

LCQ4: Resumption of normal traveller clearance between Hong Kong and Mainland

Following is a question by the Hon Michael Tien and a reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (September 29):

Question:

It is reported that there has been no local confirmed case of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) in Hong Kong with an unknown source of infection for more than a month since mid-August. In addition, in view of the stable epidemic situation on the Mainland, the Government currently allows Hong Kong and Mainland residents to come to Hong Kong from the Mainland under the Return2hk and the Come2hk Schemes respectively, and they are required to undergo multiple virus testing after arriving in Hong Kong. However, it is not known when normal traveller clearance between Hong Kong and the Mainland can be fully resumed. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) as a government expert consultant has suggested that people coming to Hong Kong from the Mainland should be required to have completed a COVID-19 vaccination course before they come to Hong Kong, so as to further reduce the risk of importing the epidemic, whether the Government will consider the suggestion;

(2) whether it has discussed with the authorities of the various Mainland provinces and cities (including the Guangdong Province, Shanghai and Beijing) the resumption of normal traveller clearance between the two places; if so, of the progress; and

(3) why the "Hong Kong Health Code" system, the development of which was completed in August last year, has not yet been launched; whether it will discuss with the Guangdong Provincial authorities the implementation of the following measure: if a resident of either place meets four conditions (i.e. having completed a COVID-19 vaccination course, having obtained proof of a positive result of serology antibody test, having no outbound travel history in the past month, and having obtained proof of a negative result of polymerase chain reaction nucleic acid test), he or she may apply for a "Guangdong-Hong Kong health code" which is valid for two weeks, so that he or she will be exempted from entry quarantine when he or she travels between Hong Kong and the designated cities of the Guangdong Province?

Reply:

President,

While the global epidemic situation continues to remain severe, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) Government has all along been adopting the approach of "preventing the importation of cases and the spreading of the virus in the community". Together with the concerted effort of the members of the public, we have successfully controlled the epidemic in the local community. On the prevention of importation of cases, the Government will continue to prevent the virus from slipping into the local community from overseas places through very stringent border control measures and closed-loop management arrangements. In preventing the spreading of the virus in the community, with the vaccination programme and the various surveillance testing, social distancing, and community prevention and control measures, we have recorded over 40 days with no local unlinked cases, and have essentially achieved "zero case" locally. That said, we cannot afford to let our guard down, and must continue with our efforts in "preventing the importation of cases and the spreading of the virus in the community", as well as to raise our vaccination rate, so as to foster favourable conditions to gradually resume quarantine-free travel with the Mainland.

In consultation with the Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau and the Innovation and Technology Bureau, my reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Michael Tien is as follows:

(1) The Government currently implements corresponding border control measures according to the assessed risks of the relevant origins of the incoming travellers to prevent importation of cases from outside Hong Kong. For example, people who have stayed in high-risk Group A specified places can only board flights for Hong Kong if they are Hong Kong residents (HKRs) who are fully vaccinated and hold a recognised vaccination record. Non-HKRs who have stayed in medium-risk Group B specified places must also be fully vaccinated in order to board flights for Hong Kong.

As far as low-risk places are concerned, in view that the risks are relatively low, generally there is no need to introduce vaccination as a requirement for people entering Hong Kong from these relevant places. The Hong Kong SAR Government will closely monitor the epidemic development and maintain communication with the Mainland. There is no need at this juncture to introduce vaccination as a requirement for people entering Hong Kong from the Mainland.

(2) Hong Kong SAR representatives led by the Chief Secretary for Administration attended a meeting on the anti-epidemic work of the Mainland and Hong Kong hosted by Deputy Director of the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office of the State Council, Mr Huang Liuquan, in Shenzhen on September 26, 2021. At the meeting, Hong Kong SAR and Mainland representatives had detailed exchanges on the strategies to prevent and fight the virus and studied the resumption of quarantine-free travel between the Mainland and Hong Kong in a gradual and orderly manner. Mainland experts agreed with Hong Kong's determination in fighting the epidemic and reaffirmed the city's present situation of "zero local infection". The two sides explored in detail matters and factors of consideration relating to the resumption of quarantine-free

travel in a gradual and orderly manner and candidly exchanged views on and examined the possible risks after resumption of quarantine-free travel. The Chief Secretary for Administration expressed Hong Kong people's eagerness for resumption of quarantine-free travel, and the close correlation of resuming quarantine-free travel with the economy and people's livelihood. The two sides discussed earnestly, provided relevant information and built a solid foundation for creating favourable conditions to take forward the resumption of quarantine-free travel. The two sides will further study the details and strive to hold a second meeting as soon as possible.

(3) The Government has completed the development of the health code conversion system in last November. The code conversion system supports eligible persons arriving Hong Kong from Guangdong Province or Macao under the "Return2hk" Scheme, to use the "Yuekang Code" or "Macao Health Code" to directly convert their valid nucleic acid testing results to the electronic Health Declaration Form platform of Hong Kong. The system also supports persons coming to Hong Kong from Guangdong Province and Macau under the "Come2HK" Scheme launched in September this year.

The Office of the Government Chief Information Officer has been collaborating with the "Health Code" technical teams of Guangdong Province and Macao on enhancement of the code conversion system with a view to incorporating the vaccination records into the code conversion function and making technical preparations for the gradual resumption of cross-boundary travels among the three places. Citizens of the three places can make use of the health code conversion system to submit the required information in one go for health declaration purpose. Relevant system will be put into service when the related arrangements for cross-boundary travels among the three places are implemented.

The Mainland, and the Hong Kong and Macao SARs have all begun vaccination programmes, and there are signs that the epidemic situation is subsiding. The Hong Kong SAR Government will continue to maintain close liaison with the relevant Mainland and Macao authorities to consider the early resumption of cross-boundary quarantine-free flow of passengers amongst the three places having regard to the latest epidemic situation.