

FHB expresses deep regret over remarks misrepresenting social distancing measures

Regarding remarks reported today (April 28) that linked the relaxation of social distancing measures by the Government based on the "vaccine bubble" with the "social credit system" in the Mainland, the Food and Health Bureau (FHB) strongly refuted and deeply regretted such misrepresentation of facts in the media report, and clarified that there is no correlation between the two.

The spokesman for the FHB stressed that the relaxation of social distancing measures announced by the Government yesterday was based on the enhanced anti-epidemic capability in Hong Kong and the steady progress of the Government's vaccination programme. In adjusting the social distancing measures, the Government has taken into account the relevant risks of infection, and the decision was supported with public health justifications, with a view to responding to the aspirations of various trades and the public to resume normal daily lives as soon as possible.

Upon the increasing numbers of the vaccination uptake, Hong Kong is gradually building a protection and immunity barrier against the epidemic. Those who have been vaccinated are safeguarded to return to their normal lives under the protection of vaccines. The spokesman reiterated that the biased remarks deliberately mislead members of the public and are unfavourable at a time when the city is joining hands in fighting the epidemic. A clarification must be made to set the record straight.

LCQ11: Premium payment for subsidised sale housing flats

Following is a question by the Hon Wong Kwok-kin and a written reply by the Secretary for Transport and Housing, Mr Frank Chan Fan, in the Legislative Council today (April 28):

Question:

Under the Housing Ordinance (Cap. 283), an owner of subsidised sale housing flat must pay a premium to the Hong Kong Housing Authority (HA) for the removal of the assignment restrictions before he/she may sell, let or otherwise assign his/her flat in the open market. Subsidised sale housing

flats put up for sale by the Hong Kong Housing Society (HKHS) are subject to similar assignment restrictions. Regarding the premium payment for such housing flats, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of (i) the number of flats for which applications for premium assessment were received by the HA, and (ii) the average amount of premium payable for each flat, in each of the past five years; whether it knows the relevant figures of the HKHS flats;

(2) of a breakdown of the cases mentioned in (1) by the saleable area of the flats (i.e. (i) below 21 square metres, (ii) 21 to 39.9 square metres, (iii) 40 to 59.9 square metres, and (iv) 60 square metres or above) (set out in Table 1); whether it knows the relevant figures of the HKHS flats;

Table 1

Year	(i)	(ii)	(iii)	(iv)	Total
2016					
...					
2020					

(3) in respect of each of the housing courts put up for sale by the HA, of the District Council district to which it belongs, the year in which it was put up for sale, and the numbers of premium-paid flats at present and in each of the past five years (set out by subsidised sale housing schemes (namely (i) the Buy or Rent Option Scheme, (ii) the Home Ownership Scheme, (iii) the Private Sector Participation Scheme, (iv) the Middle Income Housing Scheme, and (v) the Mortgage Subsidy Scheme) respectively in tables of the same format as Table 2);

Table 2 Housing scheme

District Council district	Name of housing court	Year of sale	Number of flats with premiums paid					
			Present	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020

(4) whether it knows, in respect of each of the housing courts put up for sale by the HKHS, the District Council district to which it belongs, the year in which it was put up for sale, and the numbers of premium-paid flats currently and in each of the past five years (set out by subsidised sale housing schemes (namely (i) the Flat-for-Sale Scheme, (ii) the Subsidised Sale Flat Projects, and (iii) the Sandwich Class Housing Scheme) respectively in tables of the same format as Table 2);

(5) as the Hong Kong Mortgage Corporation Limited has launched the Premium Loan Guarantee Scheme and the Premium Loan Insurance Scheme to assist the relevant owners in paying premiums, of the respective (i) numbers of

applications received and (ii) total amounts of the loans granted, in respect of the two Schemes in each of the past five years; and

(6) as there are views that the Government should consider (i) allowing owners of flats with premiums unpaid to pay the premiums by instalments, i.e. to determine the time and payment rate according to the market situation and their own financial means, and (ii) introducing a mechanism under which an owner may choose to adopt either the market value of his/her flat at the time when his/her relevant application is processed or that during the various instalment periods for the calculation of the premium amount for his/her flat, whether the Government has studied such proposals in depth; if so, of the details; if not, the measures in place to enhance the premium payment arrangements?

