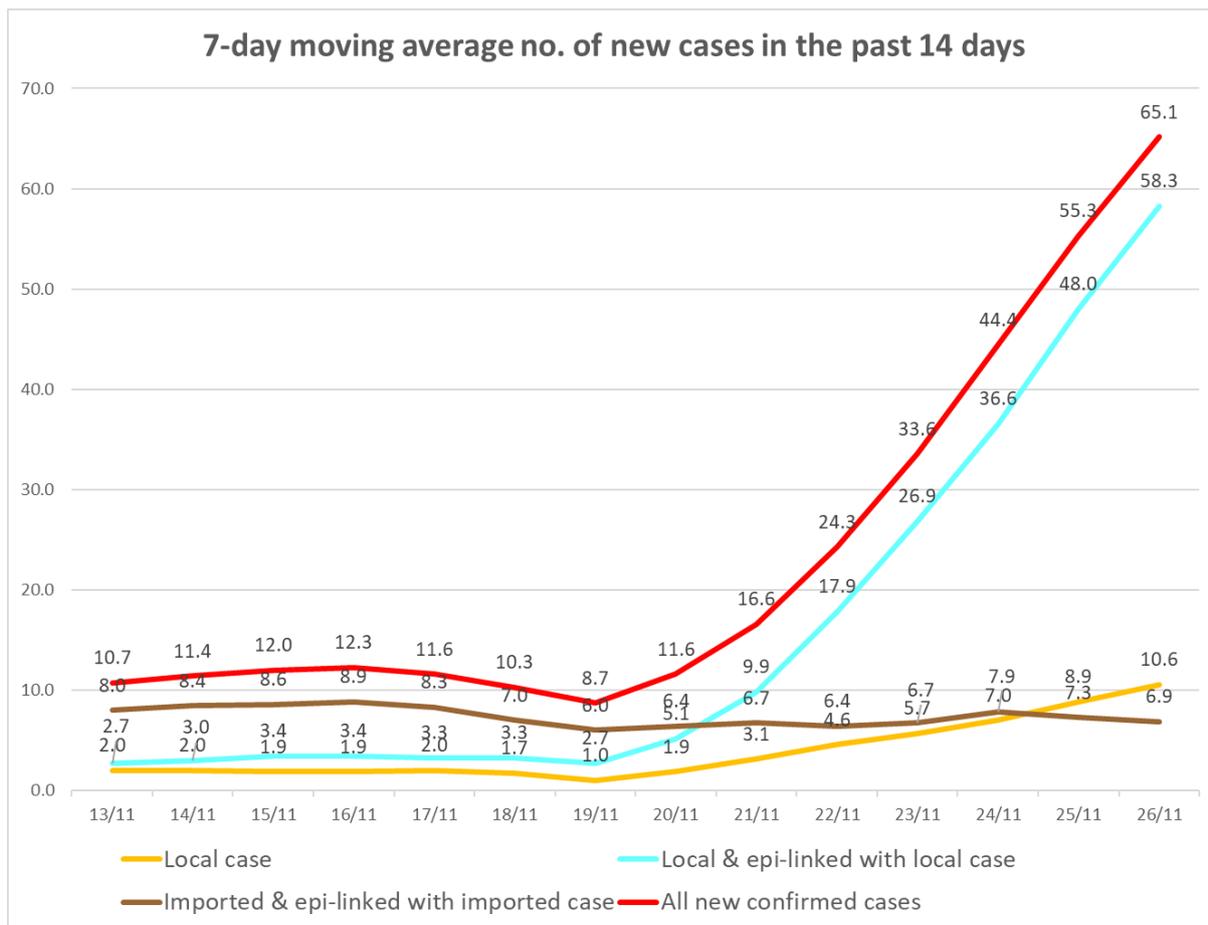


Fighting the Virus For Ten Months Sparing No Effort in Combating a Rebound and Achieving “Zero Infection”

After a stable epidemic situation of more than two months and with business activities resuming gradually, a large “dancing cluster” has sparked a new wave of infections in Hong Kong. While the exact source of the infection cluster has yet to be ascertained, the number of related confirmed cases has already reached 309. With possibly two or even more generations of transmission, the confirmed cases have come from various districts and sectors, making it very difficult to contain the spread of the virus. The anti-epidemic team of the Government, including the Department of Health, the Hospital Authority (HA) and the relevant departments, is sparing no effort to combat the virus again. As always, we are determined to win the fight to ensure that our hospital system will not collapse under the strain and, more importantly, to keep our people safe.

