

Government continues to relax social distancing measures under Prevention and Control of Disease Ordinance in a gradual and orderly manner

Having regard to the development of the COVID-19 epidemic situation in Hong Kong, the Government will gazette directions and specifications under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Requirements and Directions) (Business and Premises) Regulation (Cap. 599F), the Prevention and Control of Disease (Prohibition on Group Gathering) Regulation (Cap. 599G) and the Prevention and Control of Disease (Wearing of Mask) Regulation (Cap. 599I) today (October 27) to continue to relax social distancing measures in a gradual and orderly manner. The measures will take effect at 0.00am on October 30 for a period of seven days till November 5.

While the local epidemic situation showed signs of rebound in early October, it continued to subside over the past two weeks, with the seven-day average number of locally confirmed cases coming down gradually since mid-October, given the concerted efforts of the Government and society in fighting the virus. That said, there were still a certain number of cases with unknown sources of infection among the new confirmed cases reported and such cases were distributed across various districts in Hong Kong, indicating the existence of silent transmission chains in the community. Meanwhile, given the very severe and continually worsening global epidemic situation, imported cases would continue to pose public health risks to Hong Kong.

A spokesman for the Food and Health Bureau said, "Under the new normal, we cannot and should not aim at having no confirmed case in the community for an extended period of time. It would be unavoidable to have sporadic cases and clusters in the community from time to time as the virus will co-exist with us for quite a long period of time before effective treatment and vaccination become available. The Government will continue to adopt a targeted approach for reducing the risk of the virus spreading within the community as far as practicable, avoid the one-size-fits-all approach when adjusting social distancing measures, and work closely with the relevant trades to strengthen infection control measures at the premises concerned, in order to allow members of the public to maintain social and economic activities to a certain extent as far as practicable under the new normal."

After taking into account the latest public health risk assessment and having struck a balance with economic needs and level of acceptance of the society, the Government decided to continue relaxing the social distancing measures under the Prevention and Control of Disease Ordinance in a gradual and orderly manner. Since the current epidemic situation has not yet been brought fully under control, community transmission chains still exist and the risk of rebound still remains real, the conditions are not present for

the Government to substantially relax the existing social distancing measures at this stage and the Government may only, under a targeted approach, relax to a limited extent the restrictions imposed on individual premises in which infection prevention and control measures can be implemented effectively. It is still considered necessary for us to maintain the restrictions imposed in respect of other kinds of group gatherings in general as infection prevention and control measures may not be as effectively implemented for these gatherings. Meanwhile, having regard to the infection risks brought about by mask-off gatherings in premises such as bars, the Government also decided to restrict the areas in which mask-off activities can take place in those premises, with a view to safeguarding public health. The Government will continue to closely monitor the development of the epidemic situation, and, depending on whether the epidemic situation can continue to be controlled with the number of confirmed cases stably maintained at a low level, consider the relaxation of social distancing measures to be implemented in the next phase.

Starting from this Friday (October 30), the dine-in hours of catering business premises (including bars and pubs) will be extended to end at 1.59 am (i.e. such premises can provide dine-in service from 0.00am to 1.59am on October 30), the number of persons that may be seated together at one table will be increased from four to six for catering business premises (except bars or pubs) and from two to four for bars or pubs and clubs or nightclubs. Meanwhile, the Government decided to impose a restriction that members of public must only consume food or drink at the table (but not any other places) within bars or pubs and clubs or nightclubs. In other words, a person must not consume food or drink and must wear a mask when he or she is away from the table. Moreover, subject to appropriate infection prevention and control measures being put in place, live performances and dancing activities will be allowed to be conducted in catering business premises and clubs or nightclubs. Members of the public also are not required to wear masks when doing exercise in indoor sports premises and public skating rinks. The total number of people allowed in catering business premises (including bars and pubs), places of public entertainment (including theme parks, performance venues, etc.), clubs or nightclubs, and swimming pools will be increased to 75 per cent of the normal seating capacity or maximum capacity of the premises. Through the above measures, the Government aims to further reduce the risk associated with mask-off activities by strengthening the infection control measures in the premises concerned, so as to allow the resumption of more social and economic activities in an orderly manner as far as practicable.

