

Striving to Further Improve Our Anti-epidemic Work

Over the past month, the epidemic situation in Hong Kong has remained stable. Although one local case involving an airport worker was reported on October 8, which broke the city's streak of over 50 days of zero local cases, no infections arising from this case have been detected in the community so far. This shows that our anti-epidemic measures are effective and the overall epidemic situation is kept in check. That said, there is certainly room for improvement in our anti-epidemic work. In particular, to create favourable conditions for the resumption of quarantine-free travel from Hong Kong to the Mainland, we must constantly review our measures and strive to do even better in every aspect.

How the epidemic has developed

Hong Kong recorded one local case in the past month, which involved a staff member of the Hong Kong Air Cargo Terminals. Although the case was not linked to previous local cases according to the results of genetic analysis, we dared not take it lightly and thus enforced strict compulsory quarantine and testing measures immediately. Apart from placing some 500 close contacts or other contacts (e.g. those living with the close contacts) under quarantine, cordoning off the building where the confirmed case lived and requiring some 400 residents there to undergo testing, we also required the workplace of the confirmed case to conduct deep cleaning and took environmental samples from the workplace to see whether it had been contaminated. As no other cases have been detected since the case was confirmed on October 8, we believe that the possibility of community infection is very low. It is particularly worth noting that the above confirmed case was identified through regular testing of

targeted groups on a weekly basis, and the virus was also detected at about the same time in the sewage samples taken near the housing estate where the confirmed case lived via the sewage surveillance conducted in different districts. This demonstrates our ability to track down confirmed cases within a short period of time, which significantly reduces the risk of virus transmission in the community. Generally speaking, we believe that “zero infection” is still basically maintained in the community.

Anti-epidemic efforts

While keeping the epidemic in check, we are never complacent and always seeking to improve our anti-epidemic work in order to cope with the development of the epidemic. Currently, we are striving for the early resumption of quarantine-free travel from Hong Kong to the Mainland. The first meeting between the experts of the two places was held last month, in which relevant considerations and issues were discussed in detail. Noting the recent heated discussions in the community on how Hong Kong’s anti-epidemic measures should be enhanced to achieve the goal of quarantine-free travel, I would like to stress that we attach great importance to the Mainland experts’ opinions on our anti-epidemic work. And I have stated publicly that we will do our utmost to improve or strengthen any measures as requested by the Mainland side so that the anti-epidemic measures of both places can be more closely aligned with each other, thus ensuring that quarantine-free travel will not pose any additional risks. Even if, due to the actual situation in Hong Kong, there is any aspect that cannot be completely aligned with Mainland’s practices, we will actively identify alternative ways to achieve the same anti-epidemic effect. With this principle in mind, we are working very hard to follow up on matters raised by the Mainland experts, and we have communicated with them at the working level. We hope that the second expert meeting will be held as soon as possible. Meanwhile, we have already implemented or announced some enhancement measures, such as increasing the testing frequency for airport staff to once every

three days, strictly enforcing the requirement of using “LeaveHomeSafe” mobile application when entering government buildings or offices with effect from November 1, arrangement by Hospital Authority for patients who have recovered from COVID-19 infection to be subject to a 14-day isolation after being discharged from hospital, and removing most quarantine exemption groups for inbound travellers.

The major measures introduced are set out here in chronological order:

Date	Event
September 29	COVID-19 Vaccination Stations were set up in Queen Mary Hospital, Queen Elizabeth Hospital and Tuen Mun Hospital to enable patients to receive vaccination without prior booking when they have their follow-up consultation. On October 18, additional COVID-19 Vaccination Stations were set up in Pamela Youde Nethersole Eastern Hospital, Tseung Kwan O Hospital, Caritas Medical Centre and Prince of Wales Hospital respectively.
September 30	The maximum number of persons allowed per banquet in catering business premises adopting Type D Mode of Operation was relaxed to 240, having regard to the stringent anti-epidemic measures taken by these premises.
October 12	Two new “vaccine bubble” arrangements were introduced for fitness centres. For fitness centres having complied with all the anti-epidemic requirements, the maximum number of participants in each sub-group of training groups or classes was relaxed to 12 persons, and customers were allowed to exercise without wearing a mask.

October 12	The Hong Kong SAR Government reached a tripartite agreement with Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance and the drug manufacturer AstraZeneca on the donation of 7.5 million doses of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine to the COVAX Facility.
October 14	The Government set up a new community testing centre at the Ground Transportation Lounge of the Hong Kong International Airport to further assist members of the public working at the airport to undergo COVID-19 testing.
October 20	The Government announced the testing frequency for airport staff of targeted groups would be enhanced to one test every three days.
October 21	The Government announced that starting from November 1, except for exempted persons, all government employees and members of the public would be required to use the "LeaveHomeSafe" mobile application to scan the venue QR code before they are allowed to enter government buildings or offices.
October 22	The Government started to provide an additional 200 units at Penny's Bay Quarantine Centre on Lantau Island, making a total of 1 000 units available for quarantine of foreign domestic helpers (FDHs). The Government also announced on October 24 that the Rambler Garden Hotel in Tsing Yi would be open as a Designated Quarantine Facility starting from November 1, providing 500 rooms for quarantine of FDHs.
October 26	The Government announced that patients recovering from COVID-19 infection would be subject to a 14-day isolation and health monitoring after being discharged from hospital.

Vaccination

While we are proactively improving the anti-epidemic measures, members of the public who eagerly look forward to the resumption of quarantine-free travel from Hong Kong to the Mainland may also contribute by joining efforts to boost the vaccination rate. Hong Kong is facing a prolonged delay in achieving the basic target of 70 per cent vaccination rate and the number of persons receiving vaccines per day is fluctuating downwards. The situation can hardly be described as satisfactory. We have been using various means to encourage more people, in particular the elderly, to get vaccinated. Measures include enhancing publicity, sending outreach teams to communities and premises with elderly people, organising vaccination days with district groups, and setting up vaccination stations at public hospitals to enable patients visiting the hospitals for follow-up appointments to receive vaccination. As such, it is now very convenient for people to receive vaccination, what is lacking is the intention to do so. I call on members of the public: it is not enough to get yourselves vaccinated, please also actively encourage people around you to do the same as soon as possible in order to boost the overall vaccination rate in the community. Only then we will be able to achieve the shared goals of resuming quarantine-free travel with the Mainland and a normal life as early as possible.

Mrs Carrie Lam
Chief Executive
Hong Kong Special Administrative Region
27 October 2021