

LCQ12: Restarting economy amid epidemic

Following is a question by the Hon Yiu Si-wing and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (March 24):

Question:

To cope with the Coronavirus Disease 2019 epidemic, the Government has, on a number of occasions since early last year, implemented various anti-epidemic measures (including social distancing measures), which have dealt a heavy blow to the business of industries such as retail, catering, entertainment and tourism, as well as triggered waves of business closures and layoffs. There are views that as the Government has been carrying out anti-epidemic work continuously for more than a year, it should have grasped sufficient data and experience for launching a gradual restart of the economy on the premise that anti-epidemic needs are met concurrently. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it will set criteria that are more objective (e.g. the number of local confirmed cases or cases from unknown sources having risen/fallen to a specified level) for deciding if there is a need to tighten or relax the various social distancing measures; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) what new measures are in place to enhance its work on tracing the close contacts of confirmed patients, so as to cut the silent transmission chains in the community; what more stringent infection prevention measures are in place to cope with a worsened epidemic situation; and

(3) whether it will formulate a plan for a gradual restart of economic activities (including tourism activities) which can meet anti-epidemic needs concurrently (e.g. allowing scheduled premises directed to suspend operation due to the epidemic to resume business and tourism activities to resume when the number of local confirmed cases or cases from unknown sources has dropped to a specified level); if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

Hong Kong has been extensively affected by COVID-19, a pandemic sweeping across the world. The COVID-19 epidemic situation in Hong Kong remains volatile. Large-scale cluster outbreaks were found at catering business premises and fitness centres, and silent transmission in the community is still active. It is essential for us to take all appropriate measures to strengthen epidemic control, and to further enhance the precision of the

control measures in a bid to achieve the target of "zero infection" with the support and co-operation of the general public.

My consolidated reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Yiu Si-wing is as follows:

(1) and (3) Social distancing measures can effectively prevent the spread of the virus in the community and are an integral part of infection control measures. The implementation of stringent and decisive social distancing measures was the key to the Government's success in containing the third wave of the epidemic. In particular, the Prevention and Control of Disease (Requirements and Directions) (Business and Premises) Regulation (Cap. 599F) regulates the mode of operation of catering business and 15 types of scheduled premises, whereas the Prevention and Control of Disease (Prohibition on Group Gathering) Regulation (Cap. 599G) imposes restriction on group gatherings at public places and Cap. 599F premises. The Government has all along been adjusting our social distancing measures in a decisive and prompt manner, after balancing factors such as the protection of public health, impact on the economy and social acceptance having regard to the development of the epidemic situation. At the peaks of the previous waves of the epidemic, in order to control the epidemic situation decisively, the Government's major considerations when tightening social distancing measures were the latest overall situation of the epidemic and risk assessments, with a view to reducing social contacts and cutting the transmission chain at an early stage as soon as possible.

The Government understands that some premises under Cap. 599F and sectors related to activities that may not take place due to the restrictions imposed by Cap. 599G had been facing considerable difficulties for a period of time in the past. Also, the unemployment situation of many sectors is deteriorating. At the same time, having been engaged in the efforts to fight the epidemic for months, public adherence to social distancing measures has notably declined. Despite the severe epidemic situation earlier, there were still a large number of people out and about, and many continued to participate in cross-family gatherings. In light of the above, and having considered factors including economic situation and social acceptance, the Government has already announced that we would adopt a more precise approach in adjusting the social distancing measures, with a view to allowing resumption of normal life as soon as possible while minimising the impact on economic activities and the sectors involved.

The fourth wave of the epidemic has been gradually subsiding earlier. Having regard to the developments of the epidemic situation and risk assessments at the time, the Government had started to gradually relax social distancing measures with conditions since February 18 by reopening seven types of scheduled premises (viz. amusement game centre, fitness centre, place of amusement, place of public entertainment, beauty parlour, massage establishment and sports premises), as well as extending the period during which catering businesses may provide dine-in services to end at 10pm and increasing the number of persons per table to up to four. Compared with the relaxation of social distancing measures when the third wave of the epidemic

came under control, the Government has already relaxed the relevant measures to a greater extent this time in order to resume social and economic activities as soon as possible while the epidemic situation permits.

