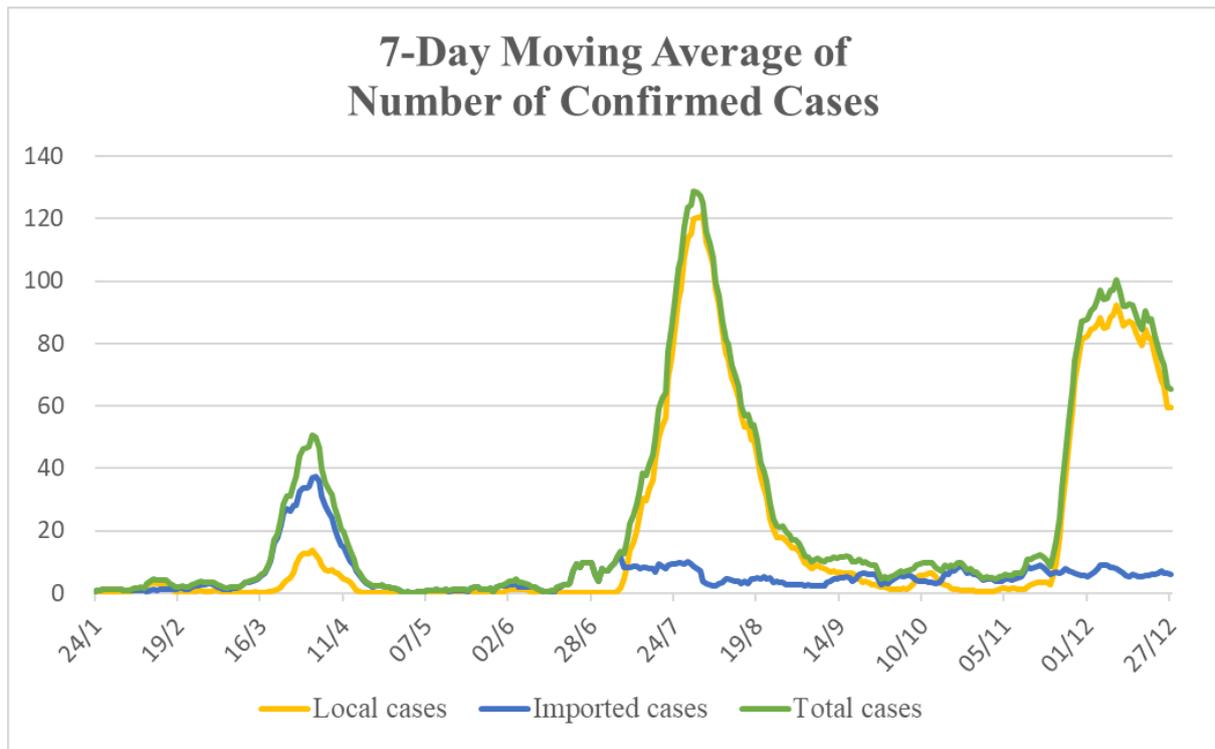


## **Fighting the Virus for Eleven Months Determined to Win the Hard-Fought Battle**

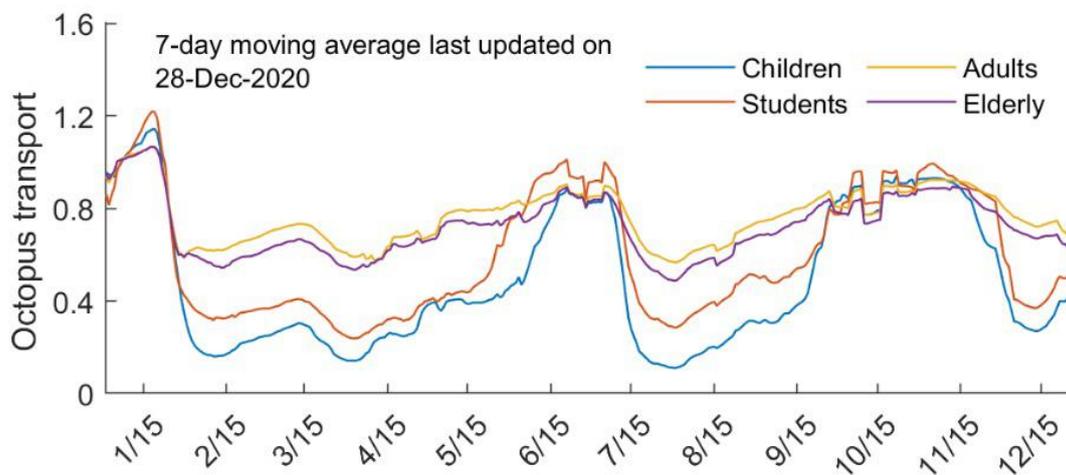
The new wave of epidemic that began in late November appears to have reached its peak in mid-December. The measures strictly implemented by the Government to prevent the importation of cases and the spread of the virus in the community have gradually yielded results. Despite fluctuations, the number of daily confirmed cases has already shown a downward trend. That said, compared with the previous wave, the current wave of epidemic is subsiding at a notably slower rate. Whether there is an epidemiological reason for this remains to be determined by experts, but according to our observations, public awareness in complying with social distancing measures is obviously lower than before. “Anti-epidemic fatigue” is probably one of the reasons why the virus remains with us. I strongly urge citizens to stay at home to fight the epidemic, which in itself is an act to support the frontline anti-epidemic personnel.

### How the epidemic has developed

The new wave of epidemic that began in late November worsened at the end of November and in early December, during which the number of confirmed cases hovered at a high level with more than 600 confirmed cases reported every week and over 100 daily confirmed cases reported on eight occasions. The majority of these cases were local cases. Quite a number of them were of unknown sources, accounting for more than 40 per cent of the local cases on some days. With the Government’s tightening of social distancing measures to the most stringent level adopted during the previous wave (i.e. in July and August) since December 10, the number of cases has recently started to drop slowly. We hope that this trend will continue. From the chart below, we can see that in terms of the average number of cases, the peak of the new wave of epidemic is lower than that of the previous wave, but the wave has lingered for a longer time and been declining at a slower rate:



