

LCQ3: Community-wide efforts to fight the epidemic

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

Question:

As the epidemic has persisted for months in Hong Kong and has not yet been brought under control, quite a number of members of the public have indicated that they would rather put up with the temporary inconvenience that may be caused to them by a "lockdown" and population-wide compulsory testing, in return for achieving "zero" infection case as early as possible. Regarding the concerted efforts across the community to fight the epidemic, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it has worked out a roadmap for achieving "zero" infection case and drawn up a specific timetable for the anti-epidemic work at various stages, so that all parties concerned can complement each other's efforts; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) as the Government has indicated that the implementation of population-wide compulsory testing must be complemented with a comprehensive lockdown which will, however, cause disruptions to the normal operation of Hong Kong and the living of members of the public, whether the Government has studied ways to keep such disruptions to the minimum (such as drawing up a clear timetable and giving members of the public time for preparation); if so, of the study outcome; if not, whether it will conduct such a study immediately; and

(3) whether it will enhance the arrangements for members of the public to record their whereabouts by themselves, including adding a positioning function to the "LeaveHomeSafe" mobile application and setting up a system for recording whereabouts by using Octopus cards, so as to provide convenience to those people who do not use smartphones (such as the elderly and the grassroots)?

Reply:

President,

In consultation with the Innovation and Technology Bureau, my reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Alice Mak is as follows:

(1) To fight against COVID-19, the anti-epidemic efforts in Hong Kong must be comprehensive. In accordance with the principle of "preventing the importation of cases and the spreading of virus in the community", we must

incorporate disease prevention and infection control into the day-to-day operations of society. With regards to preventing the importation of cases, we have implemented a series of enhanced measures for border control, including the implementation of designated quarantine hotels and transport, strengthening the testing arrangements for inbound travelers, as well as overall tightening of management of persons exempted from compulsory quarantine. Taking into account the recent discovery of the new virus variant with high transmissibility in the United Kingdom (UK) and South Africa, the Government has implemented restrictive measure since December 2020 to prohibit persons who have stayed in the UK or South Africa for more than two hours on the day of boarding or during the 21 days before that day (including Hong Kong residents) from boarding for Hong Kong.

We have been upholding the principle of "early identification, early isolation and early treatment", implementing anti-epidemic measures such as continuously expanding virus testing, expediting contact tracing, enhancing epidemiological investigations on infectious disease and social distancing, with a view to preventing the spread of the virus in the community.

In order to meet the target of "Sparing No Effort in Achieving 'Zero Infection'" as put forward by the Chief Executive in her 2020 Policy Address, the Government has been reviewing the policies on "preventing the importation of cases and the spreading of virus in the community" on a regular basis. The Government has all along made references to the advice from experts in Hong Kong, Mainland and the rest of the world in reviewing, assessing and analysing the local epidemic development for formulating anti-epidemic strategy suitable for Hong Kong based on science and theories. However, we wish to stress that, same as other anti-epidemic work related to public health, in order to effectively suppress the epidemic as quickly as possible, we need members of the public to co-operate and be disciplined to temporarily hold off social activities at this crucial time and to actively participate in COVID-19 tests in order to join hands to cut the silent transmission chains in the community.

The Chief Secretary for Administration has been leading an inter-departmental work group to effectively and centrally co-ordinate the work of the Government. It ensures co-ordination in bureaux/departments' efforts in monitoring, making timely response, and taking follow-up actions, etc. for effective implementation of various measures.

(2) 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 commencement of 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, residential care homes for persons with disabilities 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 by testing service providers 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.

On the other hand, the Government is also constantly reviewing and improving the legal framework. For example, the Government gazetted on December 8, 2020 the latest amendments to Cap. 599J for the Government to, according to the anti-epidemic needs, restrict movement of persons subject to compulsory testing, or seal off premises with epidemic outbreaks until all persons on the premises have undergone testing and the test results are ascertained.

For targeted testing on an obligatory basis, the Government continues to arrange testing for targeted groups based on risk assessment.

On voluntary testing, the Government continues to provide convenient testing service to members of the public through various channels, including free testing for the public through 188 distribution points and 83 collection points. 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.

On whether universal compulsory testing should be conducted, if it were to be effectively implemented, it must be complemented by comprehensive lockdown. It is questionable whether local citizens and businesses are willing to accept a comprehensive lockdown; and even so, the supply of daily necessities is another issue. 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 a more appropriate strategy.

(3) In addition, the aim of the Government in designing the "LeaveHomeSafe" mobile app is to provide members of the public with a convenient digital tool to record the time of their visits to different venues and taxi rides under the new normal in the fight against the epidemic, so as to help minimise the risk of further transmission of the virus and enhance the public's confidence in visiting different venues. Having regard to the views of the public and the industry, we have also enhanced the functions of the app, including updating the access permissions required for the app, adding new functions for reviewing personal visit records, auto check-out and improving steps for visiting different venues.

Considering the public's high regards and concern over personal privacy, the "LeaveHomeSafe" mobile app does not have location tracking function. As for the suggestion of using Octopus card to record whereabouts, since Octopus does not adopt a "real name" system and the public can also purchase and use more than one Octopus card, the identity of the user may not be ascertained effectively. The operation of the Octopus system also involves centralised storage and processing of user records. The Government does not have any plan at present to establish a new system to record visit records using Octopus card.

The Innovation and Technology Bureau has been actively exploring different technologies and solutions, including studying the provision of an automatic scanning function through the adoption of Bluetooth technology with the Hong Kong University Team, to conduct small-scale trial run at suitable venues such as minibuses with a view to making more effective use of the "LeaveHomeSafe" mobile app and other technologies to help the public in the prevention and fight against the epidemic.

Thank you, President.