

Transcript of remarks by CE at media session before ExCo

Following is the transcript of remarks by the Chief Executive, Mrs Carrie Lam, at a media session before the Executive Council meeting today (January 18):

Reporter: The first question is about Dr Gabriel Leung's advice because he was saying, I think earlier last week, that the Government can consider rolling out, allowing night time dining again until 8pm. Is this something the authorities can or is considering? And secondly, about the arrangement you just announced that the "vaccine bubble" will be rolled out earlier. So are you concerned long queues outside the vaccination centres will emerge again, like what we saw earlier this month? And have you discussed the arrangement with the sectors involved, including, for example, the catering industry? Can they cope with this arrangement because this arrangement has been amended time and again? Thank you.

Chief Executive: Of course, Professor Gabriel Leung is one of my expert advisors, and The University of Hong Kong has been commissioned by us to do a weekly assessment on the situation; but at the moment, since we have implemented the social distancing measures including the restriction of dine-in service in restaurants until February 3, there is no plan to relax this particular measure, especially in view of – you have heard me reporting – two local clusters which are of concern: one is about the quarantine hotel, which has led to the cases of a quarantined woman in the hotel plus nine relatives or close relatives; the other is the pet shop cluster, which we are very worried about. For the time being, we have no plan to relax what we have already announced for implementation; but going forward, of course, we will adjust our measures. If we are to allow dine-in service again – whether it will be back to the pre-Omicron situation which was very relaxed or we will adopt other means, this is something that we will certainly consider.

That brings me to answering your second question. One of the arrangements that we could consider after this round of social distancing measures is to allow businesses to operate under "vaccine bubble". In other words, staff and customers could only go into prescribed premises after they have been vaccinated. As a result of that suggestion, we are already seeing an increase – I wouldn't describe it as a surge – but an increase in vaccination amongst the population, especially amongst the older population, which is to be welcomed. Since we have been talking about this "vaccine bubble" for some time, and meanwhile we have been enhancing the capacity of our vaccination centres, I'm not worried about the capacity constraint leading to long queues. In fact, at the moment, we are doing about 40 000 doses every day but our capacity far exceeds 40 000, but I would advise members of the public to try to book an appointment to get vaccinated and leave the so-called daily quota for the elderly who find it less easy to book online.

About adopting "vaccine bubble" for an earlier resumption of business, we would certainly listen to what the sector has to say. In fact, the idea was volunteered by the trade. When they heard that we might be imposing more social distancing measures, I heard the trade, including the restaurant trade and the beauty parlour trade, actually volunteered, "Why didn't the Government allow us to operate on the basis of 'vaccine bubble'? We could ask our customers to get vaccinated before offering them the service." So in the next two weeks or so, we'll continue to engage them and see whether we can come up with more acceptable arrangements that will give us the assurance on fighting the epidemic but, at the same time, allow the business to operate. I fully understand their grievances and their hardship. We try to help through the AEF (Anti-epidemic Fund) 5.0 and we will continue to closely monitor the situation and consider other means of support as and when necessary.

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