

**For discussion  
on 25 April 2022**

## **Legislative Council Panel on Public Service**

### **Arrangements for Civil Servants to Participate in Anti-epidemic Work**

#### **Purpose**

This paper briefs Members on civil servants' participation in the anti-epidemic effort against the fifth wave of the COVID-19 epidemic.

#### **Background**

2. The COVID-19 epidemic first broke out in Hong Kong in early 2020, and the fifth wave of the epidemic took a turn for the worse in January this year and brought unprecedented challenges to Hong Kong. The HKSAR Government assumes the primary responsibility in anti-epidemic work. It follows the principle of “preventing the importation of cases and the spreading of virus in the community” at all stages of the anti-epidemic effort to achieve the goal of “early identification, early isolation and early treatment”. All available manpower and resources are mobilised to fight against the COVID-19 epidemic with all necessary measures adopted to control the epidemic situation as soon as possible.

3. The civil service, as the backbone of the HKSAR Government and a team to serve all Hong Kong people, is obligated and assumes an important responsibility to fight the epidemic as their top priority. All government employees stand ready at all times and participate in anti-epidemic work when called upon by their departments, no matter what their original or usual duties are.

4. While the epidemic situation has been stabilising and the Government has gradually resumed public services from 1 April with a view to largely resuming normal public services from 21 April, the fight against the epidemic remains the top priority and mission of the Government. The Government will continue to mobilise all available manpower and resources to fight the epidemic.

#### **Overall Manpower Situation of Anti-epidemic Work**

5. The fifth wave of the epidemic is more severe than the past few waves. The anti-epidemic measures involve a wide range of sectors and require enormous human resources. Many of the relevant tasks have to be conducted overnight such that confirmed cases and the needs of the public could be dealt with promptly and the impact of the operation to the society minimised as far as possible. Regardless of their departments and grades, civil servants, be they civilian or disciplined services staff, are all mobilised to take up various roles in the anti-epidemic work at full stretch under the leadership of Permanent Secretaries and Heads of Departments. The solidarity,

responsiveness and flexibility of various bureaux and departments (B/Ds), as well as the proactive participation of civil servants at all ranks are indispensable in the quick and smooth implementation of the anti-epidemic measures. Since the outbreak of the fifth wave of the epidemic, the number of staff mobilised far exceeds those in the past few waves. It is estimated that over 140 000 government employees have participated in the anti-epidemic work at different times and in different roles, accounting for 70% of the total number of government employees.

6. The core anti-epidemic B/Ds are responsible for the planning, organisation and coordination of anti-epidemic tasks over the past two years, involving over 30 000 government employees. Of these B/Ds, the Food and Health Bureau (FHB), the Department of Health (DH) and the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department are responsible for the formulation and implementation of the overall anti-epidemic strategies and measures. The Civil Service Bureau (CSB) is responsible for the coordination of manpower in support of the anti-epidemic effort and the implementation of the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme. Staff members of the Home Affairs Bureau (HAB) and the Home Affairs Department (HAD) provide support to the community under the epidemic. The Office of the Government Chief Information Officer (OGCIO) provides support for epidemic-related innovation and technology applications, and the Information Services Department is responsible for disseminating information on the epidemic.

7. Apart from core anti-epidemic B/Ds, other government departments have also mobilised enormous manpower to carry out essential anti-epidemic duties on various fronts. A multipronged approach has been adopted to prevent and curb the spread of the epidemic, and to ensure the smooth operation of our society. Key areas of such work include implementing a risk-based testing strategy, expediting contact tracing, enhancing quarantine, isolation and community medical service arrangements, ensuring supplies for the community, implementing support measures, and strengthening external and internal communications. Staff members of various B/Ds, including the Transport and Housing Bureau (THB), the Environment Bureau and the Environmental Protection Department (EPD), the Education Bureau, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD), the Housing Department, the Government Logistics Department (GLD), etc. have participated in these efforts. Since the onset of the fifth wave of the epidemic, relevant government departments have mobilised a total of over 40 000 staff members to provide diverse support to the anti-epidemic work.

