



18 March 2022

Dear Heads of Post and IBC Members,

Further to my letter of 28 February 2022 enclosing the 25th monthly report on the work of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government in combating COVID-19, I have received written feedback from some of you expressing concerns or seeking clarifications of certain anti-epidemic measures of the Government. Since there is a lot of common ground in the issues raised, I feel a consolidated reply from me will be helpful. Before I address those concerns one by one, let me share with you the severe challenges I and my team are handling with the exponential rise in infected cases and deaths, and would ask for your understanding and tolerance.

First and foremost, many of you have expressed the wish that close contacts of infected persons should be allowed to undergo home quarantine which should also be extended to infected persons with mild or no symptoms. I would say that such requests seen against the nature of the Omicron variant where only a tiny fraction of the infected persons require medical treatment are understandable. Indeed, in light of the surge in infected cases in the past month and the tremendous pressure on our hospital and isolation facilities, the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health (DH) has already adopted the pragmatic move of allowing close contacts to undergo home quarantine since 8 February 2022; and in late February, relaxed the criteria for discharge from the 14-day quarantine order such that fully vaccinated (two doses) people could return to normal life after two successive rapid antigen test (RAT) showing a negative result on the sixth and seventh day.

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The CHP further announced on 26 February that, in view of the latest epidemic development and risk assessment, home isolation is an option for infected persons where the living conditions and other personal circumstances permit. In practice, people tested positive by either polymerase chain reaction (PCR) or RAT are invited to undergo online self-reporting or self-declaration to CHP and the electronic form for reporting or declaration launched on 7 March (<https://www.chp.gov.hk/ratp/>) does allow for the person to indicate that he/she needs priority for admission to a government community isolation facility because of congested living conditions or personal circumstances. Those indicated no need for priority admission will normally be issued with an order to undergo isolation at home.

Looking ahead, after the 5th wave subsides, the Government will vigorously review the experience gained in the above isolation and quarantine policies to see whether they should be formally institutionalised for future application irrespective of the epidemic situation and the availability of government isolation and quarantine facilities.

Some of you have expressed concerns about cross-infection while undergoing PCR tests as a result of prolonged queuing at community testing centres and mobile testing stations. You will have noticed that with the adoption of a ticketing system, most of the testing stations have been cleared of long queues; and following the significant reduction in demand for PCR tests, testing at designated spots is now by and large hassle-free.

This brings me to respond to your concerns about the Compulsory Universal Testing (CUT) scheme announced by me on 22 February as a means to help end the 5th wave. I am acutely aware of the fact that since its announcement, the scheme has attracted a lot of attention and created some anxieties. The HKSAR Government fully recognises that such a major operation has to be carefully and meticulously designed to ensure it will achieve its desired effect and minimise disruptions to the city. With a view to allaying concerns and

refuting rumours circulating on the social media, the Government issued a press release on 1 March to reiterate that due consideration would certainly be given to maintaining the operation of important and essential activities in society and addressing the needs of the public during any CUT operation. We also acknowledge the need to provide advance notice and full details of the scheme so that nobody would be taken by surprise. As I mentioned at my daily press conference yesterday, we shall have more to report on this soon.

Globally, it has been fully recognised that vaccination is the one single effective means to reduce morbidity and mortality of the infected population and hence prevent devastating the hospital system. For Hong Kong, we have experienced it through the tragic way with 87% of fatalities being elderly aged 70 or over of whom 90% had not been fully vaccinated. Since launching the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme in late February 2021, we have spared no effort in boosting the vaccination rates through various means. For the sake of returning our city to normalcy, we will continue to urge people who have yet to be vaccinated to do so as soon as possible. Indeed, in my monthly reports over the past year, I have very often made that appeal to you all and am grateful for your support. Our utmost priority now is to vaccinate our elderly, especially those in elderly homes. A two-week campaign to visit all the 1 000 homes will end today and we hope to meet that target to protect our elderly. At the community level, priority is also given to elderly citizens to receive vaccination. Programmes will start shortly to visit individual elderly at their own home to administer the vaccination. Through combined efforts, the vaccination (first dose) rate of elderly aged 70 or above has risen from 36% as at end December 2021 (before the 5th wave) to 70% at present.

Another concern commonly shared by the consular and international business community is the separation of infected children from parents or infected parents from their new born babies in Hospital Authority (HA) hospitals. As the Chief Executive who has advocated a social policy that should be pro-child and pro-family, I was naturally distressed by such incidents brought to my attention. I have been told

that the HA has all along been endeavouring to facilitate and arrange parents to stay with their hospitalised minor children and our new Children's Hospital at Kai Tak has been built with more of such facilities. I have instructed the Secretary for Food and Health to make sure that during the COVID-19 epidemic, the HA will continue to adhere to this important principle. The same pro-child and pro-family policy will also apply to admissions into government isolation facilities.

My Government also attaches importance to school learning especially for the younger students. Despite complaints from local schools of disparity in treatment, I have asked the Secretary for Education to exempt international schools from the measure to advance the summer holiday taking into account their special arrangements for expatriate staff and families. As announced by the Secretary for Education on 28 February, international schools may continue with online teaching in March and April with the goal of resuming face-to-face learning after the Easter holiday. I should just add that when it comes to offering subsidies and providing relief, the Government is treating international schools no different from local schools.

On social distancing measures which are considered to be essential by public health experts to minimise people flow and hence the spread of the virus, the Government has recently lifted the closure requirement of hair salon/barber shop in response to public needs and we will continue to review other social distancing measures at 14-day intervals taking account of the epidemic situation.

Throughout the fight against COVID-19, my Government has been offering rounds of relief and subsidies to hard hit businesses through the Anti-epidemic Fund (AEF). Since the 5th wave emerged, we have offered two rounds of AEF support at a total cost of some \$30 billion and the 2022-23 Budget has contained a host of measures including the \$10,000 consumption vouchers to help businesses and individuals. Earlier today, I announced the relaunching of the highly effective Employment Support Scheme (ESS)

which is intended to provide wage subsidies to employers benefiting over one million employees.

Finally, I am sure top on your mind will be the resumption of quarantine-free international travel as well as travel into the Mainland. That will take time to materialise in our mapping out the post-fifth wave pathway, but before that, we will review the place-specific flight suspensions in order to allow stranded Hong Kong residents to return.

Going forward, as soon as the 5th wave stabilises, the Government will spare no effort in relaunching Hong Kong on all fronts. We welcome active participation of the business chambers and I will ask my relevant Bureau Secretaries to get in touch. Meanwhile, I appreciate you may still have questions to ask and I am happy to host a webinar in due course for all of us to have a fruitful exchange.

Yours sincerely,



(Mrs Carrie Lam)
Chief Executive

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c.c. Chief Secretary for Administration,
Chairman of International Business Committee
Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development