant to the design of the suitable tools for controlling single-use plastic items. In particular, they can help assess the public's acceptance of more stringent measures like charging. The range of additional cost that the public is willing to bear can also be of good reference to the trade when designing / exploring alternatives to single-use plastic items for the good cause of environmental protection.

Target Audience and Style of the Public Engagement

15. As controlling single-use plastics affects the daily lives of the general public, members of the public should be the main target of this engagement exercise. That said, as single-use plastics is also closely related to a wide range of businesses, engagement with such sectors is recommended where necessary. We also suggest using additional means for collecting public views, for instance, conducting randomised telephone survey and continuously engaging the youth through school visits. Furthermore, as we propose taking the opportunity of the public engagement to promote green lifestyle, the Public Engagement Document should be prepared in simple language with attractive graphics, supplemented by interesting facts and green tips to serve the education purpose.

Way Forward

16. Subject to Members' endorsement of the proposed topic and content of the public engagement, the following will be pursued:

- (a) a Programme Director will be appointed to assist the SDC in overseeing the entire public engagement process, drawing up the consultation document, collecting and analysing views received, and a service provider will be engaged to conduct the randomised telephone survey to gauge public views;
- (b) the Strategy Sub-committee under the SDC will advise on the formulation of the Public Engagement Document, the implementation of the public interaction phase of the public

engagement, and the formulation of recommendations upon considering the views collected; and

- (c) a publicity and public education plan will be formulated to supplement the public engagement exercise.

The key action timetable of the public engagement is at **Annex C**.

Views Sought

- 17. Members are invited to consider the above proposal.

**Environmental Bureau/Environmental Protection Department
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