The aforesaid arrangements on relaxation of social distancing measures is on the premise that the responsible persons of the catering business and relevant scheduled premises must adopt two new infection control measures as follows:

Measure (1): ensure that users scan the "LeaveHomeSafe" venue QR code using the "LeaveHomeSafe" mobile application on their mobile phones or register their names, contact numbers and the dates and times of their visits before they are allowed to enter the premises, with records to be kept for 31 days; and

Measure (2): arrange for all staff involved in the operation of the premises to undergo a polymerase chain reaction-based nucleic acid test for COVID-19 once every 14 days and ensure that the staff keep records of every SMS notification containing the result of the test for 31 days.

Taking into account the risks involved at catering business and scheduled premises, the Government has expanded the priority groups under the Government's COVID-19 Vaccination Programme to cover staff of these premises since March 8, 2021. If the overall uptake rate of the COVID-19 vaccine is satisfactory, together with the general public working together to strictly observe other anti-epidemic measures (such as wearing of masks, using the "LeaveHomeSafe" mobile application, etc.), the restrictions on restaurants and other commercial premises can be considered to be further relaxed, the currently closed premises can be considered to resume business, schools can be considered to fully resume classes, and sports grounds can fully resume normal operations, etc. On the other hand, in view of the current global trend, the overall vaccine uptake rate in Hong Kong and whether individuals have been vaccinated will be important factors when considering the future resumption of cross-boundary travel and relaxation of quarantine measures for cross-boundary travellers. If the overall vaccine uptake rate in Hong Kong is not satisfactory, it can be imagined that other places may not be very enthusiastic to resume cross-boundary travel with Hong Kong.

The Government will continue to closely monitor the latest development of the epidemic situation as well as the progress of the vaccination programme and its effect on disease prevention and control, review from time to time and suitably adjust the social distancing measures. We will, having regard to the development of the epidemic situation and subject to the epidemic situation coming under control and continuing to subside, continue to relax the restrictions imposed under Cap. 599F and Cap. 599G in a gradual and orderly manner by phases in a more precise approach, with a view to resuming economic activities further.

(2) Contact tracing is fundamental to the efforts in preventing further spread of the virus. In order to gate keep and contain the virus at the source and to cut the transmission chain as swiftly as possible, the Centre

for Health Protection has tightened testing and quarantine arrangement since February 27, 2021, including quarantine of all persons who had been close contact with a confirmed case within the seven days before onset of symptoms of all locally acquired unlinked cases, and 3-day quarantine for household contacts of symptomatic close contacts.

The Government has also deployed extra manpower to set up the Contact Tracing Office (CTO) in order to enhance the efficiency of contact tracing. In response to the cluster outbreak in a fitness centre in early March, the CTO took prompt action to speed up the process of identifying close contacts, making notable achievements. Since early March, the fitness centre cluster outbreak has resulted in around 140 confirmed cases. The CTO successfully traced about 1 500 contacts in a few days' time and had them quarantined, and around 3 200 household contacts of close contacts were successfully traced and requested to undergo compulsory testing. In other words, for the fitness centre cluster, the CTO identified an average of about 35 contacts or family members for each confirmed case, much higher than the average of four contacts identified per confirmed case during the initial operation of the CTO. Such efforts have significantly helped in cutting chains of viral transmission. Over the past two weeks, the number of confirmed cases with unknown sources has largely remained at a single-digit level, proving the effectiveness of the work of the CTO.

Furthermore, an internal information portal specifically designed for case investigation and contact tracing has linked up the information systems of various relevant departments and agencies for centrally and electronically collecting information needed for contract tracing, so as to streamline the procedures for information collection, input and sharing. This will help speed up the Department of Health's work in tracing contacts, as well as conducting testing and arranging quarantine or medical surveillance for such contacts.

