

For discussion on
22 April 2021

SDC Paper No. 02/21

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

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.

natural environment. The popularisation of these items also encourage a 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
April 2021

**Summary of Recent Moves of Various Jurisdictions
on the Management of Single-use Plastics**

| Jurisdiction | Recent moves on the management of single-use plastics | |
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| Global – Parties to the Basel Convention | Jan 2021 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transboundary movement of waste plastics controlled under the Basel Convention shall not proceed unless consents are received from the export, import and all transit states concerned. |
| Mainland China | Jan 2020 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Announced the plan to phase out single-use plastics across the country with effect by end of 2020 and progressively until 2025, covering the following products: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ultra-thin/non-degradable plastic bags; - plastic cotton buds; - daily chemical products with microbeads; - expanded polystyrene (EPS) tableware; - non-degradable plastic straws; - non-degradable plastic tableware; - non-degradable plastic packaging for express delivery service; and - free plastic items in hotels. |
| Macao | Nov 2019 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The “Restrictions on the provision of plastics bags”, a plastic shopping bag (PSB) levy scheme, came into force. MOP \$1 would be charged for each PSB provided during retail acts. • Banned the import and transit of |

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| | Jan 2021 | expanded polystyrene food containers. |
| South Korea | May 2018 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Announced a plan with the following major targets: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> to replace all coloured PET beverage bottles with transparent ones by 2020; to reduce the use of plastic cups and plastic bags by 35% by 2022; to reduce plastic waste generation by 50% ; and to increase the recycling rate of plastics to 70% by 2030. |
| | Jan 2019 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Banned the use of disposable plastic bags in large stores and supermarkets and extended the charging scheme on PSB to bakeries. |
| Japan | May 2019 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adopted the “Resource Circulation Strategy for Plastics” with the following key targets: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> cumulative 25% reduction in single-use plastics by 2030; to apply reusable/recyclable design for all containers and packaging/products by 2025; 60% recycling rate for containers and packaging by 2030; and 100% effective utilisation of used plastics by 2035. |
| | Jul 2020 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Retailers would need to charge at least JP¥1 (~HKD \$0.1) per PSB. |

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| | Oct 2020 | or sale of single-use plastic straws, cotton buds and drink stirrers for businesses in England. |
| | Apr 2021 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To extend the single-use carrier bag charge to all retailers, and to increase the charge from 5 pence to 10 pence in England. |
| Canada | Jun 2017 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enacted regulations to prohibit the manufacture and import (by July 2018), and sale (by July 2019) of toiletries containing plastic microbeads, including non-prescription drugs and natural health products. |
| | Jun 2019 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Announced a plan to ban “harmful” single-use plastics by 2021 the earliest. |
| | Oct 2020 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Announced a plan to achieve zero plastic waste by 2030. A key part of the plan is to ban six harmful single-use plastic items, which include plastic shopping bags, straws, stir sticks, six-pack rings, cutlery, and food service ware made from hard-to-recycle plastics, relevant regulations were planned to be finalised by end of 2021. |
| Western Australia | Jul 2018 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Banned on lightweight plastic bags provided by retailers. |
| | Nov 2020 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Released the “Western Australia’s Plan for Plastics” with both short-term |

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| | | <p>(2020 – 2023) and medium-term (2024 – 2026) actions targeting on phasing out the following plastic products:</p> <p>Short-term actions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- plates;- cutlery;- stirrers;- straws;- thick plastic bags;- polystyrene food containers; and- helium balloon releases <p>Medium-term actions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- barrier/produce bags;- microbeads;- polystyrene packaging;- cotton buds with plastic shafts; and- oxo-degradable plastics |
|--|--|--|

On-going Initiatives on the Management of Single-use Plastics in Hong Kong

2009

- **Plastic Shopping Bag (PSB) Charging Scheme**

The PSB Charging Scheme is the first producer responsibility scheme (PRS) introduced in Hong Kong. First phase of the Charging Scheme was implemented on 7 July 2009, the Charging Scheme has been extended to cover the entire retail sector since 1 April 2015 under which all retail outlets.

2018

- **Stop the sale of plastic bottled water**

The sale of plastic bottled water of 1 litre or less has been progressively ceased since 2018 in automatic vending machines at government premises.