8. While making an all-out effort to fight the epidemic, the Government continues to maintain emergency services and essential public services. Examples include mail delivery, road inspection, emergency road repairs, management of public housing estates, etc. At the same time, about 69 000 government employees from the Security Bureau and various disciplined services continue to provide public services such as law enforcement to maintain law and order in the society, emergency rescue, cargo clearance, operation of control points, etc. Meanwhile, they are facing unprecedented pressure in some scopes of their work, including the substantial surge in the Fire Services Department (FSD)'s emergency ambulance service calls due to the severe epidemic situation, and the arrangements for isolation and treatment for persons in custody who are infected with COVID-19 in the Correctional Services Department's

correctional institutions. In facing immense pressure, the Security Bureau and the disciplined services departments also have to take up extra duties in managing the community isolation facilities.

9. The epidemic has also affected the manpower of various government departments. From the onset of the fifth wave to 11 April, a cumulative total of 45 793 government employees were infected with COVID-19, accounting for about 24% of the overall actual number of government employees and involving 78 B/Ds. Among the infected government employees, more than 95% (43 963 persons) have resumed duty. To focus on controlling and stabilising the epidemic, adjustments were made to some non-emergency public services at the peak of the epidemic. Manpower of individual offices was also affected as some of their staff were infected with COVID-19, or were put under isolation or quarantine. Nevertheless, various departments have adjusted their staff arrangements as appropriate, and strived their best to maintain public services and to provide frontline and backend support to the anti-epidemic effort at the same time amidst the challenges brought by the epidemic and limited manpower.

### **Working As a Team: Government Departments Supporting Each Other with Complementary Expertise**

10. During the fifth wave of the epidemic, the Government has introduced various targeted measures which require enormous manpower for implementation within an extremely short span of time. In addition, a number of B/Ds have taken up additional anti-epidemic work, and their workload has surged along with the exponential increase in the number of confirmed cases. Given the limited manpower resources of the Government, the entire civil service understands that in order to complete the tasks effectively, colleagues from different departments have to work together in solidarity. Members from various grades are being deployed to make good use of their profession and expertise, and to jointly provide manpower support for different anti-epidemic tasks. In this way, more efficient and steadfast support could be provided to our anti-epidemic work. The following are a few examples:

#### ***(a) Risk-based Testing Strategy***

11. The Government has been implementing a risk-based testing strategy to achieve the goals of “early identification, early isolation and early treatment” through restriction-testing declaration (RTD), compulsory testing and voluntary testing.

12. The FHB started to make RTDs from time to time since early last year under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Compulsory Testing for Certain Persons) Regulation (Cap. 599J). All persons in the specified “restricted area” are required to undergo compulsory testing within a timeframe specified by the Government and stay in their premises until the test results of all persons in the area are mostly ascertained. From early January to 13 April this year, the Government had conducted more than 320 operations in various districts and the testing results indicated that the proportion of cases with positive test results was quite high, suggesting that RTD operations can help the Government to focus resources on high-risk districts.

13. RTD operations at the earlier stage were mainly coordinated by the HAD and the Housing Department which are more familiar with district matters. Furthermore, staff of other departments would also be deployed when necessary such that the planning, coordination, preparation and deployment of manpower and resources could be done as soon as possible for the commencement of the operations. The Police has taken part in every operation as well, responsible for cordoning off the area and maintaining order. Since late February this year, the Government has expanded RTD operations and mobilised even more staff from 11 bureaux and more than 40 departments under their purview. These departments have formed supporting teams and are ready to support operations whenever needed. About 150 to 450 government staff members are needed for each RTD operation of a building and the actual manpower required depends on factors such as the size of the restricted area, duration of the operation and the number of residents affected, etc.

14. As regards sewage surveillance, since October 2020, the EPD and the Drainage Services Department (DSD) in collaboration with the cross-disciplinary team of the University of Hong Kong have been conducting a research study on sewage surveillance for monitoring the transmission of the virus in local communities. In order to identify the origin of the virus in the area early, the Government, after risk assessment, has been conducting RTD operations in areas where the sewage discharged has been tested positive for COVID-19. The HAD has also distributed test kits according to the sewage testing results.

