

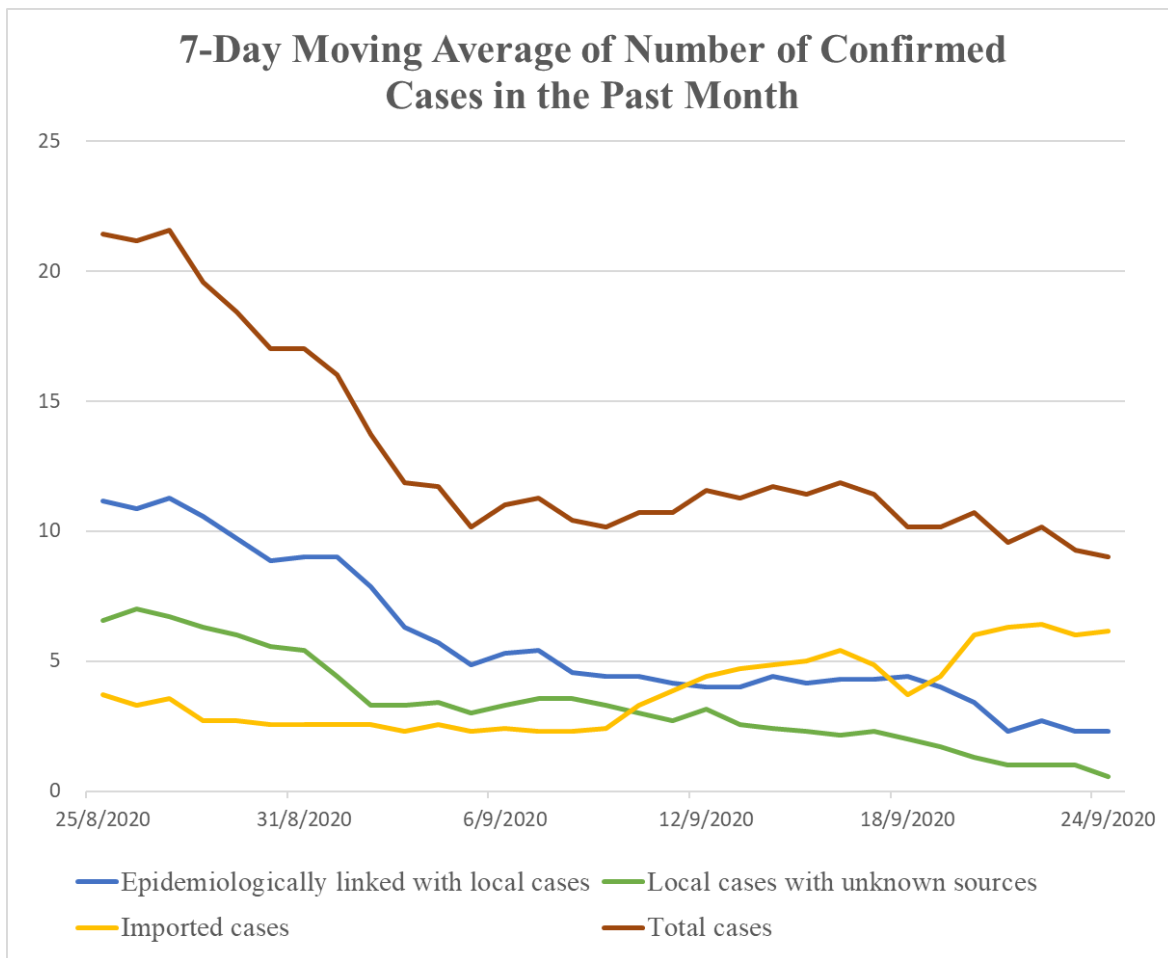
## **Fighting the Virus for Eight Months**

### **No Room for Complacency**

After a hard-fought battle of more than two months, Hong Kong has basically contained the third wave of the COVID-19 epidemic which started in early July. Yet, some sporadic cases with unknown sources of infection show that there is still a risk of virus transmission within the community. We should not drop our guard but remain vigilant to curb the spread of the disease. While the epidemic situation is expected to remain stable for some time, it is generally predicted that another wave of infections this winter is highly likely. The Government is grasping this window of stability to relax social distancing measures in phases to allow the gradual resumption of economic activities and people's normal lives to relieve the burden of enterprises and "anti-epidemic fatigue" among the public. At the same time, we are comprehensively reviewing all prevention and control measures to enhance our anti-epidemic capability on various fronts and make adequate preparations to cope with the epidemic in the future.

