

Racing Against Time and Working in Concert to Fight the Virus

It has been two full years since the establishment of the anti-epidemic steering committee chaired by the Chief Executive in January 2020. Nonetheless, the world is still in the grip of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has brought enormous challenges to the economies, livelihoods, businesses and human behaviours in various places. Entering its third year, the pandemic has not yet ceased. Anti-epidemic efforts have been made even more arduous due to the emergence of the highly transmissible Omicron variant. Hong Kong is not spared, where the first case involving the Omicron variant infection in the community was uncovered on December 30 last year and triggered the fifth wave of the epidemic. The Government has been racing against time and taking swift, precise and resolute actions in accordance with the strategy of “preventing the importation of cases and the spread of the virus in the community” in a bid to suppress the current wave of the epidemic.

Epidemic Development

Since the outbreak of the fifth wave of the epidemic, Hong Kong has recorded more than 1 000 cases tested positive for COVID-19. Of these cases, over 90% are imported cases or epidemiologically linked with imported cases whereas the rest are local cases or epidemiologically linked with local cases; and about 90% of these cases are related to the Omicron variant. This wave of the epidemic originated in the two Omicron infection clusters caused by crew members (i.e. the “Moon Palace” cluster and the “dance” cluster). Fortunately, thanks to the concerted efforts of the Government and the community, these two clusters have been largely brought under control on January 14 and January 22 respectively, with no more confirmed cases thereafter. However, later on, Hong Kong has been faced

with the “Kwai Chung Estate” cluster caused by a person suspected to have been infected with Omicron in a quarantine hotel returning to the community and a “pet shop” cluster arising from imported hamsters suspected of carrying Delta, subjecting the city to huge risks of attack by both the Omicron and Delta variants. The 30 cases or so thereof whose sources are unknown are particularly worrying. If the invisible transmission chains continue to spread, any large-scale community outbreak and exponential increase in confirmed cases will be difficult to be curbed completely.

Multi-pronged Measures

Amid the two-year-long fight against the virus, various departments have been vigilant and have not let down their guard. The Government has been adopting an attitude of racing against the pace of the spread of the Omicron variant, stepping up a series of anti-epidemic measures to prevent the importation of cases and the spread of the virus in the community. These measures have been extended twice in January and will remain in place until mid- to late February. As regards preventing the importation of cases, in view of the severe situations in a number of places, the Government has imposed the place-specific flight suspension mechanism for eight countries (i.e. Australia, Canada, France, India, Pakistan, the Philippines, the United Kingdom and the United States), under which all passenger flights from these places are prohibited from landing in Hong Kong from January 8 to February 18. Prior to the implementation of this stringent measure, we had seen 27 people tested positive upon arrival at the airport, who were required to be transferred to hospital straight off, on a single day. One could imagine that if such a situation had not been strictly curbed, the public hospitals in Hong Kong would have been faced with extreme pressure.

As for preventing the spread of the virus in the community, the Government has tightened social distancing measures to the most stringent level as seen during the third and fourth waves of

the epidemic during the period of January 7 until February 17. Actions include banning evening dine-in services at restaurants, closing premises such as fitness centres, beauty parlours and massage establishments, and sports premises as regulated under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Requirements and Directions) (Business and Premises) Regulation (Cap. 599F), closing government cultural and leisure facilities (such as libraries) and suspending all large-scale events. Furthermore, in view of the confirmed or preliminary positive cases in schools, the Government has successively announced the suspension of face-to-face classes for all primary schools, kindergartens, kindergarten-cum-child care centres and secondary schools until February 21 to protect the health of teachers and students as well as reduce people flow.

To cut the virus transmission chains within the shortest time and curb the spread of the virus in the community, the Government has taken multi-pronged measures to contain the virus in accordance with the principle of “early identification, early isolation and early treatment”. Such measures include –

- (a) Targeted community testing: In order to cut the transmission chains as early as possible and focus efforts on identifying infected people, the Government has systemically applied its testing capacity to areas of high effectiveness. Measures include issuing compulsory testing notices in respect of over 960 residential buildings and other venues; conducting over 60 “restriction-testing declarations” (RTDs); notifying affected citizens through the “LeaveHomeSafe” mobile app to undergo testing in the Community Testing Centres (CTCs); making arrangements for people to undergo testing on a voluntary basis in areas with relatively high transmission risks (such as Tuen Mun, Sham Shui Po, Aberdeen and Tai Wo Hau); and providing testing services to the public through a testing network comprising CTCs set up in all the 18 districts of Hong Kong and as many as 70 mobile specimen collection stations. Since the onset of

the fifth wave of the epidemic, over 2.5 million COVID-19 nucleic acid tests have been taken in total, with the number of tests having reached a daily average of more than 130 000 over the past week. To cope with the demand in future, the Government has requested several testing contractors to further enhance their testing capacity;