15. In addition, at the onset of the fifth wave of the epidemic, the demand for nucleic acid testing increased drastically. For better crowd management at testing stations, the CSB mobilised about 500 colleagues from 9 departments, together with district organisations and volunteer groups mobilised by the HAD, and in liaison with testing contractors through the FHB, to help the contractors to divert the crowd and assist the public at testing stations with longer queues.

***(b) Contact Tracing, Notification of Confirmed Cases and Follow-up Work***

16. The Government has been preventing the spread of the virus in the community in accordance with the principle of “early identification, early isolation and early treatment”. To expedite contact tracing, the Government set up the Contact Tracing Office in 2021. Officers from the disciplined services, with their experience in investigative duties, have been deployed to the offices to help conduct tracing with greater precision and efficiency in a professional and scientific manner with a view to cutting virus transmission chains swiftly. During the fifth wave of epidemic, to facilitate a large number of confirmed patients to report their cases for effective follow-up action, the DH has developed electronic platforms for the public to submit notification of their infection (identified by nucleic acid testing or rapid antigen test (RAT)) and to receive isolation order and quarantine order through electronic means. The Contact Tracing Offices have strengthened their manpower to follow up on cases which are reported electronically without complete information. Manpower has been deployed from more than 10 departments, including the Invest Hong Kong, the Inland Revenue Department, the Official Receiver’s Office, the Companies Registry, the

Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC), etc., to the Contact Tracing Offices, which in total have contributed more than 800 colleagues from various grades for relevant work. Amongst the staff deployed in the fifth wave, more than 500 of them are civilian staff.

***(c) Community Isolation and Treatment Arrangements***

17. To lessen demand on isolation wards at public hospitals and community treatment facilities as soon as possible for patients with higher risk of requiring medical care, the Government has quickly identified nine sites for community isolation and treatment facilities. With the support of the Central Government, the Development Bureau coordinated with the related works departments to build these facilities at full speed. During the process, a number of departments utilised their strength and gave their full cooperation both in terms of hardware or software contribution. For the hardware, the Development Bureau created a task force responsible for pooling professionals from various works departments, with specific professionals being put in charge of specific projects and working in full steam on the projects in cooperation with construction teams. Amongst the departments engaged, the Architectural Services Department was responsible for overseeing the construction of community isolation and treatment facilities. The Civil Engineering and Development Department shouldered the duty of coordinating the construction of supporting infrastructure and coordinating with such other works departments as the DSD, the Electrical and Mechanical Services Department, the Highways Department, the Water Supplies Department as well as public utilities companies in the process. For the software, the Security Bureau is responsible for the operation and management of the community isolation facilities, with assistance offered by the disciplined services departments in actual operation.

18. The Security Bureau set up an anti-epidemic task force in February 2022. About 4 600 staff (including serving and retired disciplined services staff and other government employees) have joined the task force. They are responsible for managing 27 community isolation facilities in total. Relevant tasks include inspecting the facilities, managing supplies, distributing meals and daily necessities, answering inquiries from persons under isolation, etc. In addition, they have participated in other relevant tasks including contact tracing, arranging transportation for infected persons to the isolation facilities, providing backend support, etc.

19. In addition to the above, to speed up the admission of infected persons to hospitals or isolation facilities and to facilitate the distribution of anti-epidemic supplies, the CSB has deployed some 90 Executive Officers, clerical and secretarial staff, and data processors to the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) to assist with data entry and liaison.

**People-oriented: Provide Appropriate Support to the Public**

20. The fifth wave of the epidemic has come with severity and threatened people from all sectors of the society. With empathy and compassion, civil servants uphold a

people-oriented principle in the anti-epidemic work and stay focused on the primary goal of safeguarding the lives, health and safety of the public.