#### How the epidemic has developed

The epidemic has continued to subside over the past month. The current daily number of newly confirmed cases remains at single or low double digits and most of them being imported cases. The number of local cases with unknown sources of infection has significantly decreased, reflecting lower transmission risks in the community.



The number of COVID-19 deaths exceeded 100 earlier this month. This is deeply saddening and we extend our heartfelt condolences to the bereaved families. Globally, the death rate of elderly patients is much higher than that of young patients. The median age of the death cases in Hong Kong is 82. To protect the lives of the elderly, the Food and Health Bureau, the Labour and Welfare Bureau, the Department of Health (DH) and the Hospital Authority (HA) will jointly step up support for elderly homes.

### Anti-epidemic efforts

One key initiative to fight the virus in the past month was the Universal Community Testing Programme (UCTP) conducted between September 1 and September 14. With the support of the Central Government, the UCTP provided free virus tests for all

members of the public on a voluntary basis. The aim was to get a better understanding of the overall infection situation in the community, and identify asymptomatic patients to cut transmission chains in the community. The UCTP was of a massive scale and the preparation time was extremely short, making it an unprecedented endeavour of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government. We are thankful that the Programme was successful with over 1.78 million participants. We would like to thank every person who took the test, the staff members of the testing centres and laboratories, the logistics and security personnel, as well as fellow Government colleagues who helped with the co-ordination work and provided support. The success of the Programme also owes much to the support of the Central Government, the assistance from the relevant ministries as well as the selfless dedication of some 600 members of the Mainland nucleic acid test support team, who came from Guangdong, Fujian and Guangxi. In addition to achieving the above objectives, the Programme has improved the public's understanding of virus testing procedures and enhanced awareness about disease prevention. It also helped establish, in a short period, a network of a few thousand trained personnel who acquired actual experience in taking specimen for COVID-19 test. This will be a valuable resource for us to mobilise in the future.

As mentioned on previous occasions, the UCTP is only part of the virus testing work in our anti-epidemic efforts. The DH and HA have been constantly carrying out epidemiological surveillance and investigation and will strive for further enhancements. The current virus testing capacity of the DH and HA is over 7 000 tests a day, which can be further enhanced by procuring services from private laboratories when necessary. The HA will increase the number of general out-patient clinics distributing specimen collection packs from 22 in the past to 46 next week, including clinics on outlying islands, to make it easier for people to obtain free testing services when needed. Another aspect of our virus testing work is for relevant government departments to arrange testing for certain high-risk and high-exposure service provider groups at regular or irregular intervals, including staff of residential care homes for the elderly, residential care homes for persons with disabilities and nursing

homes, public transport drivers, designated frontline staff of container terminals, frontline staff of catering businesses, staff of market stalls, and staff of critical services (such as slaughterhouse workers). Repeated testing on a regular basis or random testing will be arranged for such groups depending on anti-epidemic needs. Since mid-July until now, over 500 000 tests have been conducted for the targeted groups and for frontline staff of various government departments. We are fully prepared for, and will be able to provide virus testing for various districts or individual groups more swiftly, when there is a community outbreak in future. Thanks to the efforts of the industry and with the encouragement and assistance of the Government, the overall testing capacity of accredited private laboratories in Hong Kong has increased significantly. Tens of thousands of tests can be conducted daily to meet regular and unexpected needs.

Apart from carrying out various testing programmes, we have also commenced construction of a temporary hospital and community treatment facility, with the support of the Central Government, to enhance the HA's capability to provide isolation facilities and treatment for patients. The construction team engaged by the Mainland has already started work recently. The additional community treatment facility to be set up at AsiaWorld-Expo (AWE) is expected to be completed within several weeks while the new temporary hospital to be built on a piece of land near AWE is targeted for completion in about four months. Regarding quarantine facilities, it is expected that over 4 100 quarantine units will be available following the completion of the last phase of the purpose-built quarantine facilities at Penny's Bay, which should meet our needs. Among the four "must-haves" suggested by experts for our anti-epidemic measures (i.e. testing, tracing, quarantine and isolation or "TTQI"), we need to enhance our contact tracing capability so the Centre for Health Protection can identify the close contacts of confirmed patients within the shortest possible time. For this, the Innovation and Technology Bureau is developing an Exposure Notification System which will help residents record the places they have visited and notify them of confirmed cases found there so they can assess the infection risk. System development work is almost complete. We will discuss implementation details with relevant

sectors such as the taxi industry and restaurants. People will be free to decide whether to use it or not.

