

# Adjustment of the Base Rate

The following is issued on behalf of the Hong Kong Monetary Authority:

The Hong Kong Monetary Authority (HKMA) announced today (March 16) that the Base Rate was adjusted downward to 0.86% with immediate effect according to a pre-set formula.

The Base Rate is the interest rate forming the foundation upon which the Discount Rates for repurchase transactions through the Discount Window are computed. The Base Rate is currently set at either 50 basis points above the lower end of the prevailing target range for the US federal funds rate or the average of the five-day moving averages of the overnight and one-month Hong Kong Interbank Offered Rates (HIBORs), whichever is the higher.

Following the 100-basis point downward adjustment in the target range for the US federal funds rate on March 15 (US time), 50 basis points above the lower end of the prevailing target range for the US federal funds rate is 0.5%, while the average of the five-day moving averages of the overnight and one-month HIBORs is 0.86%. The Base Rate is therefore set at 0.86% according to the pre-set formula.

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## Government announces launch of Retail Sector Subsidy Scheme under Anti-epidemic Fund

To provide relief to retailers to help tide them over their financial difficulties during this challenging time, the Government will launch the Retail Sector Subsidy Scheme (the Scheme) under the Anti-epidemic Fund (the Fund) on March 23 (Monday).

A sum of \$5.6 billion is earmarked under the Fund for the Scheme which is expected to benefit some 70 000 retailers. Each eligible retail store will receive a one-off subsidy of \$80,000. The first tranche of payment will be made within April.

The Scheme covers shops that sell tangible goods to the public for personal or household consumption or utilisation. No processing or transformation of the goods should be involved in the resale process. This definition has all along been adopted by the Census and Statistics Department for the purpose of its regular economic and vacancies surveys for the retail sector and corresponds with the relevant international classification.

## Eligibility criteria

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To be eligible, an applicant must be:

- conducting substantial and substantive retail business at a fixed physical and individually operated store in Hong Kong; and
- running a business that has commenced before January 1, 2020, and is still in operation at the time of application.

Under the Scheme, eligible retail stores do not include:

- stores with licences of restaurants, canteens, light refreshment restaurants, fresh provision shops, food factories, bakeries, siu mei and lo mei shops issued by the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department;
- hawkers (including licensed hawkers);
- mobile stalls and counters in department stores without a separate payment system and stores operating under a short-term tenancy of a duration less than six months; and
- retail stores conducting non-store retailing via mail order, internet or direct marketing sales only.

Under the Scheme, the maximum amount of subsidy for a parent company that operates retail groups or chain stores under the same business registration is \$3 million (equivalent to no more than 38 stores).

Applicants are required to submit documentary proof of their applications, including a valid Business Registration Certificate and two other most-recent bills/statements which can ascertain their eligibility for the subsidy such as MPF contribution statements, rental receipts, utility bills, etc.

Online application system to commence operation on March 23

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The Government has commissioned the Hong Kong Trade Development Council to help implement the Scheme. To expedite the application process and minimise the time required for vetting the eligibility of applications received, the Scheme will only accept online applications via a dedicated online application system.

The online application system is scheduled to commence operation at 9am on March 23 (Monday). The deadline for applications is 11.59pm on April 12 (Sunday). During the three-week application period, applicants may submit applications and necessary supporting documents through personal computers or smartphones. There is no need for applicants to rush their submissions of online applications on the first day of the application period as the Scheme is not run on a first-come-first-serve basis.

Retail stores operated by social enterprises

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The Scheme also covers fixed physical retail stores operated by social enterprises meeting the following criteria:

- listed on the Social Enterprise Directory maintained by the Hong Kong Council of Social Service (HKCSS); or
- accredited under the Social Enterprise Endorsement Mark administered by the Hong Kong General Chamber of Social Enterprises; or
- supported by government grants, such as the Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship Development Fund, Enhancing Self-Reliance Through District Partnership Programme and Enhancing Employment of People with Disabilities through Small Enterprise Project.

