

LCQ4: Targeted anti-epidemic measures

Following is a question by the Hon Wilson Or and a reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (January 13):

Question:

During the outbreak of the third and fourth waves of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 epidemic, more confirmed cases were recorded in Kowloon East as compared with other districts. Moreover, the authorities issued last month notices requiring persons who had been present in specified buildings during the specified periods to undergo testing by a certain deadline, and around half of the 40-odd buildings involved are public housing blocks located in Kowloon East. Some members of the public consider that to be successful in fighting against the epidemic, anti-epidemic measures should be targeted, including strengthening the anti-epidemic efforts in Kowloon East where the epidemic situation is more serious. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) whether it will make it compulsory for persons who reside or work in Kowloon East to undergo testing, with a view to identifying asymptomatic infected persons as far as possible;
- (2) as an expert on epidemiology and a surveyor have pointed out that the public housing blocks in Kowloon East are relatively old and their sewers may leak due to disrepair and, as a result, once a resident has been infected, his or her faeces may cause the residents of the same block to get infected, whether the authorities will, in the short term, finish inspecting and repairing the sewerage systems of the various public housing blocks in the district; and
- (3) whether it will, targeting at the inadequacies of the current anti-epidemic efforts, make improvements, including shortening the waiting time for persons who were the close contacts of persons confirmed to have contracted the disease to be transferred to the quarantine centres, and sending personnel to carry out disinfection work for all of the private premises where persons confirmed to have contracted the disease were present?

Reply:

President,

In consultation with the Transport and Housing Bureau, my reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Wilson Or is as follows:

- (1) Our virus testing strategy is to continue and expand compulsory testing on a mandatory basis, targeted testing on an obligatory basis and testing on a voluntary basis so as to achieve the objective of "early identification, early isolation and early treatment". Since the fourth wave of epidemic from mid-November 2020 to January 6, 2021, the Government has conducted more than

1.9 million tests, of which 3 477 samples tested preliminarily positive (0.18 per cent), successfully cutting silent transmission chains in the community.

Regarding compulsory testing on a mandatory basis, the Government has implemented the Prevention and Control of Disease (Compulsory Testing for Certain Persons) Regulation (Cap. 599J) since November 15, 2020. As at January 11, the Government has required persons who had been to 121 specified premises, symptomatic persons, staff members of residential care homes for the elderly (RCHEs), residential care homes for persons with disabilities (RCHDs) and nursing homes, day service units attached to the premises of residential care homes and taxi drivers to undergo compulsory virus testing.

The Government has also actively expanded the scope of compulsory testing on a mandatory basis especially for residential buildings to achieve community clearing. With effect from December 30, 2020, if there are two or more units in a building with confirmed cases in the past 14 days and the units concerned are not epidemiologically linked to each other, the building would be included in the compulsory testing notice under Cap. 599J and persons who had been present at that building for more than two hours in the past 14 days are required to undergo compulsory testing. After the amendment of this criteria, 59 buildings had been included in compulsory testing notices by January 11. To tie in with the expansion of compulsory testing, the Government not only provides free testing services in 19 community testing centres (CTCs) but also set up around 50 mobile specimen collection stations in the vicinity of these buildings to facilitate persons subject to the compulsory testing notices to undergo testing. For the 42 premises subject to compulsory testing notices issued on December 30 and December 31, 2020, as at January 4, around 55 000 persons have received tests through mobile specimen collection stations and CTCs. The Government is also preparing to step up enforcement such as conducting blitz operations to demonstrate our determination to enforce the legal requirement of compulsory testing.

For Kowloon East, with the implementation of Cap. 599J since November 15, 2020, a total of 32 residential buildings have been included in compulsory testing notices. In addition to providing free testing service through the three CTCs located at Yau Tong Community Hall, Ngau Tau Kok Road Sports Centre and Morse Park Sports Centre in Wong Tai Sin, we had set up a total of 22 mobile specimen collection stations in Kowloon East, which as at January 9, 2021 provided free testing service for a total of close to 120 000 residents, of which 75 samples tested preliminarily positive (0.06 per cent). We are of the view that the present precision-guided anti-epidemic measures which focus primarily on compulsory testing for people of high-risk groups, complemented by broadened and more convenient voluntary testing for the public, constitute an appropriate strategy.

On voluntary testing, the Government provides convenient testing service to members of the public through various channels, including free testing for the public through 188 distribution points (those located in Kowloon East include 6 designated general outpatient clinics (GOPCs) of the Hospital Authority (HA), 15 post offices, and vending machines at Ngau Tau Kok MTR station) and 83 collection points (11 of which are located in Kowloon East).

The above three channels can distribute over 40 000 specimen collection packs per day, while the 19 CTCs also have a total daily capacity of more than 20 000 tests.

(2) Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic, the Hong Kong Housing Authority (HA) has been paying much importance to the conditions of the environmental hygiene and drainage pipes of its public rental housing (PRH) estates. In complementing the Government's effort in fighting the epidemic, HA has strengthened the cleaning and disinfection work at common areas and public facilities, and arranged staff to proactively inspect PRH units which share the same drainage system with units with confirmed cases. Additional resources have been dedicated for carrying out drainage inspections under the existing "Responsive In-flat Maintenance Scheme" and "Total Maintenance Scheme". Since the outbreak of the epidemic, the Housing Department (HD) has already carried out detailed inspections of drainage pipes of about 100 000 flats, most of which were found in satisfactory conditions. Repair works have been conducted for the remaining ones where necessary and appropriate. Moreover, HD is carrying out preliminary inspections of the drainage facilities of the remaining 300 PRH domestic blocks, the relevant work is expected to be completed before end-March 2021.

Meanwhile, the HA launched the "Drainage Inspection Programme" on October 28, 2020. Under the Programme, the HD prioritises the inspection of its approximately 800 000 PRH units with regard to the conditions of drainage pipes found from the preliminary inspections, maintenance records, percentages of elderly households and the age of housing estates or buildings, etc. Priority is also given to common drain pipes in public housing estates with confirmed cases. Where necessary, the HD will undertake repair works during inspection. The programme is expected to be completed within 18 months.

For the PRH estates in Kowloon East, the HA had preliminarily inspected drainage pipes through the various programmes mentioned above. Most of the drainage pipes were found to be in satisfactory condition. Where necessary, the HA has also undertaken the required repair works.

(3) From the start of epidemic, the Government has monitored the effectiveness of the policies on fighting the virus and reviewed the preventive control measures. After consolidating our experience, we have strengthened effective measures having regard to the changing epidemic situation and also made necessary improvements to enhance areas which fall short. The government has also continuously strengthened its response to prevention and control of COVID-19. For instance, as the quarantine arrangement for close contacts is an indispensable measure in our fight against the epidemic, the Department of Health (DH) has deployed additional manpower during the fourth wave of the epidemic, such that the number of confinees conveyed to the quarantine centers increased to about 300 daily, and over 400 daily on some days. Currently, the number of staff members for the arrangement of transferring close contacts to quarantine centres increased from 31 to 54, and will be further increased to almost 70 in the future, with a view to getting in touch with the close contacts concerned within 24 hours after a quarantine order is issued and arranging for

designated vehicles to transfer them to quarantine centres for quarantine. With the enhanced manpower, the DH succeeded in contacting the relevant confinees in 24 hours. For close contacts who cannot be contacted after 2 calls within 24 hours, the DH has referred them to Police for immediate follow-up action. The DH has coordinated with the Police and the Police will fully support the DH.

Thank you, President.