***(a) Coordination and Distribution of Anti-epidemic Supplies from the Mainland***

21. The Commerce and Economic Development Bureau (CEDB) is responsible for the coordination of the Task Force of Ensuring Medical Supplies, which includes representatives from the FHB and the GLD. The Task Force of Ensuring Medical Supplies works closely with its Mainland counterparts according to the needs of the Government's anti-epidemic policies and measures to ensure that the large quantities of medical supplies procured with the coordination by the Central Government can reach Hong Kong orderly and be distributed to the departments swiftly. Over 30 types of medical supplies broadly under five main categories, namely testing, personal protection, disinfection, medication and equipment, have been received by the Government. These include over 240 million RAT kits, 360 million N95/KN95/surgical/medical masks, 60 million sets of personal protective equipment, 1.6 million pulse oximeters and 600 000 boxes of anti-epidemic proprietary Chinese medicine.

22. Different B/Ds are responsible for the distribution and coordination of supplies provided to Hong Kong. To increase Hong Kong's storage capacity and logistic efficiency, the CEDB has assisted the GLD to identify more storage facilities. With a view to together ensuring stable goods supply from the Mainland to Hong Kong, the Task Force of Supplies from the Mainland led by the THB has assisted in enhancing the overall transportation capacity of water and land transport at a number of cross-boundary facilities through various means and coordinating the logistical arrangements for the supply of fresh food, vegetables and daily necessities to Hong Kong.

23. Currently, most of the anti-epidemic supplies have been distributed to frontline anti-epidemic personnel, persons with higher infection risks, persons working in high-risk industries, underprivileged groups, and people undergoing treatment or in need through various channels, including different government departments, enthusiastic local associations, etc., in order to help stabilise the fifth wave of the epidemic. Taking RAT kits as an example, a total of 11 million RAT kits had been distributed to the public as at late March 2022. Amongst the total number of RAT kits distributed, nearly 6 million of them were distributed to residents, cleansing staff and property management staff through the 18 District Offices according to the sewage testing results and to the public directly with the help of district organisations, while 5.4 million of the kits were distributed through volunteer groups. The Task Force of Ensuring Medical Supplies had also allocated to the HAD over 70 million RAT kits and KN95 masks as well as 7 million portions of anti-epidemic proprietary Chinese medicines procured with the help of the Central Government. They were distributed to around 2.7 million households in the "anti-epidemic service bags".

***(b) Support for Persons under Home Isolation or Quarantine***

24. Since 21 February 2022, the OGCI has been distributing anti-epidemic kits containing RAT kits, thermometers, proprietary Chinese medicines, etc. to infected persons who are required to undergo home isolation and their cohabited close contacts who are required to undergo home quarantine (hereafter referred as “persons under home isolation and quarantine”) according to the instructions of the CHP. The tasks are coordinated and carried out by staff deployed from the OGCI and the ICAC, involving over 200 serving and retired government employees from various departments during the peak period. The OGCI has distributed 1.06 million anti-epidemic kits to about 500 000 infected persons and about 560 000 close contacts. During the peak period, anti-epidemic kits could be delivered to 50 000 to 60 000 persons each day, basically meeting the required number of deliveries as instructed by the CHP.

25. Staff of the HAB, the HAD and the LCSD are responsible for providing timely support to tens of thousands of persons under home isolation or quarantine. The 24-hour “StayHomeSafe” hotline (1833 019) set up in early February this year by the HAD currently has 280 lines in operation. About 550 staff members are arranged to operate the hotlines on a daily basis. These staff members mainly include government employees of the HAD and the LCSD, as well as travel trade practitioners employed by the HAD via the Travel Industry Council of Hong Kong (TIC) using the Anti-epidemic Fund since late March.

26. The Social Welfare Department and subsequently the HAD are responsible for providing daily necessities for persons who are under home isolation or quarantine and cannot make their own arrangements for daily necessities and food. As the workload is extremely heavy, the HAD has to mobilise various parties, including the civil servants, to provide support such that the delivery work can be done quickly and appropriately. In addition, the HAD and the LCSD have deployed their civil service staff to form a “Special Caring Delivery Team” for handling urgent cases received via the “StayHomeSafe” hotline so that necessities can be delivered within the shortest period of time.