How the epidemic has developed

Before mid-November, the daily number of confirmed cases hovered between single and low double digits, with the majority being imported cases. Yet, sporadic local cases with unknown sources of infections still emerged from time to time, indicating that there were still silent transmissions in the community. Over the past week, the epidemic situation has worsened rapidly. A total of 456 cases were reported in the past seven days (from November 20 to 26), with 408 of them being local cases. The situation is worrying.



Of these 408 local cases, there is a large “dancing cluster” involving 28 premises and 309 cases. Since some of the dance teachers and dancers have been to more than one venue and did not put on a mask while dancing or even having parties in a crowded place, the infection situation has gone out of control. Moreover, in the past seven days, there were 74 local cases with unknown sources of infection, indicating that more cases have already entered the community and an even larger community outbreak could be triggered at any time.

Anti-epidemic efforts

Having regard to the anti-epidemic experience gained and the rebound of the epidemic in Europe and the United States, even when the previous wave of infections has subsided, we have continued to adopt a very prudent approach in adjusting social distancing measures with a view to allowing businesses and individuals to resume some of

their normal activities while keeping the epidemic in check. In light of the severe epidemic situation overseas, we have further tightened the quarantine and testing arrangements for inbound travellers, including requiring persons arriving from places outside China to undergo compulsory quarantine at hotels for 14 days and requiring those coming from high-risk places to present proof of a negative virus test result before boarding planes, so as to reduce the risk of importation of cases. On preventing a resurgence of local infections, the Government will continue to arrange virus testing for targeted groups. For example, the Social Welfare Department has already arranged five rounds of voluntary testing for staff of residential care homes for the elderly. In addition, in a bid to make available testing to residents on a voluntary basis, the HA has expanded its specimen bottle distribution service, including distributing specimen bottles at more clinics and vending machines, as well as extending distribution hours. To deal with a more severe situation, the Executive Council made the Prevention and Control of Disease (Compulsory Testing for Certain Persons) Regulation on November 13, empowering the Secretary for Food and Health to publish a compulsory testing notice to mandate certain categories of persons to undergo virus testing.

In response to the dance cluster outbreak, the Government has invoked the new Regulation for the first time to require persons who have been to the 28 premises to undergo compulsory testing. As at November 26, more than 1 700 persons had taken a test and notified the Government of the test results according to the requirement. We will also extend the compulsory testing requirement to symptomatic persons, staff of residential care homes for the elderly and the disabled, as well as taxi drivers shortly. Enforcement actions will be taken against those who do not comply with the requirement, including imposing a fixed penalty of \$2,000 and issuing a compulsory testing order. Those who fail to comply with the compulsory testing order commit an offence and are liable to a fine at level 4 (\$25,000) and imprisonment for 6 months.

The major measures introduced are set out below chronologically:

Date	Event
October 30	Relaxing social distancing measures for restaurants and bars to a limited extent.
November 5 to November 10	Arranging mobile vans, providing more locations and extending the operating hours for the distribution and collection of specimen bottles as well as commissioning testing contractors to provide free testing services for targeted groups and members of the public.
November 13	To strengthen the control measures targeted at inbound travellers, it is stipulated that any persons who has stayed in any foreign country within 14 days before arrival to Hong Kong must show confirmation of room reservation in a hotel in Hong Kong for the 14-day quarantine before boarding an aircraft to Hong Kong. Upon arrival in Hong Kong, they must wait at a designated location until a negative test result is available under the “test and hold” arrangement before they can go to the hotel for quarantine. The Department of Health subsequently tightened the requirement to disallow visitors for any person under compulsory quarantine in hotels.
November 15	Four community testing centres in Eastern District, Yau Ma Tai, Sha Tin and Yuen Long commenced service. The centres provide testing service for members of the public at \$240 and for targeted groups as commissioned by the Government when there is a higher risk of community infection.
November 16	A host of social distancing measures were tightened in view of the epidemic situation. They include shortening the business hours of restaurants, bars and clubs; reducing the number of persons allowed to be seated together at one table; requiring that a person must not consume food or drink and must wear a mask when away from the table; tightening the number of people allowed in scheduled premises; and making people wear masks when doing exercise in indoor sports premises and public skating rinks.