Reply:

President,

My reply to the question raised by the Hon Wong Kwok-kin is as follows:

(1) Information on premium payment of subsidised sale flats (SSFs) under the Hong Kong Housing Authority (HA) and the Hong Kong Housing Society (HKHS) in the past five years (i.e. from 2016 to 2020) is set out at Annex 1.

(2) The HA has not kept statistics on the premium paid by saleable areas of flats. Relevant information in relation to the subsidised sale projects under the HKHS in the past five years (i.e. from 2016 to 2020) is set out at Annex 2.

(3) The number of the HA's SSFs with premium paid in the past five years (i.e. from 2016 to 2020) by district (Note 1) is at Annex 3. As at March 2021, there were about 61 320 HA's SSFs with premium paid, including about 58 950 Home Ownership Scheme (HOS) Flats (Note 2) and about 2 370 flats sold under the Tenants Purchase Scheme.

(4) Information in relation to the premium payment of subsidised sale projects under the HKHS in the past five years (i.e. from 2016 to 2020) by District Council district is set out at Annex 4.

(5) No application was received under the Premium Loan Guarantee Scheme between its launch in 2010 and termination in 2018. As regards the Premium Loan Insurance Scheme (PLIS) which was introduced in 2015 and ended in 2019, there were 12 applications involving a total amount of \$10.5 million. Many PLIS applicants intended to settle the land premium in order to apply for the Reverse Mortgage Programme (RMP). As the RMP has been extended to cover subsidised sale flats since October 2016 and the borrowers are allowed to withdraw a lump-sum payout to settle the land premium, the market did not have keen demand for the PLIS. The PLIS was therefore terminated in 2019.

(6) SSFs, such as HOS Flats, are sold to eligible persons at a price lower than the market value to assist low-to-middle income families to achieve home ownership. Based on the principles of effective and rational use of public

housing resources and equity, if an SSF owner no longer wishes to reside in the flat, the owner must first pay the premium in full in order to alienate the flat in the open market. For the HA's SSFs, rules regarding the amount of premium to be paid are prescribed in the Schedule to the Housing Ordinance or the relevant land leases.

Allowing owners to pay the premium by instalments is not in line with the principles of effective and rational use of public housing resources and equity, and may also indirectly stimulate speculative activities. If SSF owners are in need of financial assistance when they pay the premium, they may consider making financial arrangements through financial institutions, or choose to sell their flats in the HOS Secondary Market with premium unpaid.

Note 1: The HA does not maintain statistics on SSFs with premium paid by District Council districts, different sale schemes or individual SSF projects.

Note 2: HOS Flats means flats sold under the Home Ownership Scheme, the Private Sector Participation Scheme, the Buy or Rent Option Scheme, the Mortgage Subsidy Scheme, the Middle Income Housing Scheme and the Green Form Subsidised Home Ownership Scheme.

LCQ6: The purchase of properties outside Hong Kong

Following is a question by Hon Cheung Kwok-kwan and a written reply by the Secretary for Transport and Housing, Mr Frank Chan Fan, in the Legislative Council today (April 28):

Question:

It has been reported that Hong Kong people purchasing properties outside Hong Kong (in countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada and Thailand) has become a common phenomenon in recent years. Last year, the Estate Agents Authority received 66 complaints about the sale of properties outside Hong Kong, which is a tenfold surge from the six complaints received in the year before last. On protecting Hong Kong people who purchase properties outside Hong Kong, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the number of complaints, received by the authorities in each of the past five years, about uncompleted properties which had become default property developments in the end, and the total amount of losses involved, with a breakdown by the country/region in which such properties were located;

(2) whether it will consider afresh enacting legislation to regulate the

practices of selling in Hong Kong properties outside Hong Kong (including the contents of advertisements), and to prohibit persons who are neither licensed estate agents nor licensed salespersons from engaging in estate agency work for properties outside Hong Kong;

(3) as there has been an upward trend of complaints about purchases of properties outside Hong Kong in recent years, whether the authorities will consider establishing communication and co-operation mechanisms with the relevant regulatory authorities in those countries/regions in which the properties are hot commodities for Hong Kong people, so as to protect the rights and interests of Hong Kong people who have purchased properties therein; and

(4) whether the authorities will step up publicity efforts to remind members of the public about matters requiring attention and common traps to avoid when they purchase properties outside Hong Kong, so as to avoid falling prey to frauds?