Eligible retail stores operated by social enterprises should have commenced their businesses before January 1, 2020, and should still be in operation at the time of application.

As retail outlets operated by social enterprises may not have a business registration, the HKCSS will help provide certification for these retail shops to confirm their eligibility and collect applications from them directly. Accordingly, there is no need for eligible retail stores operated by social enterprises to submit applications through the online system.

#### Enquiries and assistance

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A dedicated telephone hotline (1836 111) and email account ([enquiry@retailsubsidy.hk](mailto:enquiry@retailsubsidy.hk)) for the Scheme have commenced operation today (March 16) to handle enquiries on the details of the Scheme and provide assistance to applicants in preparing their online applications.

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## Suspected MERS case reported

The Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health today (March 15) reported a suspected case of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), and again urged the public to pay special attention to safety during travel, taking due consideration of the health risks in the places they visit. The case is detailed below:

Sex	Male
Age	30
Affected area involved	Dubai, United Arab Emirates

High-risk exposure	Nil
Hospital	Queen Elizabeth Hospital
Condition	Stable
MERS-Coronavirus preliminary test result	Pending

"Travellers to the Middle East should avoid going to farms, barns or markets with camels; avoid contact with sick persons and animals, especially camels, birds or poultry; and avoid unnecessary visits to healthcare facilities. We strongly advise travel agents organising tours to the Middle East to abstain from arranging camel rides and activities involving direct contact with camels, which are known risk factors for acquiring MERS Coronavirus (MERS-CoV)," a spokesman for the CHP said.

Locally, the CHP's surveillance with public and private hospitals, with practising doctors and at boundary control points is firmly in place. Inbound travellers and members of the public who recently visited the Middle East and developed relevant symptoms within 14 days will be classified as suspected MERS cases. They will be taken to public hospitals for isolation and management until their specimens test negative for MERS-CoV.

Travellers to affected areas should maintain vigilance, adopt appropriate health precautions and take heed of personal, food and environmental hygiene. The public may visit the MERS pages of the [CHP](#) and its [Travel Health Service](#), MERS statistics in [affected areas](#), the CHP's [Facebook Page](#) and [YouTube Channel](#), and the World Health Organization's [latest news](#) for more information and health advice. Tour leaders and tour guides operating overseas tours are advised to refer to the CHP's [health advice on MERS](#).

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## [CHP investigates seven additional cases of COVID-19](#)

The Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health (DH) announced that as of 8pm today (March 15), the CHP is investigating seven additional confirmed cases of COVID-19, taking the number of cases to 149 in Hong Kong so far (comprising 148 confirmed cases and one probable case). The patients of today's new cases all travelled outside Hong Kong during the incubation period.

The first case involves a 35-year-old man (the 143rd case) who has good

past health and lives in Lai Ming House, Wah Ming Estate, Fanling. He developed cough since March 11 and fever since yesterday (March 14). He attended North District Hospital on the same day and was admitted for treatment. His respiratory sample was tested positive for COVID-19 virus today and he is now in a stable condition. The patient travelled to Hokkaido, Japan between February 26 and March 11. He accompanied a friend to visit a clinic in Niseko, Hokkaido on March 7. He took the flight JL2504 (economy class cabin) by The Japan Airlines from Hokkaido to Osaka on March 11 and then departed Osaka on flight CX561 (economy class cabin) by Cathay Pacific arriving Hong Kong on the same night. Passengers who travelled in the same cabin on board the two flights are urged to call the CHP hotline. His travel collateral including his girlfriend and two friends, as well as his parents, younger sister and niece who live with him are asymptomatic and will be arranged for quarantine.

The second case involves a 29-year-old man (the 144th case) who has good past health. He developed cough since March 11 and attended Ruttonjee Hospital yesterday where he was admitted for treatment. His respiratory sample was tested positive for COVID-19 virus today and he is now in stable condition. The patient departed Hong Kong on March 5 for Germany and then visited Austria on March 7 and returned to Germany on March 11. He took the flight LH119 (economy class cabin) by Lufthansa from Munich to Frankfurt on March 12, and then from Frankfurt by flight LH796 (business class cabin) arriving Hong Kong on March 13, and had been staying alone in The Harbourview in Wanchai upon arrival. Passengers who travelled in the same cabin on board the two flights are urged to call the CHP hotline.

