

LCQ18: Measures to cope with the epidemic

Following is a question by Dr the Hon Lo Wai-kwok and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (July 7):

Question:

Early last month, the first local confirmed case with an unknown source of infection with a variant of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 was found in Hong Kong. The Government has indicated that in the light of the higher transmissibility of virus variants and their potential for causing more serious epidemic situation, it will take the "vaccine bubble" as the basis in reviewing whether social distancing measures may be relaxed. Regarding the measures to cope with the epidemic, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it has set up a mechanism for reviewing the pros and cons of adjusting the various social distancing measures in terms of preventing and controlling the epidemic as well as encouraging vaccination; if so, of the details (including the criteria adopted); if not, the reasons for that;

(2) whether it has assessed if the current testing capacity in Hong Kong is sufficient to cope with sudden and huge demand for testing involving virus variants; if it has assessed and the outcome is in the affirmative, of the details; if the assessment outcome is in the negative, the measures to increase the testing capacity;

(3) whether it will enhance the function of the "LeaveHomeSafe" mobile application of recording whereabouts to better tie in with the implementation of the various social distancing measures, with a view to cutting the virus transmission chain at an early stage; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(4) whether it has explored upgrading "LeaveHomeSafe" to a digital permit with vaccination records that can be used worldwide, so as to prepare for the full resumption of cross-boundary travels; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

In consultation with the Innovation and Technology Bureau, my reply to the various parts of the question raised by Dr the Hon Lo Wai-kwok is as follows:

(1) With our enhanced anti-epidemic capabilities and the steady progress of

the Government's vaccination programme, we have adopted a new direction in fighting the pandemic, under which social distancing measures are relaxed with "vaccine bubble" as the basis, with a view to responding to the aspirations of various trades and the public to resume normal daily lives as soon as possible. The social distancing measures under the first phase of "vaccine bubble" took effective on April 29. Given that the local epidemic situation has become more stable and the vaccination rate is increasing steadily, the measures under the second phase of "vaccine bubble" also took effective on June 24.

The adjustments to social distancing measures with "vaccine bubble" as the basis are made taking into consideration the infection risks with public health grounds. For some venues or activities that inherently involve higher risks, if the relevant persons have already received one dose of vaccine or even completed the vaccination course, the infection risks can naturally be reduced, thus creating the conditions for reopening the venues or resuming the activities. The objective effect of the relaxation measures would provide incentives for vaccination. In addition to getting protection, members of the public who have completed the vaccination course would also be subject to less stringent arrangements under various social distancing measures, bringing convenience to daily life.

The Government will continue to review and suitably adjust the details of the relevant measures having regard to the development of the epidemic situation, progress of the vaccination programme and implementation of the measures under "vaccine bubble".

(2) Virus testing is an integral part of our anti-epidemic strategies. The Government has all along been providing convenient testing services to the public through various channels to achieve the objective of "early identification, early isolation and early treatment" and cut the transmission chains as early as possible.

In view of the surge in demand for regular testing from staff of various sectors since the second half of February this year, we have increased the number of testing quotas at community testing centres (CTCs) from over 20 000 each day previously to more than 34 000 per day now, with more manpower deployed to serve the public. In addition, the Government has worked with testing contractors to set up a dozen of mobile specimen collection stations in a number of districts, which can conduct about 20 000 tests each day, to divert the demand of different sectors. In case of any surge in testing demand within a short period of time, the Government and testing contractors are capable of further increasing the booking quotas of CTCs, setting up additional mobile specimen collection stations in various districts on a need basis and extending the service period of mobile stations.

In summary, through the sustained efforts of the Government and the co-operation of contractors, the current maximum testing capacity of public and private laboratories has been substantially increased to approximately 100 000 tests per day (without sample pooling). Through various channels of specimen collection, the Government can collect samples from a maximum of

about 100 000 members of the public for testing each day. In early May, specimens were collected from over 100 000 members of the public per day on average when foreign domestic helpers underwent compulsory testing, showing that the Government can meet unexpected testing demand in an efficient and flexible manner to strengthen disease prevention and control in Hong Kong.

The COVID-19 Vaccination Programme has been implemented since the end of February. In view of the protection brought by the vaccination, the relevant staff members will no longer need to undergo regular testing upon their completion of vaccination. Based on the experience in many places, the epidemic situation can deteriorate rapidly in the face of the threat posed by mutant strains, creating tremendous pressure on the testing system. It is imperative for the public to get vaccinated as soon as possible to protect themselves and their family and friends and build a barrier for protection in Hong Kong.

(3) The "LeaveHomeSafe" mobile app aims at providing members of the public with a convenient digital tool for recording their whereabouts. In the light of the public's regard to and concern over personal privacy, the app is designed such that users are not required to register any personal information, and neither does it have a tracking function nor record any information on users' geographic locations. In an unfortunate event of infection, the "LeaveHomeSafe" users are required to submit their visit records as prescribed by law to assist the Centre for Health Protection in epidemiological investigations. Regardless of whether those confirmed patients are "LeaveHomeSafe" users or not, their visit records will be broadcast through the "LeaveHomeSafe" to other users who have visited the same venues at the relevant time. Health advice will be issued to them to enhance their vigilance so as to minimise the risk of further transmission of the virus.

Under the "vaccine bubble" initiative, members of the public are required to present their vaccination records on entry to certain designated venues. In view of this, the Government launched the "LeaveHomeSafe 2.0" on June 1, this year. By scanning the QR codes on paper or electronic vaccination records using the newly added "Electronic Vaccination and Testing Record" function, the public could store their COVID-19 vaccination records and QR codes in the "LeaveHomeSafe" mobile app to facilitate easy display if needed.

Taking into account the views of the public and the industry, and under the premise of protecting the public's privacy, we would continue to explore different technology solutions to enhance the app and expand its functionality to assist in the gradual resumption of economic and social activities on the basis of "vaccine bubble".

(4) The function of storing vaccination records and QR codes in the "LeaveHomeSafe" mobile app is a local application that ties in with the "vaccine bubble" initiative. The app does not have the function of mutual recognition of vaccination records with the Mainland or other places. We are currently examining the inclusion of the vaccination records of those who

have received vaccination outside Hong Kong into the Government's vaccination record database and provide them with the relevant QR code for vaccination records. Upon the implementation of the relevant arrangement, these people may store their vaccination records and QR codes in their mobile phones via the "LeaveHomeSafe" mobile app for display when they enter certain designated local venues. We have also established the "Health Code" data conversion system with Guangdong Province and Macao, allowing residents of the three places to use the code conversion function of the "Health Code" to submit nucleic acid testing results for health declaration purpose on entry. The function of converting Guangdong's "Yuekang Code" and Macao's "Macao Health Code" to Hong Kong's electronic health declaration form platform has already been put in use under the "Return2HK" Scheme launched on November 23, 2020. We will continue to actively explore with Guangdong Province and Macao the measures that facilitate the exit and entry of residents of the three places as well as related health declaration, including examining the technical arrangement of incorporating vaccination records into the current "Health Code" data conversion system.