

Moving Steadily Forward Along Path to Normalcy Amid Stabilised COVID-19 Epidemic

Having gone through the turbulent time in early March and seen the arrival of dawn in April, the fifth wave of the epidemic was clearly under control in May with the daily number of cases tested positive hovering between 200 and 300. Nonetheless, to create favourable conditions for quarantine-free travel with the Mainland, the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) has been steadfastly implementing the strategy of “preventing the importation of cases and the resurgence of domestic infections” and striving to reduce deaths, severe cases and infections, while encouraging members of the public to receive appropriate COVID-19 vaccine doses in a timely manner to build a stronger city-wide protection barrier against the virus. The community can thus be enabled to move steadily forward along a more promising path to normalcy.

Epidemic development

Over the past few weeks, the daily reported number of cases tested positive remained at a low but stagnant level. Neither did the figure continue to drop drastically, nor did it rise considerably despite some infection clusters found. For our peace of mind, generally low-level figures were observed in May in other monitoring indicators, including the viral load in sewage surveillance tests, the percentage of positive cases found in restriction-testing declaration operations and the percentage of positive cases from tests conducted at the community level, as well as the real-time effective reproductive number for local cases and COVID-19 point-prevalence rate released by the School of Public Health under The University of Hong Kong.

The drop in confirmed cases, coupled with the multi-tiered triage and treatment strategy in effect, has enabled the public healthcare system to resume its normal operation. The number of COVID-19 confirmed cases admitted to public hospitals significantly decreased from 1 339 on May 1 to 427 on May 29. Of the latter, eight were in serious conditions and 13 were in critical conditions (four thereof under intensive care).

Getting society back to normal

As the epidemic situation remains stable, and the COVID-19 vaccination rates of the first and second doses have reached 92% and 86.9% respectively with the risk of severe or death cases effectively reduced among the infected, the HKSAR Government has relaunched social and economic activities on various fronts in an orderly manner along the path to normalcy as announced in March 21 and in response to the expectations from various sectors of society. It is particularly gratifying to see that all students city-wide have resumed face-to-face classes at school; the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination this year has been conducted successfully; sports premises have been reopened; all scheduled premises subject to regulation have resumed business; and the catering and retail sectors have reaped a long-awaited blooming business. As regards visitors' immigration, further to lifting the flight ban on nine countries in April to allow Hong Kong residents (HKRs) from overseas to enter Hong Kong, the HKSAR Government expanded the scope to non-HKRs with effect from May 1 alongside suitable adjustments made to the route-specific flight suspension mechanism. With effect from May 9, the HKSAR Government imposed an additional rapid antigen test (RAT) requirement on "test-and-hold" at the airport to strengthen the testing arrangement for inbound passengers on the one hand, while shortening their waiting time at the airport to enhance the process of closed-loop management from the airport to designated quarantine hotels on the other.

Implementing third stage of Vaccine Pass as planned

It has been over 450 days since the launch of the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme by the HKSAR Government. No shortage of the two COVID-19 vaccines for the people of Hong Kong has ever occurred, while a growing number of channels for vaccination has been provided to bring them more convenience. At present, as many as 100 000 doses can be administered daily, which can well meet the demand. While the first- and second-dose vaccination rates of Hong Kong's population are satisfactory, the third-dose one has just exceeded 50% and needs to be boosted further. With the second stage of the Vaccine Pass coming into effect on April 30, the HKSAR Government will implement the third stage from May 31 onwards as planned. People will be then generally required to have received three doses before they can enter a series of premises subject to regulation.

In order to strengthen the immune barrier for hospitals and public healthcare facilities, protect members of the public using public healthcare services (especially the elderly and chronic patients) and further encourage them to get vaccinated, the Vaccine Pass arrangement will be implemented by administrative means in designated healthcare premises under the purview of the Food and Health Bureau, the Department of Health and the Hospital Authority (HA) (such as specialist out-patient clinics of HA, Student Health Service Centres and Special Assessment Centres, District Health Centres) with effect from June 13.

Other major anti-epidemic and related measures and events are tabulated below in the chronological order:

Date	Measure or Event
May 1	The HKSAR Government adjusted the testing and quarantine requirements for air crew, including subjecting air crew members who are spending a

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	short layover in Hong Kong and not entering the local community to a stringent closed-loop arrangement during their stay in Hong Kong, and requiring all air crew members deployed by local airlines for operating flights in and out of Hong Kong to have taken three vaccine doses
May 1	The HKSAR Government lifted the Outbound Travel Alert issued for COVID-19 on overseas countries/territories
May 4	The Treatment Centre for COVID-19 at the AsiaWorld-Expo was turned into standby mode
May 5	The HKSAR Government organised an appreciation and farewell ceremony for the last batch of Mainland medical support team members before their return to the Mainland
May 6	Twenty-six public hospitals of HA resumed the special visiting arrangement in non-acute wards and units
May 6	A handover ceremony for the hospital for emergency use constructed with the Central Government's support at the Lok Ma Chau Loop was held
May 9	In view of the epidemic development and cost-effectiveness, the HKSAR Government finished turning all the community isolation facilities (CIFs) in Tsing Yi, San Tin, Hong Kong Boundary Crossing Facilities Island of Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge, Fanling, Hung Shui Kiu and Yuen Long to standby mode; it now focuses on the use of Penny's Bay CIF and a CIF

