

With Epidemic under Control comes Path towards Normalcy

Leveraging the full support of the Central Government, the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) has enhanced its anti-epidemic capability on all fronts. This, together with the full co-operation of various sectors in society, has led to gradual stabilisation of the fifth wave of the epidemic in Hong Kong. The number of cases tested positive for COVID-19 has been trending downward continuously after reaching the peak in early March with no significant resurgence observed after the Easter holidays, enabling the HKSAR Government to adjust various restrictive measures in phases from late April as planned to get society back to normal in an orderly manner. Although the epidemic situation continues to stabilise, in order to create conditions for the resumption of people flow with the Mainland, the HKSAR Government will steadfastly take forward the strategies of “guarding against the importation of cases and the resurgence of domestic infections” to achieve the greatest anti-epidemic effect at the smallest cost while minimising the impact of the epidemic on Hong Kong’s social and economic development.

Epidemic development

Since the outbreak of the fifth wave of the epidemic, we have recorded 1 190 437 cases tested positive for COVID-19 (including 9 069 deaths). The number of daily reported positive cases reached a peak of some 70 000 in early March and trended downward continuously afterwards. The daily caseload dropped to a four-digit number from March 26 and further to a three-digit number from April 15, with 300 to 400 cases recorded daily these days. A downward trend was also observed in other monitoring indicators such as the viral load in sewage surveillance tests, the percentage of positive cases found in

restriction-testing declaration operations and the percentage of positive cases in tests conducted at the community level.

Elderly persons have been particularly hard hit by this wave of the epidemic. Among the death cases reported thus far, the median age is 86. Over 90% of the cases are people aged 65 or above. Over 50% are residential care home residents; over 90% are patients with known chronic diseases; and over 70% have not received any COVID-19 vaccine.

Continuing with the strategy of “three reductions, three focuses and one priority”

In the past month, the inter-departmental Steering Committee cum Command Centre chaired by me continued to closely monitor the epidemic development and, on the advice of the Mainland experts, implement in a full-fledged manner the strategy of “three reductions, three focuses and one priority”, namely reducing infections, severe cases and deaths, adopting more precise, stronger and more targeted measures on certain groups of people, premises and areas, and according priority to supporting the elderly.

Having learnt from the painful experience, the HKSAR Government, together with the Hospital Authority and various sectors of the community, worked doubly hard over the past few months to make good use of the Central Government’s support and integrate Chinese and Western medicines in treatment in order to strengthen protection for the elderly. A dedicated task force led by the Permanent Secretary for Labour and Welfare was set up to rationalise the implementation of anti-epidemic measures to protect residents at elderly care homes. As a case in point, the holding centre located at the Kai Tak Cruise Terminal came into service in early April to provide some 1 200 beds for the elderly. Healthcare workers from the Western and Chinese medicine disciplines of two universities, two non-governmental welfare organisations and a private healthcare group, as well as

Mainland care workers employed directly by the Social Welfare Department, are working in concert to provide comprehensive care for the infected elderly at the centre. This is an excellent example of medical-social collaboration and public-private partnership to enhance the capability in the admission and treatment of patients.

Three-day city-wide rapid antigen test (RAT) exercise

With the strong support of the Central Government in medical supplies, the HKSAR Government successfully distributed 3 million anti-epidemic service bags to more than 2.7 million households in Hong Kong in the first week of April. Later on, it initiated a three-day city-wide RAT exercise, calling on members of the public to conduct daily tests for three consecutive days from April 8 to 10 using the RAT kits in the anti-epidemic service bags and report positive results to the online declaration system of the Centre for Health Protection. With favourable response from the public, the exercise has largely achieved its three objectives, namely having a better grasp of the local infection situation, identifying in the community more silent transmission chains to arrange for those infected appropriate isolation and treatment, and enabling the public to familiarise themselves with the use of RATs so as to raise their anti-epidemic awareness.