Reply:

President,

Having consulted the Commerce and Economic Development Bureau, the Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau (CMAB), the Financial Services and the Treasury Bureau, the Security Bureau and the Estate Agents Authority (EAA), the consolidated reply to the question raised by the Hon Cheung Kwok-kwan is set out below:

(1) For complaints received by Government departments/organisations which involved properties outside Hong Kong, there is no classification on whether the properties concerned were not completed on schedule (or referred to as "default property developments"). As regards the number of complaints received by departments/organisations which involved uncompleted properties outside Hong Kong in the past five years, the breakdown by year is shown at Annex. Since the complainants could lodge complaints to different departments/organisations and the departments/organisations could refer individual case(s) to another department/organisation, the complaints or cases received by different departments/organisations may involve the same cases.

(2) Regarding the engagement in estate agency work involving properties situated outside Hong Kong, pursuant to the Estate Agents (Exemption from Licensing) Order (Cap. 511B), a person shall be exempted from the requirement for obtaining an estate agent's licence if he/she handles exclusively properties outside Hong Kong; and states in all his/her documents (including pamphlets and brochures, etc.) and advertisement that he/she is not licensed to deal with any property situated in Hong Kong. However, if the company or individual concerned performs estate agency work for properties both within Hong Kong and outside Hong Kong, that company/individual is required to obtain a licence issued by the EAA and be regulated by the EAA. If a licensed estate agent/salesperson is suspected of breaching the Code of Ethics and

practice circulars issued by the EAA in the course of the sale of properties, regardless of whether the properties concerned are Hong Kong properties or not, the EAA will investigate the matter.

In December 2017, the EAA issued a practice circular to provide guidelines on the appropriate practices and measures to be adopted in handling the sale of uncompleted properties situated outside Hong Kong for estate agent licensees to comply with. These practices and measures include, amongst others, due diligence measures and requirement on providing important sales documents. The guidelines have taken effect since April 1, 2018. Licensees who breach the guidelines may be subject to disciplinary actions from the EAA.

There are likely substantial differences between the sale of properties situated outside Hong Kong and those in Hong Kong from the perspectives of market operation and conduct regulation. Moreover, the sale of properties situated outside Hong Kong involves laws and regulations as well as tax regimes of different jurisdictions, and also various stakeholders (e.g. non-local developers, intermediaries and agents). Furthermore, vendors of non-local properties can easily conduct sales and promotion activities through the internet, which is very difficult to regulate. It has been a more effective approach for the EAA to educate the consumers through various channels and continue to enhance public education by reminding consumers the issues that they should pay attention to before deciding to purchase non-local properties.

Regarding the regulation of practices (including advertising content) for the sale of non-local properties in Hong Kong, according to the relevant codes of practice on advertising standards issued by the Communications Authority, all advertisements on television and radio are required to be legal, clean, honest and truthful. For advertisements of real properties outside Hong Kong, the codes of practice require the broadcasting licensees to seek certain substantiation information from the advertisers, unless the advertiser is an estate agent licensed under the Estate Agents Ordinance (Cap. 511). The codes of practice further require such advertisements to carry an advisory message reminding the audience to obtain and review all relevant information relating to the real properties before making any purchase decisions and seek professional advice if in doubt.

(3) & (4) The EAA has from time to time reminded investors and the public the risks and points-to-note before deciding to purchase properties situated outside Hong Kong (especially those uncompleted ones) through articles in newspapers and other media, educational booklets and public seminars, etc. The EAA also set up a designated section about purchasing properties located outside Hong Kong under its consumer education website and published a new educational booklet entitled "Purchasing Non-local Properties Be SMART" in early 2020, reminding consumers about the risks of purchasing properties situated outside Hong Kong. The EAA also rolled out its online promotion campaign to attract the public to visit its consumer education website and read the booklet.