Date	Measure or Event
	hotel
May 11	Upon completion of a three-stage outreach vaccination arrangement for residential care homes (RCHs), outreach vaccination had been arranged for the residents of all the 1 100-odd RCHs for the elderly (RCHEs) and RCHs for persons with disabilities (RCHDs) who were suitable for COVID-19 vaccination, largely achieving a comprehensive vaccination coverage with an overall vaccination rate of over 80%
May 12	Eight Designated Clinics for COVID-19 confirmed cases under HA ceased operation and resumed provision of services the next day as General Out-patient Clinics; and another eight ceased operation on May 23 likewise
May 13	A restricted visiting arrangement was implemented in RCHEs and RCHDs on the premise of observing infection-preventive measures to protect the health of residents and staff of the RCHs
May 14	The Social Welfare Department returned four sports centres earlier used as holding centres (namely Choi Wing Road Sports Centre, Shek Kip Mei Park Sports Centre, Harbour Road Sports Centre and Tsuen Wan West Sports Centre) to the Leisure and Cultural Services Department
May 19	The Education Bureau of the HKSAR Government announced that, having regard to the advice of the Centre for Health Protection, the current daily RAT requirement for students and

Date	Measure or Event
	school staff be extended till late June
May 20	The HKSAR Government relaunched the online platform for declaration of non-local vaccination records to provide an additional channel for declaring non-local vaccination records alongside boundary control points and designated post offices
May 21	Having regard to experts' advice, the HKSAR Government announced that, in addition to persons aged 60 or above in general as earlier permitted, uninfected persons aged 18 to 59 at a higher risk of COVID-19 exposure or with personal needs might choose to receive a fourth COVID-19 vaccine dose
May 23	The "LeaveHomeSafe" telephone hotline (2626 3066) commenced operation to handle public enquiries on installation or use of the "LeaveHomeSafe" mobile app in areas such as the storing and display of the Vaccine Pass
May 27	The HKSAR Government announced that six million RAT kits had been distributed for free to persons aged 60 or above through various elderly service units, and that the initiative be extended till the end of June to encourage them to take rapid tests continually for the regular monitoring of their health conditions
May 29	The HKSAR Government announced, effective from June 1, the fine-tuned pre-departure and post-arrival nucleic acid testing arrangements applicable to persons boarding for Hong Kong

Date	Measure or Event
	from overseas places and Taiwan (including an additional compulsory nucleic acid test on the ninth day of arrival in Hong Kong), and the updated penalty to be incurred by airlines for neglecting to verify the required documentation of persons boarding flights for Hong Kong and triggering the route-specific flight suspension mechanism, to reduce the impact on the journeys of persons coming to Hong Kong while continuing to firmly guard against importation of cases
May 31	HA extended the special visiting arrangement to other acute and specialist hospitals as well as child and adolescent psychiatric wards or units

Supporting enterprises and safeguarding jobs

The HKSAR Government announced in May that the seasonally adjusted unemployment rate for February to April this year stood at 5.4%, representing a 0.4 percentage point increase as compared with the preceding three-month period. Nonetheless, the subsiding local epidemic situation and progressive relaxation of social distancing measures, together with the 2022 Employment Support Scheme (2022 ESS) and new round of electronic consumption vouchers of \$10,000 each to eligible citizens as announced in the Government Budget this year, would expectedly give a boost to the business of various sectors by and large. It is hoped that enterprises could regain vitality and retain staff or even hire more, improving the business sentiment and promoting economic rebound.

Earlier on, the HKSAR Government rolled out the fifth and sixth rounds of the Anti-epidemic Fund to provide some financial

relief to the enterprises and practitioners of various trades affected directly or indirectly by the fifth wave of the epidemic, as well as to the frontline personnel having contributed to anti-epidemic efforts such as cleansing workers. As at May 25, over \$14 billion was disbursed. The 2022 ESS, which comes with a wider coverage, met with overwhelming response. By the deadline of May 12, applications from 176 000 employers (involving about 1.66 million employees) and 119 000 self-employed persons were received. They are being processed in batches. As at May 25, the wage subsidies of May were approved for 77 000 employers, involving \$5.2 billion. These employers had committed to employ about 665 000 people in May; and a one-off subsidy of \$8,000 was approved for about 64 000 self-employed persons, involving over \$0.5 billion.

Moving steadily forward along path to normalcy

The COVID-19 epidemic has been raging across the globe for nearly two and a half years. Hong Kong has not been spared and has met with five waves of the epidemic, of which the latest one triggered by the highly transmissible Omicron mutant strain has overwhelmed our anti-epidemic capacity. While progressing along the path to normalcy, we should feel gratified, and most grateful, for the timely assistance from the Central Government and full co-operation by society at large. This is the 28th monthly report on our anti-epidemic efforts, also the last one in a row, issued by me as the Chief Executive of the HKSAR. I wish Hong Kong steady strides continuously along the hard-earned path to normalcy, resuming cross-boundary people flows in an orderly manner early and reinvigorating the status as Asia's world city connecting East and West, and new heights scaled therewith under "One Country, Two Systems".

Mrs Carrie Lam
Chief Executive
Hong Kong Special Administrative Region
May 30, 2022