

Transcript of remarks of press conference (with photo/video)

The Chief Executive, Mrs Carrie Lam, held a press conference this afternoon (January 5). Also joining were the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan; the Director of Health, Dr Ronald Lam; the Controller of the Centre for Health Protection of the Department of Health, Dr Edwin Tsui; and the Chief Executive of the Hospital Authority, Dr Tony Ko. Following is the transcript of remarks of the press conference.

Reporter: Some English questions. Why not require work from home and suspend schools now? Can you explain the rationale? Also, is forbidding dine-in services only after 6pm enough?

Chief Executive: As I have said at my media stand-up yesterday, in the two years of fighting COVID-19, the most difficult decision for the Chief Executive is to decide what sort of measures to take, having regard to the epidemic situation, the various factors to be considered, and also knowing very well the impact – normally it would be the adverse impact – of the measures that we are going to take, particularly in tightening these social distancing measures. It is not an easy decision. But having regard to the transmissibility of Omicron as we have seen in other parts of the world, the not entirely satisfactory vaccination rate in Hong Kong, and also the latest public health advice given to me about these cases that they might be related to an imported case but the channel of transmission is not entirely clear, the advice given to me by my colleagues in the public health arena is we are facing a very dire situation of a major community outbreak any time, and that's why we have to take very decisive measures.

Of course, in taking the decisive measures we also have to consider some very genuine situations. You are right that compared with all the drastic measures we have taken previously, there are two measures that we have deliberated very fully this morning but decided that we would not put them in place in exactly the same way as previously. One is for civil servants to work from home. Of course, I would encourage private companies to allow their employees, wherever possible, to work from home, because the ultimate objective is to reduce people flow, to reduce congestion on public transport and hence to reduce the chance of infection. But for civil servants to work from home, our experience is, one, we have a lot of civil servants who have duties to do, and in dealing with this epidemic, there are even more duties for the civil servants to do. If you go to visit one of those places under the "restriction-testing declaration" in a district, in a small area or in a building, we have to mobilise hundreds of civil servants and staff to operate it. So it is not entirely realistic to carve up some of the civil servants who could work from home. Having said that, the Civil Service Bureau will advise the various departments that if departments have staff who could continue to deliver the service without coming back to office, without seeing their customers face-to-face, they will continue to do it. Just like how I

will be cancelling a lot of face-to-face meetings. I have cancelled my appearance at the Asian Financial Forum next Monday; I will do an online message to this very important forum held annually. All these are refinements in order to achieve the objective of reducing people flow but without introducing a drastic policy of allowing a certain percentage of civil servants not to come to the office, because that would seriously affect the service to the public. You may remember the situation when postmen were put to work from home, and they couldn't even deliver the essential goods and letters to the people of Hong Kong. That's our consideration of not putting in place the same policy of work from home. I would imagine that some of my civil service colleagues will not be coming back to office because they could meet the requirement of providing service without coming back to office. And even for those who come back to office, they will be asked to come in staggered hours, they will be asked to go out to lunch in staggered hours, which will achieve a similar purpose but without undermining our service to the community.

As far as suspension of face-to-face learning, I mentioned this at my media stand-up yesterday. This is one of the most difficult decisions. I can take a decision to cancel events, dinners and so on, knowing that they will have an impact on the business, but one would not say that they have a very major consequence. But not allowing young students to come to school, not having face-to-face learning, is significantly affecting their health, whether it's their mental health or their physical health. And schools have been highly co-operative in arranging the resumption of these classes for a very long time, and so far they've been working well. So for the time being, we feel that, for the benefit and the interest of the children – and of course also their parents, because if the kids are not going to school and the parents couldn't look after them, there will be major problems as well – we are not suspending classes. But we will be sending very strong advice to the schools that they will have to be doubly cautious in enforcing all the precautionary measures in looking after their students. Those are the two major considerations in not putting in place the two measures that you have highlighted.

(Please also refer to the Chinese portion of the transcript.)