As the vaccination rate of the elderly has yet to reach a satisfactory level, it is necessary to further encourage the elderly to monitor their own health condition regularly such that early appropriate treatment can be arranged for them once they are found to be infected. The HKSAR Government has provided free COVID-19 nucleic acid testing service for all the elderly aged 70 or above at the community testing centres and mobile specimen collection stations since early April, and distributed free RAT kits to the elderly through various channels (including District Health Centres, District Health Centre Expresses and Elderly Health Centres) since April 19 until the end of May.

Return to normalcy gradually

With the local infection situation having stabilised, the HKSAR Government has proceeded to implement the various measures announced by me on March 21 as planned to resume social and economic activities in a gradual, orderly and risk-controlled manner:

- (a) schools resumed face-to-face classes in phases from April 19. In order to keep the school environment hygienic and better safeguard the health of teachers and students, besides requiring schools to take adequate protective measures, the HKSAR Government for the time being also requires all teachers, school staff and students to conduct an RAT every day and allow only those with a negative result to go to school;
- (b) this year's Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination commenced on April 22 as scheduled. To ensure that the 50 000-odd candidates can take the examination in a safe environment, the HKSAR Government, jointly with the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority and the school sector, has strengthened precautionary measures and compressed the examination timetable to three weeks. All candidates and examination personnel are required to conduct an RAT before the examination every day and only those with a negative result can enter the normal examination centres. The HKSAR Government has also set up a special examination centre at the Penny's Bay Community Isolation Facility for candidates undergoing compulsory quarantine and candidates confirmed with COVID-19 to sit for the examination;
- (c) the first-phase relaxation of the social distancing measures started on April 21 meeting the keen demand of members of the public and various trade sectors. Dinnertime dine-in

services are allowed to resume at catering premises (and staff members are required to conduct an RAT every three days); most previously closed premises (i.e. indoor and outdoor venues of sports premises, fitness centres, beauty parlours and massage establishments, places of public entertainment (including cinemas), places of amusement, amusement game centres, event premises and religious premises) are allowed to re-open; local group tours with no more than 30 persons are allowed to resume (and if all tour participants have conducted an RAT before tour activities commence on the day, the number of participants allowed will be relaxed to 100); the number of persons allowed in group gatherings in public places is raised from two to four; and the restriction on multi-household gathering (i.e. prohibition of gatherings in private places involving more than two households) is lifted; and

- (d) the place-specific flight suspension mechanism for nine countries was lifted with effect from April 1. While the boarding, quarantine and testing arrangements for Hong Kong residents (HKRs) who have stayed in overseas places have been rationalised on the premise of continuously guarding against importation of cases, the HKSAR Government has announced that non-HKRs be allowed to enter Hong Kong from overseas places and that the route-specific flight suspension mechanism be suitably adjusted with effect from May 1.

Latest vaccination situation

Boosting the vaccination rate remains one of the important means for the HKSAR Government to fight the virus. Over 90% of people aged 12 or above have received the first dose of COVID-19 vaccine while the percentage of those having received the second dose will soon reach 90%. Yet, the first-dose vaccination rate for children aged 3 to 11 and that for elderly persons aged 70 or above have only reached 60% and 70%

respectively, far lower than those of other age groups. The HKSAR Government will continue to further boost the vaccination rates of children and the elderly as a matter of priority. For instance, the Home Vaccination Service was launched on April 26 such that outreach teams can provide door-to-door vaccination service for registered unvaccinated elderly persons aged 70 or above and persons with impaired mobility due to illness or physical disability; a new stage of outreach vaccination service has been rolled out to boost the first-dose vaccination rate at residential care homes from the current rate of over 70% to 90% as soon as possible; diverse and convenient channels have been made available for children to receive vaccination; and the Vaccine Pass will continue to be strictly implemented, requiring all the people entering relevant premises to have received two and three vaccine doses with effect from the end of April and the end of May respectively.