It seems there are multiple reasons why this wave of epidemic is more difficult to contain. One of them is frequent social contacts. This has led to a singing and dancing cluster involving more than 730 confirmed cases, causing outbreaks in multiple places within a short period of time with cases penetrating deep into various communities. Infection clusters appear in more than 20 residential buildings and housing estates, with possible environmental transmission in some cases, making the prevention and control of the epidemic even more challenging. Moreover, after fighting the epidemic for months, public awareness in complying with social distancing measures has obviously declined. Despite the severe epidemic situation, there is still a large number of people on the streets. The chart below illustrates the situation of citizens using Octopus cards to travel. It shows that during the new wave of epidemic, perhaps due to Winter Solstice and Christmas holidays, the reduction in journeys made is significantly less than that during the previous wave. At the same time, we have seen a confirmed patient leaving the hospital without authorisation, upstairs bars operating illegally, and citizens ignoring the restrictions on group gatherings. Such irresponsible behaviour has added to the burden of our anti-epidemic work.



### Anti-epidemic work

The new wave of epidemic has affected various sectors in Hong Kong again and disrupted plans by members of the public to go out or gather with their families and friends during the holidays. I can fully understand the public discontent with the Government’s anti-epidemic work and we will continue to consolidate our experience with a view to suppressing the epidemic as soon as possible. I have also pledged in my 2020 Policy Address on November 25 to achieve the target of “zero infection”, should we have the support and co-operation of the general public.