- (b) Persistent contact tracing: The Government is committed to implementing two-tier tracing (viz. apart from tracing the close contacts of confirmed cases and promptly putting them under quarantine, the close contacts of close contacts will be traced and required to undergo compulsory testing or compulsory quarantine depending on the risk level). Since December 31 last year, more than 11 300 people have been arranged to be sent to the quarantine centre, and some 7 000 people in Kwai Chung Estate have been put under multiple-day home quarantine. Of the cases epidemiologically linked with imported or local cases, over 60% have been detected at the quarantine centre or in the buildings put under RTDs. It means that when the test result of a case was found to be positive, the patient had already been at the quarantine centre or still in the building being cordoned off, thereby considerably reducing transmission in the community;
- (c) Round-the-clock sewage testing: Since October 2020, the Environmental Protection Department and the Drainage Services Department, in collaboration with the cross-disciplinary team of The University of Hong Kong, have been conducting sewage surveillance to monitor the epidemic situation. They have set up over 100 stationary points (covering a population of some five million people) for sewage surveillance, and in response to the epidemic situation, conducted testing at mobile points so as to collect more sewage samples. As positive test results of the samples collected from a number of buildings in various districts were detected over the past few weeks, the

Government issued compulsory testing notices, distributed COVID-19 rapid test kits, set up mobile testing stations and so on in the places concerned based on infection risk levels. More people were enabled to undergo testing such that asymptomatic patients could be identified as soon as possible;

- (d) Enhancing the enforcement of RTD: In view of the large number of confirmed cases found from widely distributed floors and buildings in Kwai Chung Estate, the Government has implemented one to seven days of RTD operations on the buildings concerned according to their infection risks. At the height of the incident, some 7 000 residents in three buildings were put under home quarantine concurrently and required to undergo testing daily. The Government would like to express its heartfelt gratitude to the residents of Kwai Chung Estate for their understanding, co-operation and support; and
- (e) Regarding the “pet shop” cluster, in addition to the worker confirmed to be infected, a number of the animals and environmental samples collected from dozens of pet shops and warehouses were tested positive. To prevent the virus from spreading further, the Government has taken decisive action to humanely dispatch more than 2 500 animals, including hamsters, with high infection risks. We are grateful to the pet owners for their surrendering over 100 hamsters in total in response to the Government’s appeal and fighting the epidemic together.

Major anti-epidemic measures introduced are set out below in the chronological order –

Date	Measure
December 31, 2021	The Government announced that residence, workplaces and places visited by persons of all cases confirmed/suspected to be carrying the Omicron variant would be included in the compulsory testing notice
January 1, 2022	The Government tightened the quarantine arrangements for locally based air crew, requiring them to stay in designated quarantine hotels (DQHs) until obtaining negative results from the COVID-19 tests taken on the seventh day following their return to Hong Kong, and remain subject to multiple COVID-19 tests regularly during their medical surveillance periods after leaving DQHs
January 2	The Hospital Authority reopened the standby community treatment facility at AsiaWorld-Expo to provide about 500 more beds, including 20 negative pressure cubicles
January 4	The Chief Executive announced the plan to expand the “vaccine bubble” requirement to cover more premises with effect from February 24
January 5	The Chief Executive announced a series of stepped-up anti-epidemic measures to prevent the importation of cases and the spread of the virus in the community. The measures included implementing place-specific flight suspension mechanism (for two weeks with effect from January 8), tightening social distancing measures (for two weeks with effect from January 7) and cancelling all large-scale events