The other major anti-epidemic and related measures introduced are tabulated below in the chronological order:

Date	Event
April 2	The HKSAR Government, together with over 10 000 volunteers, started distributing anti-epidemic service bags to all households, and from April 7 to April 13, set up 89 distribution points for collection of anti-epidemic service bags in different districts of Hong Kong
April 7	The fifth batch of Mainland epidemic prevention and control experts sent by the Central Government arrived in Hong Kong
April 8 to 10	The HKSAR Government appealed to all members of the public to conduct daily RATs for three consecutive days and report positive results within 24 hours

Date	Event
April 8	Having taken the experts' advice into consideration, the HKSAR Government announced that persons aged 60 or above having received three doses of the Sinovac vaccine or the BioNTech vaccine could receive the fourth vaccine dose at least three months after their last dose
April 11	The Department of Health informed private doctors using the Electronic Health Record Sharing System that they could apply via the dedicated electronic platform to obtain two types of COVID-19 oral drugs; as at April 26, over 200 doctors registered to use the drugs
April 13	The sampling method for the additional rapid nucleic acid test required of passengers when departing via land boundary control points or the Hong Kong International Airport for the Mainland or Macao was changed into taking nasopharyngeal swabs (originally combined nasal and throat swabs) to avoid outflow of the virus
April 14	Children aged 3 to 11 having received two doses of the Sinovac vaccine for three months could receive the third dose of the Sinovac vaccine
April 19	The first phase of the Penny's Bay Community Isolation Facility constructed with the support of the Central Government was handed over to the HKSAR Government, providing around 1 000 units involving around 2 000 beds; the remaining facilities would be handed over gradually, with the whole project providing around 7 000 units involving around 14 000 beds in total

Date	Event
April 19	The HKSAR Government launched the recovery record QR code for persons infected with COVID-19 to facilitate their entry into the relevant premises under the Vaccine Pass
April 19	The first batch of some 190 doses of AstraZeneca monoclonal antibody drug for prevention of COVID-19 arrived in Hong Kong for use by the Hospital Authority expectedly on patients who are immunocompromised and those with organ transplants
April 23	The Department of Health set up a new hotline number (1830 111), together with the two existing numbers (2125 1111 and 2125 1122), for the public to make COVID-19-related enquiries

Supporting enterprises to regain vigour and safeguard jobs

Since the HKSAR Government's announcement of the preliminary framework of the 2022 Employment Support Scheme (ESS) on March 18, many Legislative Council (LegCo) Members and the relevant sectors have expressed strong support while raising further requests. After listening to the views of various parties, I announced on April 7 the refined version of the 2022 ESS. The enhancement measures included: removing the monthly salary cap for employees eligible for the wage subsidy; allowing employers to choose either the 2020 ESS data or the fourth quarter of 2021 for setting the number of headcounts eligible for the wage subsidy; allowing the industries which are less affected by the fifth wave of the epidemic to apply for the wage subsidy, with 100 employees as the cap (with the Exclusion List amended into the Restricted List); covering part-timers, temporary staff, as well as self-employed persons, and employees aged 65 or above, with Mandatory Provident Fund accounts. Following the passage of the funding application worth

\$43 billion by the Finance Committee of LegCo on April 12, the scheme will be open for applications starting April 29.

Besides, the Temporary Unemployment Relief Scheme under the sixth round of the Anti-epidemic Fund has received over 470 000 applications by the deadline of April 12. A one-off subsidy of \$10,000 has been disbursed to 101 000 eligible persons thus far.

Continuing to fight the virus together along the hard-earned path towards normalcy

It has been over four months since the outbreak of the fifth wave of the epidemic in Hong Kong. We have gone through an arduous journey, having ridden out the storms in February and March, while seeing the dawn in April. Nonetheless, as the epidemic situation across the globe shows no sign of abating and we still see hundreds of confirmed cases in Hong Kong every day, the HKSAR Government will stay vigilant and members of the public should not let their guard down. With the support of the Central Government, we will continue to steadfastly implement the measures of “early identification, early isolation and early treatment” to further stabilise the epidemic situation and enable society to return to normalcy in an orderly manner. Let us join hands to safeguard the safety and health of all and ensure the overall stability in society, reinvigorating Hong Kong’s integral role as a bridge and a hub connecting with the Mainland and overseas places!

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