On prevention of imported cases, we have had a comprehensive review on the arrangement for inbound travellers returning to Hong Kong via Hong Kong International Airport and have introduced various enhanced measures, including arranging dedicated staff to collect samples from travellers through combined nasal and throat swabs; carrying out rapid tests for travellers to shorten their waiting time for test results and reduce the risk of infection during the waiting period; arranging designated transportation to take travellers to designated hotels for quarantine; restricting persons who have stayed in the United Kingdom or South Africa from boarding flights to Hong Kong in view of the emergence of a new virus variant with stronger transmission capability in the two places; extending the compulsory quarantine

period and increasing tests required for travellers during the quarantine period to prevent any case from slipping through the net, achieving “closed-loop management” and erring on the side of caution. I personally visited the airport on December 26 to review every aspect of the process to ensure that all the loopholes are plugged.

To prevent the spread of the virus in the community, in addition to tightening social distancing measures, we have also amended the legislation to empower the Secretary for Food and Health to restrict movement of persons subject to compulsory testing until all persons on the premises have undergone testing; made full use of the testing capacity of private laboratories to extend the scale and scope of virus tests for specified persons who will be compulsorily tested, target groups which should be tested and people who would like to be tested; and enhanced law enforcement actions, including taking the first enforcement action on compulsory testing notice and initiating prosecution by the Home Affairs Department, the licensing body for clubs, against a premises in relation to the singing and dancing cluster.

The major measures introduced are set out below chronologically:

<b>Date</b>	<b>Event</b>
November 29	Face-to-face classes and school activities of all kindergartens, primary and secondary schools would be suspended until the start of the school Christmas holidays. The suspension is later extended to January 10 next year.
November 30	The Government announced that save for those involved in the provision of emergency services and essential public services, all other government employees would work from home starting on December 2.

December 2	The Government announced that the social distancing measures would be further tightened. These include the cessation of dine-in services from 10pm to 5am of the next day and no more than two persons may be seated together at one table for catering premises; closure of karaoke establishments, etc.; limiting the number of persons allowed in group gatherings to two with the exemption on religious activities and local tours removed; requiring catering premises and scheduled premises to display the “LeaveHomeSafe” venue QR code, etc.
December 8	The Government amended the relevant legislation to empower the Secretary for Food and Health to restrict movement of persons subject to compulsory testing, or seal off premises with epidemic outbreaks until all persons on the premises have undergone testing and the test results have been ascertained.
December 10	The Government further tightened the social distancing measures. These include the cessation of dine-in services at restaurants from 6pm to 5am of the next day; limiting the number of people participating in a banquet to 20; closing all scheduled premises, etc.
December 11	For any person who participates in a prohibited group gathering, fails to wear a mask in public places, or fails to comply with a requirement of a compulsory testing direction/notice, the fixed penalty was be raised from \$2,000 to \$5,000. The maximum penalty for the latter two offences was also raised to a \$10,000 fine.
December 11	The Government announced that it has reached advance purchase agreements with two vaccine developers to provide 15 million doses of vaccine to Hong Kong. The first batch of one million doses would be delivered to Hong Kong in January next year the earliest.

December 18	Persons who arrive at Hong Kong from places outside China on or after December 2 would be required to undergo a COVID-19 test on the 19th or 20th day following their arrival at Hong Kong after completing the 14-day quarantine. These persons are later further required to stay at their place of residence or the specified place of quarantine until the test result is available.
December 22	The Designated Quarantine Hotel Scheme was fully implemented. A total of 36 hotels are participating in the scheme.
December 23	The Government made a regulation to provide the legal framework for bringing in COVID-19 vaccines which satisfy the criteria of safety, efficacy and quality for emergency use and announced that it has reached agreement with the third vaccine developer to provide 7.5 million vaccine doses to Hong Kong. The Government also started preparations for a large-scale vaccination programme and proposed that an indemnity fund should be set up to provide support for members of the public who encounter a severe adverse event associated with the administering of the vaccine.
December 24	Taking into account the new virus variant with higher transmissibility found in the United Kingdom (UK) and some European countries, all persons who have stayed in the UK for more than two hours on the day of boarding or during the 21 days before that day would not be allowed to board their flight to Hong Kong.
December 24	The law enforcement departments conducted the first enforcement action on a compulsory testing notice in Ming Yan House, Jat Min Chuen, Sha Tin.

