

LCQ10: The Government's anti-epidemic efforts

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

Question:

In January last year, the Government established a Steering Committee cum Command Centre on anti-epidemic efforts led by the Chief Executive, and set up under it an expert advisory group and four workgroups. Furthermore, the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health (DH) held an epidemic briefing almost every day for the past year. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the respective numbers of meetings held last year by two of the aforesaid workgroups, namely (i) the Workgroup on Public Participation, which was led by the Secretary for Home Affairs, and (ii) the Workgroup on Communications, which was led by the Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs; among such meetings, the respective numbers of those chaired by the Secretaries themselves; the respective tasks carried out so far by the two Workgroups;

(2) given that the epidemic has been brought under control on the Mainland, whether the Government will invite experts on public health and epidemiology (e.g. Professor Zhong Nanshan) from the Mainland to join the expert advisory group to draw on collective wisdom; if so, of the candidates; if not, the reasons for that;

(3) of the respective numbers of occasions last year on which (i) the Director of Health, as well as (ii) the Controller, (iii) the Head of Communicable Disease Branch and (iv) other personnel of CHP attended the epidemic briefings and other press conferences; and

(4) as it has been reported that the Head of Communicable Disease Branch has been attending the epidemic briefings almost every day for over 11 consecutive months, while the Controller of CHP took leave for more than one month within the period, whether DH has reviewed if the division of labour among its personnel is appropriate; if DH has, of the outcome; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

In consultation with relevant policy bureaux, including the Home Affairs Bureau and Civil Service Bureau, my consolidated reply to the various parts

of the question raised by Dr the Hon Priscilla Leung is as follows:

(1) The Workgroup on Public Participation (the Workgroup) led by the Secretary for Home Affairs (SHA) is committed to supporting the work of the Steering Committee cum Command Centre. The Workgroup has been encouraging the community to take part in activities to fight the virus in collaboration with various sectors on different platforms and aspects, with special attention paid to the elderly, the underprivileged, and the diligent frontline staff fighting the virus. The Workgroup has conducted 12 meetings so far, all of which were chaired by SHA. The Workgroup conducted the meetings in a more frequent manner in the early stage to formulate the work directions; while during the subsequent implementation stage, communication has been mostly by emails and other means to meet the actual needs and reduce social contact. The Workgroup has promoted and publicised anti-epidemic messages at multiple levels, and provided or encouraged different sectors in the community to provide material assistance at the onset of the epidemic. Its work includes strengthening community publicity and participation, co-ordinating the distribution of donated materials, and mobilising volunteers to assist in anti-epidemic work, targeting at individual sectors and the district level.

The Workgroup has focused its efforts in the anti-epidemic work for the property management sector, which includes, among others, overseeing the implementation of the Anti-epidemic Support Scheme for Property Management Sector under the Anti-epidemic Fund by the Property Management Services Authority, with the aim to expedite approval of applications, strengthen publicity and enhance transparency. The Workgroup has also organised activities with the transport sector to distribute materials, and worked with the cultural, legal and other professional sectors to encourage members of the public to face the epidemic positively through music, videos and social media platforms.

On the work at the district level, the Workgroup has directed the Home Affairs Department (HAD) and District Offices (DOs) to provide free cleaning services for old buildings in need, particularly those "three-nil buildings", through different arrangements subject to the actual circumstances, and called for the tenants to join hands to fight the virus by maintaining environmental hygiene. From December 2019 to December 2020, about 3 300 sessions of cleaning services were provided for over 1 900 "three-nil buildings" by the HAD and DOs. Moreover, the HAD has also strengthened the publicity work in rural areas, and cleaned hygiene blackspots in rural villages and distributed anti-epidemic supplies with the aid of the Heung Yee Kuk and rural committees.

As regards community publicity and participation, the Workgroup has launched all-round promotion of anti-epidemic information, and successfully mobilised various sectors in the community by soliciting the support from major charitable organisations, associations, district organisations and community organisations for promoting city-wide participation in fighting the virus. It is noted that hundreds of anti-epidemic activities were carried out by various organisations to distribute face masks and other anti-epidemic supplies to members of the public. In addition, in order to enhance the

interaction with young people, the Home Affairs Bureau (HAB) and the Youth Development Commission have made a series of COVID-19 Q&A with Young People videos to answer the enquiries from young people and shared information on combating the epidemic, injecting positive energy into society.

During the epidemic, the Government has received about 7.7 million face masks in donations and the Workgroup was tasked to distribute those materials to members of the public in need. The HAD has passed on the majority of the face masks to the underprivileged, the elderly, low income families/persons and patients' organisations, etc., through various channels, and has given away some of the donated masks through the Education Bureau to students in need.

