

LCQ13: Government's anti-epidemic efforts

Following is a question by the Hon Paul Tse and a written reply by the Secretary for the Civil Service, Mr Patrick Nip, in the Legislative Council today (December 9):

Question:

To cope with the epidemic, a number of government departments curtailed their public services on several occasions this year. After resumption of public services, the offices under the departments concerned, such as the Transport Department's offices located in Admiralty and Cheung Sha Wan, as well as the Immigration Departments office located in the Immigration Headquarters, were crowded with a large number of people. Although some members of the public had made appointments online, they still often needed to wait for more than an hour. Some members of the public have queried that such arrangements were confusing, and the packing of over 100 persons in a cramped office who had to wait in a long queue for receiving services would result in the epidemic spreading easily. On the other hand, some members of the public have criticised the Government's anti-epidemic measures to be "half-baked", resulting in the epidemic surging wave upon wave. For instance, the compulsory quarantine measures for persons arriving in Hong Kong are not strict, including that (i) some persons undergoing home quarantine may be living with their family members, (ii) hotels which receive quarantined persons may concurrently receive non-quarantined persons, (iii) persons arriving in Hong Kong need to go to their places of quarantine on their own using public transport, and (iv) quarantined persons have not been closely monitored to see if they have taken off their electronic tracking wristbands, left their places of quarantine or met with their relatives and friends who visit them. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it has noticed the situation of a large number of members of the public gathering in the aforesaid offices; of the measures in place to enhance the administrative efficiency of such offices and improve their operational arrangements, so as to prevent a large number of members of the public from gathering there for a long time during the epidemic;

(2) whether it has received complaints about the offices of other government departments, apart from the aforesaid offices, having the same situation; if so, of the names of the departments concerned and the number of complaints received; and

(3) to achieve the target of "zero" infection, whether the Government will, by making reference to the Mainland's successful anti-epidemic experience, take the following measures: requiring that all persons arriving in Hong Kong from foreign places must be escorted and taken to their places of quarantine by personnel who have put on a full set of anti-epidemic gear using designated vehicles, and undergo quarantine in designated hotels dedicated

for compulsory quarantine purpose, as well as expeditiously conducting universal testing, as recommended by Professor Zhong Nanshan, a Mainland anti-epidemic expert and an academician of the Chinese Academy of Engineering, to identify asymptomatic patients and cut the transmission chain?

Reply:

President,

In consultation with the Food and Health Bureau, the Security Bureau, the Transport and Housing Bureau and relevant departments, my consolidated reply to the various parts of the Hon Paul Tse's question is as follows:

(1) and (2) In light of the development of the local epidemic situation, the Government implements special work arrangements to reduce the flow of people and social contacts to stop the virus from spreading in the community. Individual bureaux/departments (B/Ds) will deploy staff to suit their own mode of operation and provide the necessary service, and make announcement on the latest arrangements of their services. During the implementation of special work arrangements, B/Ds will keep the provision of services under review and make necessary adjustments as necessary. Besides, members of the public are encouraged to make use of alternative means, such as by post, drop-in boxes, telephone hotlines or online channels, etc. to receive the services they need.

Taking into account the needs for the functioning of the society and the demands for public services, the Government will embark on the orderly resumption of normal public services when the epidemic situation stabilises, subject to the implementation of social distancing and infection control measures. At the beginning of service resumption, there may inevitably be a surge in demand for public services within a short period of time, thereby lengthening the waiting time or processing time for applications. The government appeals to the understanding of members of the public, and again encourage them to continue to make use of alternative means, such as by post, drop-in boxes or online channels to receive the services they need; or to schedule appointments online or by telephone in advance. If members of the public have to visit government buildings or offices, they should wear surgical masks at all times, and comply with the infection control measures implemented by relevant departments including temperature checks and crowd control arrangements.

As regards the individual departmental offices mentioned by the Hon Tse, during the implementation of special work arrangements in the past, the Licensing Offices of the Transport Department (TD) suspended walk-in counter services and correspondingly increased the daily quota for online appointments to cater for the public needs. At the beginning of full services resumption, while the number of applicants using walk-in counter services increased, the Licensing Offices had to provide services for those who had made prior bookings at the same time. All these have lengthened the waiting time for applicants. Subsequently, the TD has adjusted the daily quota for

online appointments appropriately, and the waiting time has gradually resumed normal. In view of the of the latest epidemic situation and the special work arrangement for Government employees, the TD suspended walk-in counter services from December 2 to December 15, but would continue to process applications with online appointments of counter services, as well as those submitted by drop-in boxes, by post, or online. The TD would continue to closely monitor the usage of the online appointment system and suitably adjust the daily quota and its distribution.

The Immigration Department (ImmD) has also been closely monitoring the flow of people at various offices. The ImmD has strengthened its online services. In addition to submitting specified applications by post or drop-in boxes, members of the public can also fill in and submit applications online or through mobile application. For those who are required to visit the offices in person, they will be given quota tags for attending the relevant offices according to the specified period. Members of the public can also apply for or collect travel documents through self-service kiosks.

(3) To further reduce the chance of cross-infection between guests undergoing quarantine and other local guests, the Government is devising relevant measures to mandate travellers arriving in Hong Kong from places outside China to undergo compulsory quarantine at designated quarantine hotels in accordance with the directions under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Regulation of Cross-boundary Conveyances and Travellers) Regulation (Cap. 599H). The designated quarantine hotels can only receive the aforementioned inbound travellers arriving in Hong Kong from places outside China who are subject to compulsory quarantine and the Government will also arrange designated transportation for sending them to designated quarantine hotels from airport, with a view to reducing their contact with the community and other guests. The Government is liaising with the hotel trade to firm up the implementation arrangements for setting up the designated quarantine hotels. Details will be announced in due course.

At the same time, the Government has been stepping up testing efforts in a multi-pronged approach. In order to detect patients in the community as soon as possible and cut the transmission chains, specified persons are required to undergo compulsory testing on a mandatory basis. On the other hand, the Government also encourages members of the public to undergo testing on an obligatory basis and a voluntary basis. At present, the precision-guided anti-epidemic measures focus primarily on mandatory testing for people of high-risk groups. There is no plan to require population-wide mandatory testing at this stage.