***(c) Support for Various Industries and Sectors***

27. During the fifth wave of the epidemic, the Government has rolled out the fifth and sixth rounds of the Anti-epidemic Fund involving some 70 measures to provide support for businesses and individuals that are hard hit by the epidemic and the tightening of social distancing measures. Together with those launched under the earlier four rounds of the Fund, as many as about 180 relief measures have been introduced, involving 10 bureaux and around 20 government departments in the implementation of these relief measures. Many colleagues have, on top of their day-to-day business, accorded topmost priority to the additional work arising from the relief measures. Their work includes devising details of the schemes, processing applications, handling appeals and complaints, handling related administrative work, etc. Despite the additional workload, the civil service has remained committed to their duties, and tried every possible means to shorten the processing time such that the relief grant can be disbursed to various scheme applicants as soon as possible.

## **Concerted Actions: Joining Forces to Fight the Epidemic**

28. Participation of the community at large is crucial in the fight against the epidemic. Under the collaboration of the Government, the business sector and the community, various anti-epidemic measures have been delivered within a short time frame under the fifth wave of the epidemic. For example, a number of developers have lent private land to the Government for free for the construction of community isolation and treatment facilities. Various district and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have also participated in the large-scale anti-epidemic initiatives of distributing anti-epidemic supplies from the Mainland and “anti-epidemic service bags”. Other major examples include:

### ***(a) Promoting Vaccination***

29. Demand for COVID-19 vaccination spiked after the onset of the fifth wave of the epidemic. Under the coordination of the CSB, 18 additional community vaccination centres have been set up since January this year. Some of them were located in free venues offered by private enterprises. Moreover, the Government has launched the home vaccination service in collaboration with healthcare institutions, district organisations and social welfare organisations for vaccinating the elderly and persons who are unable to leave home due to medical conditions or disabilities, with a view to achieving the goals of making vaccination always available and reaching out to the individuals in need of vaccination. Various government B/Ds also continue to work with schools and residential care homes for the elderly and persons with disabilities to help members of the public to timely receive vaccination as soon as possible, with the elderly and children being the priority target groups.

### ***(b) Mobilising the Most Affected Trades to Join Anti-epidemic Work***

30. The fifth wave of the epidemic has taken a toll on all industries and sectors in Hong Kong. To support the personnel of the trades which are most hard-hit by the epidemic, at the same time helping the Government to implement some of the large-scale anti-epidemic measures and relieving the burden of civil servants in face of a sudden surge of anti-epidemic workload, government departments have mobilised the participation of relevant trades in the implementation of various anti-epidemic measures.

31. Taking the travel trade which has been hard hit by the epidemic as an example, the Government mobilised some 300 practitioners of the trade to distribute anti-epidemic kits to those under home isolation and quarantine together with the OGCIO and the ICAC staff during the peak period. In addition, government departments have also employed individuals who have been most affected by the epidemic through the Job Creation Scheme under the Anti-epidemic Fund to participate in anti-epidemic work. For example, the first batch of about 600 travel trade practitioners have been employed through the TIC for working at the “StayHomeSafe” hotline centre. Short-term jobs have been offered to travel trade practitioners for providing operational and



administrative support to community vaccination centres since May 2021. Sports coaches and travel trade practitioners have also been recruited as housekeeping assistants for community isolation facilities to provide support for persons undergoing quarantine in the facilities.

32. Under the fifth wave of the epidemic, the businesses and income of the transport trade are also seriously affected. Hence, the THB and the Transport Department invited the transport trade to jointly provide support to those who are infected and in need. For example, the Government, together with the taxi trade, has set up a designated taxi fleet to provide free transport between the designated clinics and the residences to infected persons with mild symptoms and undergoing home isolation. The designated fleet has facilitated infected persons to receive medical consultation and has reduced the public health risks associated to their visits to the designated clinics. Since the commencement of the service from 18 February, over 105 000 journeys have been completed.