The spokesman added, "As we have stressed time and again, co-operation and self-discipline of members of the public are the keys to the effectiveness of social distancing measures in preventing the spread of the disease in the community. Only with the co-operation of society as a whole can the Government continue to allow resumption of social and economic activities in a gradual and orderly manner. Therefore, the public's concerted efforts in fighting the epidemic and compliance with requirements and restrictions applicable to individual premises are of utmost importance. Otherwise, when there is another outbreak in the community, the Government

will have no choice but to significantly tighten social distancing measures in order to safeguard public health."

Details of the aforementioned social distancing measures (details of the arrangements for premises under Cap. 599F at Annex 1) which are to be effective from October 30, 2020 to November 5, 2020 are as follows:

(I) Catering business and scheduled premises

(1) From 2.00am to 4.59am daily, save for specific premises (details at Annex 2), a person responsible for carrying on a catering business must cease selling or supplying food or drink for consumption on the premises of the business; and close any premises, or part of the premises, on which food or drink is sold or supplied by the business for consumption on the premises. The premises concerned may still sell or supply food and/or drink for takeaway services and deliveries. A person responsible for carrying on a catering business is also required to put up a notice at the entrance to the catering premises to remind customers that food or drink should not be consumed in areas adjacent to the catering premises;

(2) No more than four persons may be seated together at one table within bars or pubs as well as clubs or nightclubs; no more than six persons may be seated together at one table within other catering business premises;

(3) The total number of people allowed in catering business premise, places of public entertainment, clubs or nightclubs, and swimming pools will be capped at 75 per cent of the normal seating capacity/maximum capacity of the respective premises;

(4) To further reduce the public health risks associated with mask-off activities in bars or pubs as well as clubs or nightclubs, consumption of food or drink will only be allowed at the table;

(5) Live performances and dancing activities will be allowed to take place in catering business premises and clubs or nightclubs, subject to strict compliance of the relevant infection control measures, including mask-on requirement for performers, partitioning to serve as effective buffer between performers and customers/ the audience and no mingling between performers and customers/ the audience before or after the performances;

(6) Members of the public are not required to wear masks when doing exercise in indoor sports premises and public skating rinks; and

(7) Other requirements and restrictions on catering business and scheduled premises will be maintained. Amongst others, facilities involving higher health risks such as steam and sauna facilities and ball pits will continue to be prohibited from opening.

Persons responsible for carrying on catering businesses and managers of scheduled premises that contravene the statutory requirements under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Requirements and Directions) (Business and

Premises) Regulation (Cap. 599F) would have committed a criminal offence. Offenders are subject to a maximum fine of \$50,000 and imprisonment for six months.

(II) Group gatherings

(8) Unless exempted, the prohibition on group gatherings of more than four persons in public places will continue during the seven-day period from October 30 to November 5, 2020.

Any person who participates in a prohibited group gathering; organises a prohibited group gathering; owns, controls or operates the place of such gathering and knowingly allows the taking place of such gathering, commits an offence under Cap. 599G. Offenders are liable to a maximum fine of \$25,000 and imprisonment for six months. Persons who participate in a prohibited group gathering may discharge liability for the offence by paying a fixed penalty of \$2,000.

(III) Mask-wearing requirement

(9) The mandatory mask-wearing requirement under Cap. 599I will be extended for a period of seven days from October 30 to November 5, 2020. During the aforementioned period, a person must wear a mask all the time when the person is boarding or onboard a public transport carrier, is entering or present in an MTR paid area, or is entering or present in a specified public place (i.e. all public places, save for outdoor public places in country parks and special areas as defined in section 2 of the Country Parks Ordinance (Cap. 208)).

Under Cap. 599I, if a person does not wear a mask in accordance with the requirement, an authorised person may deny that person from boarding a public transport carrier or entering the area concerned, as well as require that person to wear a mask and disembark from the carrier or leave the said area. A person in contravention of the relevant provision commits an offence and the maximum penalty is a fine at level 2 (\$5,000). In addition, authorised public officers may issue fixed penalty notices to persons who do not wear a mask in accordance with the requirement and such persons may discharge liability for the offence by paying a fixed penalty of \$2,000.