Apart from organising two large-scale public seminars on purchasing non-local properties, the EAA also held two online seminars in 2020 and 2021 respectively, which generated over 80 000 views of the online seminar video. Besides, the practice circular issued to licensees as mentioned in Part (2) of this reply is not only binding on the licensed estate agents, but also provides a reference for consumers to assess whether the sales arrangements adopted by individual persons (including the exempted persons) are appropriate.

Moreover, the Consumer Council has from time to time published articles in its publications to remind the public of the risks involved in the purchase of properties outside Hong Kong, for example, by extracting actual complaint cases relating to the purchase of properties outside Hong Kong in the "CHOICE" magazine.

Besides, the Securities and Futures Commission (SFC) updated in 2016 its FAQs in relation to the Securities and Futures Ordinance to provide guidance on collective investment schemes involving real estate interests. Furthermore, the SFC and its subsidiary, the Investor and Financial Education Council (IFEC), have issued educational materials on overseas property investment and reminded the public of the potential risks involved through various channels (e.g. IFEC's educational website "The Chin family", social media, newspaper and seminars) from time to time. The SFC and the IFEC will continue to enhance investor education on this front.

Apart from the above, one of the main functions of the five Mainland Offices of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government (namely the Beijing Office and the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Offices in Guangdong, Chengdu, Shanghai and Wuhan) is to provide assistance to Hong Kong residents in distress in the Mainland. If the Hong Kong residents seeking assistance wish to make complaints or appeals to the Mainland authorities as regards properties in the Mainland, the Mainland Offices will refer their cases to the relevant Mainland authorities on request. Besides, the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office in Guangdong has commissioned an organisation to provide free legal advisory service to Hong Kong residents in need through a telephone hotline or by arranging Mainland duty lawyers to meet the assistance seekers to provide preliminary advice on Mainland related legal matters.

To enhance the public's understanding of matters related to property purchase in the Mainland, the Mainland Offices published the Practical Guide for Hong Kong Residents Living in the Mainland, a booklet on living in the Mainland covering practical information about property purchase such as points to note for entering contracts on sale and purchase. A link to the webpage of the EAA containing practical information on the purchase of property outside Hong Kong has been provided on the websites of the Mainland Offices to facilitate access by citizens. The CMAB has also published an article in the "CHOICE" magazine of the Consumer Council in February 2021 to remind citizens of the points to note when purchasing property in the Mainland. The web link of the article has been added to the websites of the Mainland Offices.

LCQ17: Anti-epidemic measures

Following is a question by the Hon Chan Han-pan and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (April 28):

Question:

An expert on epidemiology has pointed out that while the fourth wave of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) epidemic has become stable recently, there may still be silent transmission in the community. On the other hand, during holidays and weekends, everywhere in the street is packed with people, and members of the public have not maintained an appropriate social distance. Under such circumstances, the epidemic may rebound on a large scale at any time. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it has drawn up a contingency plan for a large-scale rebound of the epidemic; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) whether it has plans to fully introduce COVID-19 rapid self-testing services to increase the testing capability; if not, of the reasons for that; if so, whether it will provide those categories of persons such as teachers, students and restaurant practitioners with free or subsidised services to encourage them to conduct testing on their own daily; and

(3) given that currently some scheduled premises (such as bars and karaoke establishments) have not yet been allowed to resume business, whether the Government will consider relaxing the operation restrictions of such scheduled premises subject to the following conditions being met: operators of scheduled premises must arrange for their staff to undergo COVID-19 tests more frequently, and operators may only receive customers who have undergone COVID-19 rapid tests; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

The number of local confirmed cases has declined to a lower level in recent days. To continue containing the spread of the disease, we cannot let our guard down. It is essential for us to take all necessary measures to strengthen epidemic control by guarding against the importation of cases and the resurgence of domestic infections, and to further enhance the precision of the control measures in a bid to achieve the target of "zero infection" with the support and cooperation of the general public. At the same time, we will adopt the concept of "vaccine bubble" as announced earlier as the new direction in fighting the epidemic.

My reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Chan Han-pan is as follows:

(1) On the prevention of importation of cases, more targeted measure in stopping the introduction of the virus into Hong Kong at the source, the Government implemented on April 14 the tightened flight-specific suspension mechanism, as well as the new place-specific flight suspension mechanism in parallel. Under the place-specific flight suspension mechanism, if a total of five or more passengers among all flights from the same place, regardless of airline, were confirmed by arrival tests for COVID-19 with the N501Y mutant strain within a seven-day period, the Government would invoke the Prevention and Control of Disease (Regulation of Cross-boundary Conveyances and Travellers) Regulation (Cap. 599H) to prohibit all passenger flights from that place from landing in Hong Kong for 14 days, and would at the same time specify that place as an extremely high-risk place under Cap. 599H to restrict persons who have stayed in that place for more than two hours from boarding passenger flights for Hong Kong for 14 days, so as to prevent persons from the relevant place from arriving at Hong Kong via transit.

At the same time, the Government has in place very stringent inbound prevention and control measures, including requiring travellers arriving at Hong Kong to undergo "test-and-hold" at the airport, as well as the arrangement of dedicated transport to transfer persons who have stayed in different places outside China to designated quarantine hotels for compulsory quarantine. All travellers arriving at Hong Kong via land boundary control points, including Hong Kong residents returning under the Return2hk scheme, are also subject to tests.

As the global pandemic situation remains severe with the new virus variants still ravaging many parts of the world, the Government needs to maintain the 21-day compulsory quarantine requirement for persons who have stayed in high-risk places outside China. However, considering that the epidemic situations in certain places have stabilised and pose lower public health risks, with reference to the "vaccine bubble" concept, the Government will adjust the quarantine arrangements for persons who have stayed in overseas places other than extremely high-risk and very high-risk places under the Compulsory Quarantine of Certain Persons Arriving at Hong Kong Regulation (Cap. 599C), the Compulsory Quarantine of Persons Arriving at Hong Kong from Foreign Places Regulation (Cap. 599E) and Cap. 599H. The basic boarding and quarantine requirements will remain unchanged for high-risk and medium-risk places (i.e. Group B and Group C specified places), but the Government will supplement in due course new arrangements applicable to fully vaccinated persons and shorten the compulsory quarantine period for the relevant persons from 21 days to 14 days under the "vaccine bubble" concept. As for low-risk Group D specified places (i.e. Australia, New Zealand and Singapore), the compulsory quarantine period for fully vaccinated persons will also be correspondingly shortened from 14 days to seven days in due course under the "vaccine bubble" concept. Persons that have completed quarantine under the adjusted Group B, Group C and Group D requirements will be required to self-monitor for seven days and undergo compulsory testing after their shortened quarantine. The Government will announce at appropriate

junction the adjusted arrangement and the exact grouping of places after finalising the relevant details.

In terms of prevention of rebound within the community, the Government has all along been adjusting our social distancing measures having regard to the latest development of the epidemic situation. If and when there are cluster outbreaks on individual types of premises, we would, taking into account the actual circumstances and the operating characteristics of individual sectors, enhance the infection control measures on the relevant premises. For instance, in view of the cluster in eateries earlier, we have introduced two infection control measures in respect of catering premises successively, in order to step up infection control thereat and reduce transmission risks: (1) starting from March 4, all catering premises are required to arrange, if practicable, dedicated staff for clearing used utensils and cleaning and disinfecting used tables and partitions or suitably adopt hand hygiene measures; and (2) by end April, all catering premises must enhance its air ventilation to a minimum level of six air changes per hour, and if this could not be achieved, appropriate air purifier(s) should be installed as an alternative, in order to reduce the relevant transmission risks. In addition, there was a large-scale cluster outbreak involving a fitness centre earlier. To contain the outbreak, we tightened the infection control measures in fitness centres with immediate effect from March 12 by reinstating the mask-on requirement.

Virus testing is an integral part of our anti-epidemic strategies. Regarding the strategy for virus testing, we will continue to expand and enhance the implementation of compulsory testing on a mandatory basis, targeted testing on an obligatory basis and testing on a voluntary basis, and provide more convenient testing services to encourage members of the public to undergo testing, with a view to achieving the objective of "early identification, early isolation and early treatment" and cutting the transmission chains as early as possible.