33. Moreover, to alleviate the pressure for the demand of the FSD's ambulance service and to facilitate early admission of infected persons with no or mild symptoms to the community isolation facilities, the THB has liaised with trades of non-franchised buses (including coaches and school buses) as well as public light buses to set up a designated bus fleet, and arranged additional designated taxis to help the FSD to take these persons to the designated community isolation facilities. Since the commencement of the service from 21 February, the fleet has transported more than 38 000 infected persons to community isolation facilities. In addition, to tie in with the examination arrangements of the Education Bureau for the Diploma of Secondary Education Examination candidates who have been infected with COVID-19 or have been identified as close contacts, the designated taxi and bus fleet will also provide free pick-up services for candidates who need to take the examination at the Penny's Bay Community Isolation Facility.

***(c) Distributing “Anti-epidemic Service Bags”***

34. To meet the public's anti-epidemic needs promptly, the Government distributed “anti-epidemic service bags” to all households in Hong Kong. The packaging and distribution of the “anti-epidemic service bags” required enormous manpower. With the coordination by the HAD and the 18 District Officers, and the participation of Legislative Council Members, the Hong Kong Community Anti-Coronavirus Link, the Anti-Coronavirus Link of 18 districts, over 350 district organisations and NGOs, clansman organisations, charity groups, volunteer and uniformed groups, religious groups and ethnic minorities service organisations, as well as nearly 2 000 civil servants from 13 bureaux and their departments and the Department of Justice, the packaging work of around 3.5 million “anti-epidemic service bags” was completed at 133 assembly points within three days from 30 March to 1 April, fully demonstrating the united spirit of the Government and the community in fighting the epidemic.

35. The Government immediately started to distribute the “anti-epidemic service bags” from 2 April, with priority accorded to the under-privileged, such as households of “three-nil” buildings and subdivided units, singleton elderly, disabled persons, etc. The distribution of the service bags to these persons door-to-door was participated by more than 700 civil servants amongst others. Other channels include distribution by the Housing Department and the Hong Kong Housing Society to households of their public housing, distribution to households of private housing estates through owners’ corporations, other owners’ organisations or property management companies, as well as distribution to households living in rural or remote areas and to homeless people through the Heung Yee Kuk or Rural Committees and NGOs respectively. The Government had already distributed a total of around 3.1 million service bags to 2.7 million households in Hong Kong by 6 April, which was two days ahead of the original seven-day plan. The 18 District Offices then set up 89 “anti-epidemic service bag” distribution points from 7 to 13 April for collection by members of the public who had not received the service bags or were in need of more supplies because of larger family. Some 280 000 bags were distributed in the distribution points. Adding the 3.1 million bags distributed at the first stage, about 3.38 million of “anti-epidemic service bags” have been distributed during the entire operation.

### **Lead by Example: Promoting Dedication and Devotion**

36. In the fifth wave of the epidemic, civil servants at various ranks take the fight against the epidemic as their responsibilities. In addition to participating in anti-epidemic work when called upon by their departments, many colleagues have been leading by example and proactively reached out in the community out of their working hours, demonstrating their dedication in fighting the epidemic in unity with members of public. For example, the Administrative Officer Grade has formed a volunteer team of over 100 members comprising Permanent Secretaries, Heads of Departments and Administrative Officers at different ranks to participate in anti-epidemic work, including distribution of anti-epidemic supplies, data input and compilation and other supporting tasks. Apart from undertaking additional anti-epidemic duties in their own departments round the clock, many colleagues have also taken an extra step to take part in volunteer work in the community outside their working hours with exemplary dedication and devotion. The time devoted by these colleagues in the anti-epidemic fight, be it within their working time or not, is not quantifiable.

### **The Way Forward**

37. While the fifth wave of the epidemic has been stabilising, the civil service will stay vigilant. It will continue to make an all-out effort to support the anti-epidemic effort in multiple aspects and join in the fight against the epidemic in support of departmental arrangements. In face of the ever-evolving epidemic situation, the civil service will surely uphold the spirit of serving the public, stay committed to their duties and firmly stand by the public in the fight against the epidemic.

**Advice sought**

38. Members are invited to note this paper.

**Civil Service Bureau  
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