Date	Measure
January 10	Taking into consideration the relatively short incubation period for infection with Omicron, the Government announced the updated quarantine requirements at the quarantine centre for close contacts of local cases, shortening the quarantine period from 21 days to 14 days, followed by seven days of self-monitoring
January 11	The Government announced that all primary schools, kindergartens and kindergarten-cum-child care centres in Hong Kong should suspend face-to-face classes and all on-campus activities until schools' Chinese New Year holidays
January 13	The Government appealed to employers for allowing flexible work arrangements for employees and considering arranging them to work from home where practicable
January 14	The Chief Executive announced extending the anti-epidemic measures under the strategy of "preventing the importation of cases and the spreading of the virus in the community" implemented earlier for two weeks and cancelling major events during Lunar New Year and Lunar New Year fairs
January 20	The Government announced that all secondary schools should suspend face-to-face classes and all on-campus activities on or before January 24 until schools' Chinese New Year holidays
January 24	The Civil Service Bureau requested bureaux and departments to implement special work arrangements starting from January 25 having regard to their operational needs with basic

Date	Measure
	public services generally maintained and anti-epidemic work unaffected; such arrangements may include allowing some of their staff to take turns to work from home as far as possible
January 27	The Chief Executive announced that the anti-epidemic measures under the strategy of “preventing the importation of cases and the spreading of the virus in the community” implemented earlier would be further extended for two weeks until mid- to late February; that all kindergartens, primary schools, secondary schools, etc. in Hong Kong should further suspend face-to-face classes and all on-campus activities until February 21; that starting from February 5, the compulsory quarantine period for vaccinated Hong Kong residents arriving in Hong Kong from overseas will be shortened from 21 days to 14 days in DQHs, followed by seven days of self-monitoring

Anti-epidemic Fund

In line with the “prompt” and “targeted” approach adopted to combat this wave of the epidemic, the Government has rolled out the fifth round of the Anti-epidemic Fund (AEF) worth \$3.57 billion just a week after announcing the tightening of social distancing measures. This round aims to provide subsidies to not just the premises and individuals directly affected by the latest round of the tightening of social distancing measures (especially those commercial premises requested to close and catering premises with their evening dine-in service banned), but also the trades “frozen” for a long time due to the lack of people flow between Hong Kong and other places. As at January 27, most of the relief measures have been open to applications, some of

which have already been approved with subsidies disbursed. In the light of the extension of the tightened social distancing measures for two weeks after the Lunar New Year, I announced on January 27 our plan to roll out another round of AEF. Details will be released once proposals are formulated to seek the approval of the Legislative Council for funding injection.

“Vaccine Pass”

Vaccination is highly effective in preventing severe cases or deaths from COVID-19, and we are in a race against time in combating the highly transmissible mutant variants. The Government has been strongly appealing to the public for getting vaccinated in order to protect the community at large by increasing the vaccination rate in Hong Kong. The Government is also committed to providing a variety of vaccination channels to enable the public to receive vaccination conveniently. As at January 28, the rate of those who have received the first dose of vaccine was 79.1%, while the population who have received the third dose of vaccine has gradually increased to over 910 000. Currently, some 500 000 elderly people aged 70 or above still have yet received their first dose of vaccine. If they unfortunately contract the virus, the chances that they become severely ill or even die are many times higher than for those vaccinated. The Government has announced measures to encourage the elderly to receive vaccination. As for children, the Government has further extended the age eligibility of vaccination to cover those aged five to 11. Parents/guardians can make reservations for children to receive vaccination at designated locations. The Government also plans to arrange transport services between schools and vaccination centres and provide outreach vaccination service at schools.

In order to curb the epidemic, resume people’s normal life and create favourable conditions for the resumption of quarantine-free travel with the Mainland, it is imperative to implement the arrangement of the “vaccine pass” to strengthen

the anti-epidemic barrier. The Government plans to expand the “vaccine pass” arrangement on February 24 to cover more premises that members of the public frequently visit. Details of the arrangement will be announced later.

Fight the Virus together

The co-operation and support of members of the public and various sectors, the dedication of healthcare workers, as well as the concerted efforts made by Government bureaux and departments, have all been key to Hong Kong’s success in fighting the epidemic over the past two years. Although the Lunar New Year is around the corner, I appeal to members of the public and relevant premises to strictly adhere to the various social distancing measures. Members of the public should also reduce outside activities and avoid gatherings. People with suspected infection risks should undergo testing, while those yet to receive vaccination or eligible to receive the third, booster dose should get vaccinated as soon as possible. I believe that, with our joint efforts in the current race against time, Hong Kong will be able to soon overcome the fifth wave of the epidemic.

I wish all Hong Kong citizens a healthy and auspicious Year of the Tiger.

Mrs Carrie Lam
Chief Executive
Hong Kong Special Administrative Region
28 January 2022