The third case and the fourth case involve a 37-year-old man (the 145th case) and a 39-year-old man (the 146th case) respectively. The CHP's epidemiological investigations revealed that the patients have travelled to France during the incubation period. They arrived Hong Kong from Paris by the flight CX260 (economy class cabin) by Cathay Pacific on March 13. Passengers who travelled in the same cabin on board the flight are urged to call the CHP hotline.

The 37-year-old man (the 145th case) has good past health and lives in Pak Sha Wan, Sai Kung. He developed cough since March 10 and subsequently diarrhoea and fever. He attended the Tseung Kwan O Hospital (TKOH) yesterday and was admitted for treatment. His respiratory sample was tested positive for COVID-19 virus today. He is now in a stable condition. His wife, two daughters and domestic helper who live with him are asymptomatic and have been admitted to TKOH for examination.

The 39-year-old man (the 146th case) has good past health and lives in Fort Mansion, 25-27 Fort Street, North Point. He developed cough since March 13 and attended Queen Mary Hospital (QMH) yesterday and was admitted for treatment. His respiratory sample was tested positive for COVID-19 virus today. He is now in a stable condition. His another travel collateral is asymptomatic and was admitted to QMH for examination. His girlfriend who lives with him is asymptomatic and will be arranged for quarantine. The taxi driver who drove the patient from Hong Kong Station to his home at around

7.30 – 7.45am on March 13 is urged to call the CHP hotline.

The fifth and sixth cases involve a couple, a 61-year-old woman (the 147th case) and a 58-year-old man (the 148th case) who both have underlying illnesses. They live in Kellett View Town Houses, 65 Mount Kellett Road. The female patient developed sore throat since March 10 and then fever and cough since March 11. The male patient developed fever and cough with sputum since March 10, mild abdominal discomfort since March 13 and then diarrhoea today. They attended Hong Kong Adventist Hospital –Stubbs Road on March 11, and Hong Kong Sanatorium & Hospital on March 13 and Ruttonjee Hospital yesterday where they were admitted for treatment. Their respiratory samples were tested positive for COVID-19 virus today and are now in stable condition. They visited Toronto between February 15 and March 2, New York between March 2 and 5, then Boston between March 5 and 9. They took the flight CX811 by Cathay Pacific (business class cabin) from Boston arriving Hong Kong on March 10. Passengers who travelled in the same cabin on board the flight are urged to call the CHP hotline. Their son, driver and two domestic helpers who live with them are asymptomatic and will be arranged for quarantine.

The seventh case involves a 32-year-old man (the 149th case) who has good past health and lives in Wah Cheong House in Wah Fu (II) Estate, Pok Fu Lam. He developed fever since March 14 and consulted a private doctor. He attended the Accident and Emergency Department at QMH today. His deep throat saliva sample was tested positive for COVID-19 virus today. He is admitted to QMH for treatment and is now in a stable condition.

The patient joined a group tour to visit Tunisia from Hong Kong from February 24 to March 2, and then visited England and Spain with his friends from March 3 to 9, returning to Hong Kong on March 10. His mother and elder sister who live with him are asymptomatic and will be arranged for quarantine.

The CHP's epidemiological investigations and relevant contact tracing on the confirmed cases are ongoing. Quarantine will be arranged for close contacts while medical surveillance will be arranged for other contacts. For the progress on the contact tracing of the cases, please see the annex.

Separately, the CHP continues to follow up on the cases of COVID-19 in Heng Tai House, Fu Heng Estate, and is locating one remaining affected household (i.e. a household among the "13" and "14" units of the 29th to 34th floor) who is required to undergo quarantine. The CHP urged the household to contact the centre as soon as possible.