November 16	The Government launched the “LeaveHomeSafe” COVID-19 exposure notification mobile app to encourage the public to keep a record of their whereabouts.
November 20	Government departments would take flexible measures to reduce the number of staff members present at the office at any time, on the premise that the provision of public services would be maintained.
November 21	The Hong Kong-Singapore Air Travel Bubble originally to be launched on November 22 was deferred for two weeks due to the epidemic situation.
November 22	The Government exercised, for the very first time, the statutory power to require any person who had been present at 14 specified dance premises to undergo compulsory testing and would require other symptomatic persons, staff of residential care homes for the elderly and taxi drivers to undergo compulsory testing shortly.
November 23	Face-to-face classes of Primary One to Primary Three in all primary schools, and primary sections of special schools would be suspended for 14 days to December 6. All kindergartens and kindergarten-cum-child care centres would continue to suspend face-to-face classes or services until December 6.
November 23	The “Return2hk Scheme” started to be implemented. The Scheme allows Hong Kong residents currently in Guangdong Province or Macao to be exempted from the 14-day compulsory quarantine requirement when they return to Hong Kong upon fulfilment of the specified conditions. Around 5 000 Hong Kong residents returned to Hong Kong through this channel in the first four days after the introduction of the Scheme.
November 24	The Government gazetted another compulsory testing notice that required all persons who had been to another 7 specified premises to undergo testing (7 more premises were included subsequently, bringing the total number to 28 as at November 27). Announcement was also made to further tighten social distancing measures, namely all bars or pubs,

	bath-houses, clubs or nightclubs must be closed; the number of people participating in any one banquet in catering premises would be limited to 40; restrictions would be imposed on gathering activities for hotels and guesthouses. These measures came into effect on November 26. Furthermore, catering businesses and scheduled premises open for business are requested to apply for a “LeaveHomeSafe” venue QR code from the Government on or before December 2, and display the QR code at a conspicuous position at the entrance of the premises.
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Making all-out efforts and doing our best

Our anti-epidemic work has lasted for almost one year. During this time, the Government has been consolidating its experience and making reference to the effective measures taken in the Mainland and overseas with a view to enhancing our anti-epidemic measures to guard against the importation of cases and the resurgence of local infections. Whenever there is a rebound of the epidemic, there will inevitably be criticisms, complaining that the Government’s epidemic control measures have failed. With cross-border travel suspended for a long time and an adverse impact of social distancing measures on the businesses of some service sectors, it is understandable that some people may feel anxious and discontented. However, when we look at the situation around the world, Hong Kong has done quite well in containing the virus: the total number of confirmed cases in Hong Kong is 5 948, ranking behind more than 130 countries or regions; the number of confirmed cases per million people is 793, an extremely low level. One of the reasons why Hong Kong people feel upset is the great success of our neighbouring Mainland and Macao in strictly controlling the epidemic.

Recently, there have been demands in society for the Government to implement compulsory universal testing so we can come out of the epidemic as soon as possible. As pointed out by the World Health Organization, testing is the key to controlling the epidemic at the moment. The number of tests conducted in Hong

Kong actually ranks among the top in the world (a total of more than four million tests, or more than 530 000 tests per million people, have been conducted). However, carrying out compulsory testing for seven million people within a short period of time involves issues like scientific basis, cost-effectiveness and practicability. The approach that the Government is adopting now is to require infection clusters or high-risk persons to undergo compulsory virus tests, arrange testing for target groups as far as possible, and provide voluntary virus testing service for the general public to relieve their worries. These free virus testing services are provided by the HA, Public Health Laboratory Centre and various testing institutions commissioned through tender. The number of tests conducted currently is now still within the capacity of 100 000 single-tube tests per day. As mentioned in The Chief Executive's 2020 Policy Address delivered on November 25, the Government will not rule out the possibility of implementing large-scale universal community testing again. However, to effectively contain the epidemic or even achieve the target of "zero infection", we need the support and co-operation of the public. For example, people should avoid crowded and unnecessary gatherings, reduce social contacts, wear masks and wash hands frequently, etc.

Fighting the virus together and staying vigilant

Although the rebound of the epidemic is worrying, members of the public should not lose confidence. As long as the whole community work together, Hong Kong is surely capable of suppressing the new wave of the epidemic once again. However, as repeatedly pointed out by experts, it is difficult to completely eliminate the risk of virus transmission before the advent and widespread application of effective vaccines. The public should remain vigilant at all times and not let their guard down by strictly following the anti-epidemic rules. Apart from this, the Government has launched the "LeaveHomeSafe" COVID-19 exposure notification mobile app to facilitate members of the public to keep a record of their whereabouts so as to enhance the efficiency in contact tracing. I urge members of the public to download and use the app and contribute a part to the fight against the epidemic.

Conclusion

In recent months, various pharmaceutical companies have announced breakthroughs in vaccine development. Every country and region has been encouraged by the progress, but it is believed there is still a long way to go before vaccines are widely applied. Therefore, in the meantime, let us stay positive and optimistic, and continue to work together to fight the virus. I hope that the epidemic situation will be brought under control as soon as possible so that we can enjoy a safe and joyful Christmas here in Hong Kong.

Mrs Carrie Lam
Chief Executive
Hong Kong Special Administrative Region
27 November 2020