In addition, to provide operational and administrative support for relevant government departments/non-governmental organisations, HAB has recruited more than one thousand volunteers from the community through different networks to provide volunteer services.

The Workgroup on Communications under the Steering Committee cum Command Centre has rolled out initiatives in a speedy and flexible manner by mainly making use of instant messaging to achieve the aim of "conveying the latest and accurate messages to all members of the public and relevant stakeholders speedily and effectively". Efforts include making prompt clarifications and rebuttals of inaccurate information. Completed and ongoing initiatives of the Workgroup on Communications include:

In February 2020, a "COVID-19 Thematic Website" and an "Interactive Map Dashboard" were set up to provide members of the public with the latest epidemic information on a one-stop basis. The website also contains anti-epidemic messages in ethnic minority languages for ethnic minorities' reference. Besides, the Government has made extensive use of online and social media platforms to convey messages to audiences of different ages and from different walks of life. Such platforms include "GovHK Notifications", news.gov.hk, Facebook page, Instagram, YouTube, WeChat, Weibo, Twitter and Telegram accounts. For effective dissemination of information, the Government has been adopting diversified forms of communication, such as information charts, video clips and animations that are simple and easy to understand to enhance access by the public.

In response to inaccurate remarks on the internet, the Government has made prompt clarifications through press releases and social media posts to avoid the public from being misled.

In view of the latest epidemic developments, the Government produces and broadcasts television and radio announcements in the public interest (APIs) containing different health information in a timely manner, and uploads them to the webpages and social media platforms. The APIs are also broadcast on major transport carriers and at government venues and shopping malls. In addition, the Government has produced a number of posters and promotional flyers, published advertisements in newspapers, and displayed large-scale promotional banners at various government venues and major thoroughfares to

deliver the latest epidemic information and related health advice, engaging the public in fighting the virus together.

To address concerns outside Hong Kong, Principal Officials of the Government accept interviews by foreign and Mainland media from time to time to explain the latest epidemic situation and our measures in response to the outbreak in Hong Kong. The Government also disseminates updated information on the epidemic situation here to the consulates-general in Hong Kong, foreign chambers of commerce, statutory organisations and bodies, policy research institutions and think tanks, foreign and Mainland guests invited to visit Hong Kong before, foreign journalists, as well as overseas and Mainland Economic and Trade Offices. The relevant news are also promoted via social media posts, complemented with advertisements and search engine marketing. Moreover, the Government collaborates with the media to promote the positive message highlighting our resolute and effective anti-epidemic measures, and closely monitors reports in overseas media about Hong Kong's fight against the pandemic in order to clarify and refute any negative or biased reports in a timely manner.

(2) The Expert Advisory Panel appointed by the Chief Executive consists of Professor Gabriel Leung, Professor Keiji Fukuda, Professor Yuen Kwok-yung and Professor David Hui Shu-cheong. They are experienced in the fields of public health, infectious diseases and clinical experience, and are very familiar with the overall situation as well as the problems and needs in fighting the epidemic locally. In the past year, they provided valuable professional advice for the Government, which effectively assisted the Government in handling the epidemic based on scientific justifications. Apart from appointing local experts to the Expert Advisory Panel, the Government also values exchanges with Mainland experts. For instance, the Chief Secretary for Administration led a delegation of expert advisors and government officials to attend a meeting with Mainland officials and experts on the COVID-19 epidemic situation on December 22, 2020. The meeting exchanged views on the analysis and assessment of the pandemic, strategies and various prevention and control measures for fighting the epidemic. Mainland and Hong Kong experts have also agreed to establish mechanism to exchange views more closely on the overall epidemic situation and joint epidemic prevention and control efforts. The Government will continue to formulate appropriate measures for fighting the epidemic in Hong Kong catering for the actual local situations, based on scientific justifications, taking into account the advice of local, Mainland and global experts.

(3) and (4) Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the Government has been closely monitoring the development of the epidemic situation. Guided by the three key principles of responding promptly, staying alert to the situation and working in an open and transparent manner, and having regard to experts' advice, we have implemented decisive and appropriate measures to safeguard the public's health.

With respect to information dissemination, the Centre for Health Protection of the Department of Health (DH) issues press releases daily to provide the latest information on COVID-19. The Government also makes use of

different channels, including press conferences and media briefings etc., to disseminate information on the epidemic to the media and the public. In 2020, the Government held over 300 press conferences and media briefings on COVID-19.

The DH is the main government department responsible for combating COVID-19. In response to the development of the epidemic and operational needs of anti-epidemic efforts, the Department has timely deployed manpower to cope with the epidemic. Colleagues of the DH have assumed professional roles in different positions to take forward the various anti-epidemic work.