On the other hand, the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme is being implemented in full swing. Members of the public are provided with the Sinovac and Comirnaty vaccines which meet the criteria of safety, efficacy and quality. So far, a total of over 1.3 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines have been administered to the public (including about 700 000 doses of the Sinovac vaccine and about 600 000 doses of the Comirnaty vaccine). The Vaccination Programme has already covered persons aged 16 or above. Members of the public can receive COVID-19 vaccines at 29 Community Vaccination Centres throughout Hong Kong, designated General Out-patient Clinics under the Hospital Authority, as well as designated private clinics.

(2) The Government has all along been providing convenient testing services to the public through various channels, including free testing service. The 21 community testing centres across the territory provide self-paid testing services to the public for general community or private purposes (such as certification for travelling or work); and free testing services for persons subject to compulsory testing or targeted groups requiring testing (including employees of designated scheduled premises and catering businesses,

construction site workers as well as school staff). The number of tests available for appointments at community testing centres has been further increased to more than 38 000 per day, and more manpower has been deployed to serve the public. In the past few weeks, the average booking rate for the next seven days at the 21 community testing centres in the territory was only about 20 per cent, and there were sufficient quotas to meet the demand. In addition, there are about 20 mobile specimen collection stations throughout Hong Kong that provide free testing services to the public, some of which exclusively serve staff of catering premises and designated scheduled premises and local residents and workers subject to compulsory testing, with sufficient capacity to meet the testing needs of the public and the relevant sectors.

The Government has been monitoring the latest developments of COVID-19 testing technology. With reference to scientific studies around the world and in Hong Kong, practical experience and expert advice, the Government will roll out rapid antigen tests in specific settings. For instance, the Hospital Authority announced earlier the resumption of special visiting arrangements in infirmary hospitals. Relevant departments are also exploring the possibility of applying rapid antigen testing in the visiting arrangement at care homes.

(3) The Chief Executive announced on April 12 that the Government would adopt a new direction in fighting the pandemic down the road, which is manifested by the adjustments of social distancing measures with "vaccine bubble" as the basis, with a view to giving a clear path to help the community to build a consensus and work together, so that Hong Kong can gradually return to normality.

The Government had earlier met with the relevant trade representatives to listen to their views and suggestions on the implementation of social distancing measures under the "vaccine bubble" and finalised the details of the relevant measures after considering their views. The relevant details was announced on April 27.

Under the "vaccine bubble" concept, the six types of premises that are currently required to be closed (viz. bar or pub, bathhouse, party room, club or nightclub, mahjong-tin kau premises and karaoke establishment) may gradually resume operation on the premise of adopting the specific measures in relation to staff and/or customers receiving COVID-19 vaccination and customers using the "LeaveHomeSafe" mobile application to record the premises visited. At the same time, the Government will make appropriate arrangements for the staff of these premises who are unable to receive COVID-19 vaccination because of health reasons and the elderly and children who are unable to use the "LeaveHomeSafe" mobile application.

The Government will continue to closely monitor the implementation situation of the relevant measures, and having regard to the development of the epidemic situation, suitably adjust the social distancing measures.

Public hospitals daily update on COVID-19 cases

The following is issued on behalf of the Hospital Authority:

As at 9am today (April 28), 13 COVID-19 confirmed patients were discharged from hospital in the last 24 hours. So far, a total of 11 392 patients with confirmed or probable infection have been discharged.

At present, there are 636 negative pressure rooms in public hospitals with 1 179 negative pressure beds activated. A total of 117 confirmed patients are currently hospitalised in 16 public hospitals and the North Lantau Hospital Hong Kong Infection Control Centre, among which three patients are in critical condition, two are in serious condition and the remaining 112 patients are in stable condition.

The Hospital Authority will maintain close contact with the Centre for Health Protection to monitor the latest developments and to inform the public and healthcare workers on the latest information in a timely manner.

The case numbers of the discharged, critical and serious patients are as follows:

Discharged	11461, 11538, 11540, 11562, 11576, 11594, 11627, 11643, 11653, 11660, 11694, 11730, 11734
Critical	6794, 8078, 9907
Serious	10358, 11654