

Transcript of remarks of press conference on anti-epidemic measures (with photo/video)

The Chief Executive, Mrs Carrie Lam, held a press conference on anti-epidemic measures this morning (March 19). Also joining were the Secretary for the Civil Service, Mr Patrick Nip, and the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan. Following is the transcript of remarks of the press conference:

Reporter: Good morning. We would like to ask what is the occupancy rate of the community isolation facilities converted from the hotels? How much the Government is paying monthly to these hotels? And there have been complaints from long-stay hotel tenants that they were forced to move out within two weeks of notice period. Is there a need to secure these hotels' room given the low number of infections recorded recently and what will the Government do to help these long-stay tenants? And second has the city achieved herd immunity yet given the high level of infections and also vaccination rate? And third, referring to the letter to the business community by Mrs Lam yesterday, why there is a need to, like, send the letter now, and does it come a little bit too late? Thank you.

Chief Executive: I will have to defer to the Secretary for Food and Health to answer your question about herd immunity. On the situation of hotels which have joined the scheme (Community Isolation Facility (CIF) Hotel Scheme) to perform the role of a community isolation facility, you may remember that I had a webinar with the hotel industry and the hotel federation (The Federation of Hong Kong Hotel Owners) to appeal for their support to transform some of their hotels into a CIF. And that took place in February when we were very short of community isolation facilities, when we did not know how bad the situation could be in terms of confirmed cases. At that point in time, we were pretty desperate to get more hotel rooms to provide the needed isolation facility for the people. I have to say that the meeting has been most productive and fruitful. We have quite a number of hotel owners who come forward and agree that they are happy to perform this role. But the problem is that not every hotel is suitable. We have to examine and inspect the hotel in terms of its ventilation system and its proximity to other residential blocks and so on. I think right now we have engaged maybe about 30 hotels, but not all of them are on board yet, exactly because they have to do some decanting as you have mentioned. Some hotels are occupied by long-term customers. They are not tourists per se, but they are living in a hotel as a sort of residence.

If a hotel has joined the Scheme then we have to use the whole hotel. We cannot accept the situation where there are infected customers and non-infected people living in the same hotel. Some hotels have taken a bit of time and up till now they have not been turned into a community isolation facility yet. That is to ensure that they could take the necessary

arrangements to transfer the long-term tenants to another hotel of their chain, because most of them are not single-hotel owners, they have a chain of hotels. I was told that actually the best way that they have done is to transfer them to a more superior hotel, that is upgrading their accommodation status, in order to get a more amicable sort of arrangement with their customers. I have not received any complaints from the hotels or from the hotel tenants, but if there are, we would tell the hotel to provide a better arrangement for their existing tenants so as to facilitate their joining the Scheme.

I cannot give you the details of our contractual arrangement with the hotels. But again, I want to thank hotels. It is not an easy task to let a commercial hotel operate as a community isolation facility. You remember at the earlier stage they were being used as quarantine hotels. Quarantine hotels are for people who are not yet infected but they need to be quarantined in order to ensure that they are not bringing the virus into the community, but a community isolation facility hotel is a hotel which will take in infected persons. At the beginning there were some anxiety and reluctance until I met with them and explained the very dire situation and appealed for their corporate responsibility, and many have come forward. And I can tell you that even their staff are very co-operative. Initially, they said, "Mrs Lam, you could take over my hotel but you provide your own staff to man the hotel." We said, "Okay, if that's the case then you are not providing us with full service. It's just the hardware of the hotel." I can tell you now every participating hotel in this Scheme is giving us full service. Not a single hotel has asked us to run the hotel for them, except putting in the management people and the people to make sure the security arrangements are fine, so that the hotel isolatees will not get out of the hotel without our scrutiny. That is the point about hotel.

The second of your enquiries was about my letter. Let me give you a bit of background. In Hong Kong, a very international city, we have two major communities that the Government continuously engages with, especially since I assumed office as the Chief Executive. Two days ago, in response to, again an English question, I said nobody attaches more importance to Hong Kong's international status – not international financial centre status, but international status – than myself as the Chief Executive because I know it is very important for Hong Kong to succeed and survive as an international city. We have to be connected with the outside world, we have to be attractive to the overseas and Mainland business community to encourage them to invest in Hong Kong, we have to attract far more talents from overseas and Mainland to come and work in Hong Kong. There are two important communities. One is our consular community. We are one of the few Chinese cities that have so many CGs (Consulates-General) present in Hong Kong. The other is the business community. We have a committee called the IBC, the International Business Committee, which is chaired by the Chief Secretary for Administration, which means that during my four and a half years as the Chief Secretary for Administration I had been meeting these business chambers' heads very often to tell them the Hong Kong's situation and to get their feedback.

Since the beginning of this fight against the epidemic, I have been sending monthly reports, personally signed-off monthly reports to these two very important communities every month, because somehow most of the news are now reported in Chinese or Cantonese, so our two expatriate communities may not get the first-hand information about the work of the Hong Kong SAR Government. So on a non-stop basis, I have been sending them monthly reports to tell them about the Government's work in fighting the epidemic. On February 28, I sent them my 24th report because this fight has gone on for two years. And as a result of that, partly because of the current situation and worries about school closure and border controls, many of the recipients of my 24th report sent me letters as feedback. I thought that since there is a lot of common ground amongst the letters sent to me, I may as well give them a further supplementary piece of information through a letter to the same communities, that is members of the IBC and what we call the Heads of Post – Heads of Post refer to the Consulates-General as well as the heads of a number of international organisations in Hong Kong. That is the purpose of my letter, and my letter actually recaps all the things that I've said in public, especially on this occasion, but to give them a consolidated picture is something that I find relevant and it may be regarded as useful. And actually from yesterday afternoon, I had been given a lot of feedback that they were very grateful for the Chief Executive's letter. They found it most informative and encouraging, but they also looked forward to more concrete measures to be announced in due course. So it is not a question of whether this is done fast enough or too late, this is part of my ongoing work as the Chief Executive to engage with important communities in Hong Kong.

Secretary for Food and Health: Thank you for your question on herd immunity. How one can achieve immunity depends on basically a few things. First is infection, and second is vaccination. So whether Hong Kong has achieved herd immunity in totality remains a question that we need to look into through more scientific data, especially local scientific data. The Food and Health Bureau in fact has a commission to study in the very beginning of the epidemic on looking into the issue of immunity. We have funded a population based serology study and we need to look more into the data. Secondly as I have said, natural infection is one, but vaccination is another. You may already have heard from Patrick (Secretary for the Civil Service, Mr Patrick Nip) about our vaccination rate in the community, but the vaccination rate of our elders in the community remains to be heightened. We are working very hard on improving the vaccination rate of this particular group of people. So whether the entire society has achieved a herd immunity remains a question that we need to look more into our scientific data. Thank you.

(Please also refer to the Chinese portion of the transcript.)

