

LCQ9: Strategies to cope with the epidemic

Following is a question by the Hon Shiu Ka-fai and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (September 29):

Question:

Many members of the public and practitioners of a number of trades have relayed to me that they are eagerly looking forward to an expeditious resumption of normal traveller clearance between Hong Kong and the Mainland, so that residents of the two places will be able to fully engage in activities such as visiting relatives, travelling and doing business which have been restricted for a long time. On the other hand, the Chief Executive (CE) indicated early this month that Hong Kong could not and should not adopt a strategy of "co-existing with the virus" for coping with the epidemic, otherwise the hope of resuming normal traveller clearance with the Mainland will be even more remote. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it has studied how countries and places which have adopted the strategy of "co-existing with the virus" for coping with the epidemic compare with (i) their own situations prior to their adoption of this strategy and (ii) those countries and places which have adopted the strategy of "zero-infection" case for coping with the epidemic in terms of infection rate, the incidence of cases with severe symptoms and the death toll; if so, of the details;

(2) given that the epidemic in various places across the globe is still fluctuating, whether the Government has assessed the impacts of Hong Kong's long-term adoption of the strategy of "zero-infection" case on local economic activities such as tourism as well as convention and exhibition, and whether it has formulated corresponding plans; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) as CE indicated in the middle of this month that the Government was discussing with the Mainland authorities the circumstances and conditions under which normal traveller clearance could be resumed in a progressive and an orderly manner, and that the Central Authorities were very supportive of the experts from Hong Kong and the Mainland to establish a dialogue in this respect, of the progress of the relevant work, including whether the relevant conditions and timetables have been worked out?

Reply:

President,

Over the past year or so, the anti-epidemic strategy and objective of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government has been premised on the overall interest of the Hong Kong community, including considering the aspirations of members of the public and the impact on the economy. The Chief Executive announced on April 12, 2021 the new direction in fighting the pandemic. The first component of the new direction is indeed to resume normalcy in a gradual and orderly manner in response to the aspirations of various sectors and members of the public. In fact, since May, Hong Kong did not record any local cases for the majority of the time and have basically reached the target of "zero infection". At the same time, we are also well-positioned to relax social distancing measures in an orderly manner having regard to the actual situation, with a view to enabling various businesses to resume operation, people's lives to largely return to normal and our economy to show encouraging signs of recovery. Hong Kong continues to top the "normalcy index" compiled by an international media. The Government will continue to strive to reach "zero infection" and sustain the various stringent and necessary anti-epidemic measures, with a view to proactively implementing the anti-epidemic strategy of "preventing the importation of cases and the spreading of virus in the community", in the hopes of creating favourable conditions for the early gradual resumption of cross-boundary travel with the Mainland and Macao.

In consultation with the Commerce and Economic Development Bureau and the Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau, my reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Shiu Ka-fai is as follows:

(1) The Centre for Health Protection under the Department of Health has all along been closely monitoring the COVID-19 epidemic development around the world and the control and preventive strategies adopted to combat the epidemic. We noticed that some countries and regions have adjusted their anti-epidemic strategies, from the original goal of "zero infection" to the so-called "co-existing with the virus" strategy without striving for "zero infection". Generally, after adjusting their anti-epidemic strategies, these countries and regions saw an increase in the number of infection, hospitalisation and death cases recorded. For example, since August this year, Singapore has adjusted its strategy and gradually relaxed its control and preventive measures. The local 7-day morbidity rate increased from less than 100 cases for every 1 million population in mid-July to over 1 000 cases for every 1 million population on September 20. Furthermore, the United Kingdom relaxed various control and preventive measures by phase starting from March to June this year. Before relaxing the measures, the local 7-day morbidity rate in February was 1 000 to 2 000 cases for every 1 million population. Since mid-2021, the number of local infection, hospitalisation and death cases have all substantially increased and is still at a very high level as of now. On September 20, the 7-day morbidity rate has climbed to over 3 000 cases for every 1 million population.

(2) With the prolonged outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic around the world, both inbound and outbound travel markets have suffered from a complete halt with the tourism industry undoubtedly being the hardest hit sector. For the first eight months of this year, the number of visitors to Hong Kong was only

about 50 000, representing a 99.9 per cent drop from the same period in 2019 (about 44 million) prior to the epidemic.

The Government has all been providing support to the trade in various ways, including launching five rounds of schemes through the Anti-epidemic Fund since 2020 to provide direct financial support to the tourism industry with a cumulative funding commitment amounting to around \$2.6 billion, benefitting over 1 700 travel agents, around 21 000 practitioners including travel agent staff, tourist guides, tour escorts and drivers of tour service coaches, around 2 100 hotels and guesthouses and the cruise sector, as well as increasing the financial commitment for the Travel Agents Incentive Scheme and the Green Lifestyle Local Tour Incentive Scheme to around \$150 million and \$100 million respectively. The Hong Kong Tourism Board has also launched five rounds of the "Free Tour" and "Staycation Delights" programmes in total, encouraging local consumption and providing support of around \$45 million to the tourism industry.

At the same time, during the past year or so, whenever the epidemic situation has improved, the Government has actively expanded room for operations for the tourism industry on the premise of containing and combating the epidemic, including allowing the trade to resume organising local group tours of 30 persons or below with conditions since end-April, and relaxing the restriction on the number of participants for group tours with two-thirds of the participants having received the first dose of COVID-19 vaccine to 100 persons since end-June. Besides, "cruise-to-nowhere" itineraries for Hong Kong residents which do not involve ports outside Hong Kong resumed in end-July.

The pandemic brings challenges to the convention and exhibition industry around the world. Since February last year, over 200 exhibitions in Hong Kong have been postponed or cancelled, while some large scale international conferences were organised online. As the pandemic situation in Hong Kong eases, some of the local public exhibitions were successfully held during summer. Between mid-July and end August, 27 exhibitions were held in the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre and AsiaWorld-Expo. We anticipated that about 40 exhibitions will be held in the above two venues during the rest of this year and 70 exhibitions in the first half of next year.

In this regard, the Government is implementing the Convention and Exhibition Industry Subsidy Scheme with a total commitment of \$1.07 billion, providing 100 per cent of venue rental subsidy for exhibitions and international conventions held at the two venues; and 50 per cent of the participation fees for exhibitors of exhibitions and participants of major conference organised by the Hong Kong Trade Development Council. As of the end of August, the Scheme has provided total subsidy of around \$121.85 million to 53 exhibitions.

The Government will continue to support the tourism and convention and exhibition industry on various fronts, maintain liaison with the trades, and put in place appropriate measures to assist the industries to tide over this challenging time where necessary.

(3) HKSAR 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, HKSAR 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.