December 25	The Government further tightened the quarantine arrangements. All persons who have stayed in places outside China on the day of arrival at Hong Kong or during the 21 days before that day are required to undergo compulsory quarantine for 21 days in designated quarantine hotels. All persons who have stayed in South Africa for more than two hours would not be allowed to board a flight to Hong Kong.
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### Preparation for vaccination at full steam

Despite the severe epidemic, there was still encouraging news in the past month – several vaccines which had entered phase 3 clinical trial have been approved for emergency use and after months of efforts, we have concluded advance purchase agreements with three vaccine developers to provide Hong Kong with 22.5 million doses of vaccines of different technology platforms. The first batch of vaccines is expected to arrive in Hong Kong as soon as January next year. Although we still need to review the clinical research data of the vaccines to authorise their emergency use in Hong Kong under the new regulation, we are confident that the purchased vaccines are safe and effective, having regard to the experience in other countries and the views of experts. We appeal to members of the public to get vaccinated to protect themselves and help Hong Kong get through the epidemic, allowing members of the public to get back to life as normal again.

In view of the importance of vaccination in the fight against the epidemic, the Government cannot afford to lag behind. Although the vaccines have not been delivered to Hong Kong yet, we have already started preparatory work, including introducing a legal framework for the emergency use of vaccines in Hong Kong; appointing members to a statutory expert advisory panel to advise the Government on specific vaccines; and setting up a dedicated task force to be led by the Secretary for Food and Health and the Secretary for the Civil Service and joined by two former heads of the Centre for Health Protection as well as the Chairman of the Elderly Commission as expert members, to jointly

prepare for the large-scale Government vaccination programme. I thank the experts in the two groups for stepping forward in this critical moment to give their advice on such a significant anti-epidemic tool.

Indeed, the research and development of COVID-19 vaccines lasted only a few months. It is understandable that members of the public may have doubts about the safety of the vaccines and we absolutely respect the choice of people on whether and when to receive the vaccination. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasise that any vaccine, regardless of its origin or developer, has gone through large-scale clinical trials and relevant data has been scrutinised by independent experts before it can be administered in Hong Kong. We will also set up a mechanism to monitor continuously if there are any side effects after vaccination. As pointed out by experts, data revealed that side effects of the vaccines are very rare, and compared with the severe consequences that may be brought about by COVID-19 infection, the advantages of vaccination far outweigh the risks. I appeal to members of the public to look at vaccines from a scientific perspective and consider getting vaccinated in accordance with the priority for different groups to be set by the Government.

### Keep fighting the epidemic and determined to win

Globally, the epidemic development is still extremely severe. According to the statistics of the World Health Organization, the number of confirmed cases is close to 80 million globally while the death toll has exceeded 1.7 million and the numbers are increasing rapidly. Many countries, including those in Europe and America, are facing the most severe situations since the outbreak of the epidemic, necessitating the implementation of such extreme measures as city lockdown, stay-at-home order and closing all borders. Having regard to the social regime and the environment of Hong Kong, we can control the epidemic effectively only if members of the public stay vigilant and strictly comply with the anti-epidemic rules.

We are grateful to scientists around the world for bringing a glimmer of hope amid the long-running anti-epidemic battle by working day and night to conduct research for the development of vaccines. Every member of the public should also support thousands

of our healthcare workers and anti-epidemic personnel on the frontline. By overcoming the “anti-epidemic fatigue” and avoiding gatherings and going out, members of the public can join hands with the frontline personnel in the fight and walk out of the darkness of the epidemic together.

With just a few days to go before the start of 2021, I wish you all good health and happiness in the coming year.

Mrs Carrie Lam  
Chief Executive  
Hong Kong Special Administrative Region  
28 December 2020