On the other hand, virus testing is also very important in epidemic prevention and control. The Government has been refining its anti-epidemic strategies in accordance with the development of the epidemic, including following the three key principles of "compulsory testing on a mandatory basis, targeted testing on an obligatory basis and testing on a voluntary basis" to conduct large-scale COVID-19 testing for groups of different risks with a view to achieving "early identification, early isolation and early treatment", and cutting the transmission chains in the community as far as possible.

Since the Prevention and Control of Disease (Compulsory Testing for Certain Persons) Regulation (Cap. 599J) came into operation on November 15 last year, the Government has exercised the power under the regulation almost daily to issue compulsory testing notices (CTNs) with a view to fully implementing the virus testing strategy of compulsory testing on a mandatory basis. As at March 15, 2021, the Government has required persons who had been present at some 940 specified premises (including dance clubs/venues, restaurants, residential buildings, construction sites, fitness centres, department store and hospitals) and 33 restricted areas; symptomatic persons;

staff members of residential care homes for the elderly, residential care homes for persons with disabilities and nursing homes, day service units attached to the premises of residential care homes; taxi drivers and airport staff to undergo compulsory testing by respective deadlines.

For residential buildings, the Government has also actively expanded the coverage of compulsory testing on a mandatory basis and further lowered the threshold of compulsory testing. Currently, if one or more new confirmed cases (regardless of whether the source is unknown) are found in the residential buildings, or there are sewage samples tested positive, the buildings will be included in the CTN. The Government will also delineate restricted areas and make "restriction-testing declarations" (RTDs). Persons within the areas are required to stay in their premises and undergo compulsory testing in accordance with the arrangement by the Government, and can only leave after the relevant test results are mostly ascertained. All buildings within the restricted areas, whether or not confirmed cases were found therein, would be included in the CTN. Any person who had been present at buildings in the restricted area for more than two hours in the past 14 days, even if they were not present in the restricted area at the time when the RTD took effect, also have to undergo compulsory testing.

As for workplaces, if the Centre for Health Protection considers that there is a cluster outbreak in a particular workplace, such as a construction site, apart from requiring suspension of operation and disinfection, a CTN will also be made to require persons who had been to the same workplace premises as the confirmed case to undergo testing. The testing threshold has been further lowered to that if one or more confirmed cases are found in a workplace, the workplace will be included in the CTN.

The Government arranges staff to verify the testing certifications of residents at the entrances/exits of the buildings covered by CTNs, and conduct checks within buildings to ask residents to show the SMS notification of having conducted test or related certifications. The Government will also conduct enforcement operations in restricted areas to verify whether residents have complied with the requirement to undergo testing. The Government will issue a fixed penalty of \$5,000 on any persons who fail to comply with the CTN and/or a compulsory testing order to undergo testing within a specified period. The Government will continue to enforce the law and strictly handle persons who do not comply with the CTN.

At the same time, the Government has all along been adjusting our anti-epidemic measures having regard to the latest development of the epidemic situation. If and when there are cluster outbreaks at individual types of premises, we would, taking into account the actual circumstances and the operating characteristics of individual sectors, impose new infection control measures on the relevant premises.

For instance, in view of the cluster in eateries earlier, we have implemented two new infection control measures in respect of catering premises, in order to step up infection control at such premises and reduce transmission risks: (1) starting from March 4, all catering premises to

arrange, if practicable, dedicated staff for clearing used utensils and cleaning and disinfecting used tables and partitions or suitably adopt hand hygiene measures; and (2) by end April, all catering premises must increase its air ventilation to a minimum level of six air changes per hour, and if this could not be achieved, appropriate air purifier(s) should be installed as an alternative, in order to reduce the relevant transmission risks.

There has also been a large-scale cluster outbreak in a fitness centre recently. To contain the epidemic, we have tightened the infection control measures in fitness centres with immediate effect from March 12, reinstating the mask-on requirement. The relevant department has also been actively discussing with the industry to encourage fitness centres to enhance infection control measures on a voluntary basis. Such measures include limiting the number of customers in the premises and exploring more frequent tests of staff.