A spokesman for the CHP said, "In view of proliferation of the disease and continuous increase in the number of cases reported around the world, members of the public are strongly urged to avoid all non-essential travel outside Hong Kong."

"Meanwhile, according to our epidemiological investigations, clusters are observed in the local community involving large meal gatherings and other gatherings. Members of the public are urged to go out less and reduce social

activities such as meal gatherings or other gatherings, and maintain an appropriate social distance with other people as far as possible."

The spokesman said, "The CHP strongly urges the public to maintain at all times strict personal and environmental hygiene, which is key to personal protection against infection and prevention of the spread of the disease in the community. On a personal level, members of the public should wear a surgical mask when having respiratory symptoms, taking public transport or staying in crowded places. They should also perform hand hygiene frequently, especially before touching the mouth, nose or eyes.

"As for household environmental hygiene, members of the public are advised to maintain drainage pipes properly, and regularly pour water into drain outlets (U-traps); cover all floor drain outlets when they are not in use; after using the toilet, they should put the toilet lid down before flushing to avoid spreading germs."

The CHP will report the cases to the World Health Organization, National Health Commission, Health Commission of Guangdong Province, relevant health authorities and the Hospital Authority.

The CHP has set up a hotline (2125 1122) for public enquiries. The hotline operates from 8am to midnight daily. As at 4pm today, a total of 34 922 calls were received.

Moreover, the Government has launched the website "COVID-19 Thematic Website" ([www.coronavirus.gov.hk](http://www.coronavirus.gov.hk)) for announcing the latest updates on various news on the COVID-19 infection and health advice to help the public understand the latest updates.

To prevent pneumonia and respiratory tract infection, members of the public should always maintain good personal and environmental hygiene. They are advised to:

- Wear a surgical mask when taking public transport or staying in crowded places. It is important to wear a mask properly, including hand hygiene before wearing and after removing a mask;
- Perform hand hygiene frequently, especially before touching the mouth, nose or eyes, after touching public installations such as handrails or door knobs, or when hands are contaminated by respiratory secretions after coughing or sneezing;
- Maintain drainage pipes properly and regularly (about once a week) pour about half a liter of water into each drain outlet (U-traps) to ensure environmental hygiene;
- Cover all floor drain outlets when they are not in use;
- After using the toilet, put the toilet lid down before flushing to avoid spreading germs;
- Wash hands with liquid soap and water, and rub for at least 20 seconds. Then rinse with water and dry with a disposable paper towel. If hand washing facilities are not available, or when hands are not visibly soiled, performing hand hygiene with 70 to 80 per cent alcohol-based handrub is an

effective alternative;

- Cover your mouth and nose with tissue paper when sneezing or coughing. Dispose of soiled tissues into a lidded rubbish bin, then wash hands thoroughly; and
- When having respiratory symptoms, wear a surgical mask, refrain from work or attending class at school, avoid going to crowded places and seek medical advice promptly.

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## Hong Kong Customs seizes suspected methamphetamine (with photo)

Hong Kong Customs yesterday (March 14) seized about 3.6 kilograms of suspected methamphetamine with an estimated market value of about \$1.8 million at Hong Kong International Airport.

A 36 year-old male passenger arrived in Hong Kong from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia yesterday. During customs clearance, the batch of suspected methamphetamine was found concealed inside the false compartments of his check-in suitcase. The man was then arrested.

The arrested man has been charged with one count of trafficking in a dangerous drug. He will appear at Kwun Tong Magistrates' Courts tomorrow (March 16).

Customs will continue to apply a risk assessment approach and focus on selecting passengers from high-risk regions for clearance to combat transnational drug trafficking activities.

Under the Dangerous Drugs Ordinance, trafficking in a dangerous drug is a serious offence. The maximum penalty upon conviction is a fine of \$5 million and life imprisonment.

Members of the public may report any suspected drug trafficking activities to Customs' 24-hour hotline 2545 6182 or its dedicated crime-reporting email account (crimereport@customs.gov.hk).