The anti-epidemic measures adopted are set out below chronologically:

<b>Date</b>	<b>Event</b>
August 28	The <u>first phase</u> of relaxation of social distancing measures was implemented, including extending the hours of dine-in services at catering premises to 9pm, maintaining the requirement that no more than two persons may be seated together at one table, and re-opening cinemas, beauty parlours and some outdoor sports premises.
September 1	The UCTP was launched with 141 community testing centres to collect specimens from the public.
September 4	The <u>second phase</u> of relaxation of social distancing measures was implemented, including extending the hours of dine-in services at catering premises to 10pm and re-opening fitness centres, places of amusement (except ice skating rinks), cinemas, beauty parlours and massage establishments, club-houses, as well as some indoor and outdoor sports premises.
September 11	The <u>third phase</u> of relaxation of social distancing measures was implemented, including relaxing the number of persons allowed in group gatherings in public places as well as the number of persons allowed to be seated together at one table in catering premises from two to four, and re-opening amusement game centres, all places of amusement, places of public entertainment, mahjong-tin kau premises and sports premises.

September 15	Government departments fully resumed normal public services subject to targeted measures to reduce social contact and the application of infection control measures.
September 15	The Government announced the introduction of the third round of measures under the Anti-epidemic Fund with a total financial implication of \$24 billion to support businesses and individuals hard-hit by the epidemic, to provide additional funding for enhancing anti-epidemic capability (including procuring vaccines) and to provide concessions or waivers of government rentals and fees. The Government announced that the quarantine centre at Blocks 1 to 3 of Chun Yeung Estate would be closed by end-September to allow prospective tenants to move in by end-January 2021 (i.e. more than two months earlier), and the University of Hong Kong-Shenzhen Hospital would be appointed to take up follow-up consultation for the HA's patients living in Guangdong.
September 18	The <u>fourth phase</u> of relaxation of social distancing measures was implemented, including extending the hours of dine-in services at catering premises to midnight, re-opening bars/pubs, bathhouses, all places of public entertainment, party rooms, clubs/nightclubs, karaoke establishments and swimming pools, and relaxing the restrictions concerning the wearing of masks and the arrangement of groups in fitness centres and sports premises.
September 23	All schools in Hong Kong started to resume face-to-face classes by phases.

## Resuming cross-boundary travel

Apart from being an international city, Hong Kong is also an externally oriented economy. To revive our economy, we must resume the flow of people between Hong Kong and other places. Besides, many Hong Kong people, due to family, work, study or other personal reasons, have a genuine need to travel, especially to and from the Mainland. The HKSAR Government had made preparations by early July before the emergence of the new wave of the epidemic, and was discussing with the governments of the Guangdong Province and the Macao Special Administrative Region mutual recognition of nucleic acid test results to exempt cross-boundary travellers from compulsory quarantine. We had also basically completed the technical development of the “Hong Kong Health Code”. However, due to the rebound in the local epidemic situation, the relevant arrangements could not be implemented. With the epidemic situation stabilising gradually in Hong Kong, we will strive to restart discussions with relevant authorities to enable members of the public to resume travel as soon as possible. As for the setting up of “travel bubbles” with other places, we have established an inter-departmental task force under the leadership of the Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development which is actively exploring the subject with countries that have a relatively stable epidemic situation and close economic and trade relations with Hong Kong. It seems that providing proof of a negative nucleic acid test result, whether in paper or electronic form, will be a necessary requirement for cross-boundary travel in the near future.

## Fighting the epidemic while celebrating National Day and the Mid-Autumn Festival

With the relaxation of social distancing measures, the re-opening of premises, and phased resumption of school classes, there are obviously more people on the street. To curb virus transmission in the community and to avoid the need to tighten the measures again due to another rebound, I sincerely urge members of the public and operators of business premises to, for themselves and others, strictly observe infection prevention and control measures, including the

requirements on mask wearing as well as the maximum number of persons allowed in particular premises. Relevant departments will also step up law enforcement actions. With concerted efforts and ongoing self-discipline, I am confident that we can gradually resume normal life while keeping risks in check.

The National Day and the Mid-Autumn Festival fall on the same day this year and will be celebrated soon. May I wish you and your family a joyous celebration while continuing to stay vigilant against the virus.

Mrs Carrie Lam  
Chief Executive  
Hong Kong Special Administrative Region  
25 September 2020