- **Install more water dispensers and water filling stations**

Since 2018, the EPD has been progressively increasing the number of water dispensers in government venues and water filling stations in country parks to inculcate the “bring your own bottle” culture.

- **“Plastic-Free Takeaway, Use Reusable Tableware” campaign**

The Environmental Campaign Committee and the EPD collaborated with the food and beverage industry to jointly hold the campaign in 2018 and 2019 to encourage members of the public to go plastic-and-disposable-free when they order takeaways.

- **“Plastic Free Beach, Tableware First” campaign**

The EPD launched the campaign at various public beaches in the summer of 2018 and 2019 to encourage members of the public and eateries in the vicinity to go plastic-free on beaches by avoiding the use and distribution of disposable plastic tableware.

- **The Green Outreach**

The Green Outreach, a community outreaching team on waste reduction and recycling was set up in phases to bring closer collaboration with different community stakeholders in source separation and clean recycling.

2019

- **Reduce the use of disposable tableware in Government premises**
The government has already ceased the provision of plastic straws and polyfoam food containers in most Government premises and canteens since 2019, while relevant requirement on the avoidance of such disposable tableware would also be imposed when awarding new contracts or renewing existing contracts.

2020

- **Pilot Scheme on Collection and Recycling Services of Plastic Recyclable Materials**
The two-year Pilot Scheme was rolled out in Eastern District, Kwun Tong and Sha Tin progressively in 2020. All types of waste plastic collected from non-commercial and non-industrial sources would be processed into recycled raw materials or products for proper handling.
- **“Plastic-free” School Lunch Pilot Scheme**
The Scheme serves to provide the “Four Treasures” (refrigerators, steam cabinets, dishwashers and disinfection machines) to about 50 schools, with a view to encouraging students to bring their own lunches using reusable food containers.
- **“Reduce and Recycle 2.0” Campaign**
The on-going Campaign encourages the public to “Use Less, Waste Less” and practicing green living, promotes the message “Save More, Recycle More”, and disseminates knowledge and the latest information about waste reduction and recycling.
- **A new brand for the Community Recycling Network**
22 Recycling Stores and over 100 Recycling Spots (mobile collection points with weekly schedule) under a new “6” brand have commenced operation progressively since late 2020, accepting single-use plastics among other relatively low-value recyclables. Together with the 9 existing Recycling Stations (known previously as community green stations), the new community recycling network plays a more proactive role in promoting source separation of waste and clean recycling in the community.

2021

- **PRS on plastic beverage containers public consultation**

The Government will take forward the PRS on plastic beverage containers (PPRS) that requires relevant stakeholders to jointly share their eco-responsibilities. Subject to the views collected in the public consultation and the legislative procedures required for putting forward the final proposal, it is expected that the PPRS may be implemented by 2025 the earliest.

- **Reverse Vending Machine (RVM) Pilot Scheme**

The EPD has rolled out a one-year RVM Pilot Scheme to assess the feasibility and cost-effectiveness of the application of RVMs in local context.

- **Smart Water Dispensers Pilot Scheme**

The Scheme provides about 80 primary and secondary schools with smart water dispensers to encourage students to inculcate a living culture of “bring your own bottle”.

- **Public consultation on regulation of disposable plastic tableware**

The Government plans to consult the trade, the public and other stakeholders on the phased regulation of disposable plastic tableware. Subject to the views received and the ensuing legislative procedures, it is hoped that the first phase of regulation can be implemented in around 2025.

**Action Timetable
of the Council for Sustainable Development’s Public Engagement
on the Management of Single-Use Plastics**

| Time | Actions |
|--------------------------------|---|
| May to August 2021 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appoint Programme Director • Form Strategy Sub-committee and appoint co-opt Members • Prepare for public engagement, including formulation of work plan, preparation of public engagement document and other relevant work • Appoint a service provider to conduct the randomised telephone survey |
| September to November 2021 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carry out various public interaction and publicity activities in the 3-month period • Conduct the randomised telephone survey |
| December 2021 to February 2022 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analyse the views collected and formulate recommendations |
| March 2022 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publish findings and recommendations |