

# Responses from University Grants Committee on 2025-26 Budget

The following is issued on behalf of the University Grants Committee:

The 2025-26 Budget promulgates a number of financial measures relating to the higher education sector. The Chairman of the University Grants Committee (UGC), Mr Tim Lui, welcomes the Government's approval of the recurrent funding to the UGC-funded universities for the 2025/26 to 2027/28 triennium (2025-28 triennium) as well as the allocation of an additional \$1.5 billion for a new round of the Research Matching Grant Scheme. They represent the continuous investment in the future, which injects impetus into the higher education sector, while promoting the effective use of resources in the universities as they forge ahead.

The recurrent funding for the UGC-funded universities in the 2025-28 triennium has reflected the magnitude of efficiency savings applied government-wide, i.e. a progressive 2 per cent reduction each year cumulatively to achieve total savings of about \$2.8 billion. In addition, the UGC-funded universities will return \$4 billion from their balances of the General and Development Reserve Fund (GDRF) to the Government on a one-off basis in the 2025-26 financial year. Together with the savings of \$1.2 billion following the increase in the tuition fee level in the 2025-28 triennium, such measures will yield benefits that worth \$8 billion to the public coffer altogether.

In accordance with the established mechanism, the recurrent subvention requirement of the UGC-funded sector in the 2025-28 triennium amounts to \$70.9 billion, whereas the recurrent funding as approved by the Government is \$68.1 billion. In other words, there is a reduction of \$2.8 billion over three years, resulting in a 4 per cent average reduction rate.

The UGC-funded universities retain their unspent recurrent grants from the UGC as the GDRF to buffer against variations in cash flow requirements. As of June 30, 2024, the aggregate balance of the GDRF of all universities totalled \$11.1 billion. The \$4 billion to be returned to the Government accounts for more than one-third of such reserve funds.

Mr Lui said, "Over the past years, the Government had allocated abundant resources to propel the vibrant development of our higher education sector, including various new UGC initiatives for universities to step up their roles in nurturing talent and advancing scientific research. With such support, we have garnered international reputation for our higher education sector that we take pride in. At this critical juncture, the higher education sector is demonstrating their solidarity with the wider community. The UGC believes that our universities will continue their efforts in advancing excellence in teaching and research with valuable public resources, thereby contributing towards developing Hong Kong into an international hub for post-secondary

education and building our nation into a leading country in education."

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## Inspection of aquatic products imported from Japan

In response to the Japanese Government's plan to discharge nuclear-contaminated water at the Fukushima Nuclear Power Station, the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene issued a Food Safety Order which prohibits all aquatic products, sea salt and seaweeds originating from the 10 metropolis/prefectures, namely Tokyo, Fukushima, Ibaraki, Miyagi, Chiba, Gunma, Tochigi, Niigata, Nagano and Saitama, from being imported into and supplied in Hong Kong.

For other Japanese aquatic products, sea salt and seaweeds that are not prohibited from being imported into Hong Kong, the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department will conduct comprehensive radiological tests to verify that the radiation levels of these products do not exceed the guideline levels before they are allowed to be supplied in the market.

As the discharge of nuclear-contaminated water is unprecedented and will continue for 30 years or more, the Government will closely monitor and step up the testing arrangements. Should anomalies be detected, the Government does not preclude further tightening the scope of the import ban.

From noon on February 25 to noon today (February 26), the CFS conducted tests on the radiological levels of 216 food samples imported from Japan, which were of the "aquatic and related products, seaweeds and sea salt" category. No sample was found to have exceeded the safety limit. Details can be found on the CFS's thematic website titled "Control Measures on Foods Imported from Japan" ([www.cfs.gov.hk/english/programme/programme\\_rafs/programme\\_rafs\\_fc\\_01\\_30\\_Nuclear\\_Event\\_and\\_Food\\_Safety.html](http://www.cfs.gov.hk/english/programme/programme_rafs/programme_rafs_fc_01_30_Nuclear_Event_and_Food_Safety.html)).

In parallel, the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) has also tested 50 samples of local catch for radiological levels. All the samples passed the tests. Details can be found on the AFCD's website ([www.afcd.gov.hk/english/fisheries/Radiological\\_testing/Radiological\\_Test.html](http://www.afcd.gov.hk/english/fisheries/Radiological_testing/Radiological_Test.html)).

The Hong Kong Observatory (HKO) has also enhanced the environmental monitoring of the local waters. No anomaly has been detected so far. For details, please refer to the HKO's website ([www.hko.gov.hk/en/radiation/monitoring/seawater.html](http://www.hko.gov.hk/en/radiation/monitoring/seawater.html)).

From August 24, 2023, to noon today, the CFS and the AFCD have conducted tests on the radiological levels of 118 161 samples of food imported from Japan (including 77 535 samples of aquatic and related products, seaweeds and sea salt) and 27 426 samples of local catch respectively. All the samples passed the tests.

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## Effective Exchange Rate Index

The effective exchange rate index for the Hong Kong dollar on Wednesday, February 26, 2025 is 106.8 (up 0.1 against yesterday's index).

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## LCQ9: Food poisoning cases

Following is a question by the Hon Steven Ho and a written reply by the Secretary for Environment and Ecology, Mr Tse Chin-wan, in the Legislative Council today (February 26):

Question:

It has been reported that a suspected incident of food poisoning happened recently in which a doctor of the Princess Margaret Hospital passed away unfortunately. The incident has aroused widespread concern, and there have also been cases of food poisoning since last year involving star hotels, restaurants providing meals for tour groups and so on, which have aroused public concern about food safety. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of (i) the number of food poisoning cases involving restaurants/food factories received by the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) (and the number of persons involved) in each quarter from 2022 to last year, and set out in Table 1 a breakdown by (ii) licensed premises (and the number of persons involved) and (iii) unlicensed premises (and the number of persons involved);

Table 1

Food poisoning cases	The first quarter of 2022	.....	The fourth quarter of 2024
(i)			
(ii)			

(iii)			
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(2) of (i) the causes, (ii) the corresponding preventive measures, (iii) the number of cases (and the number of persons involved) regarding the food poisoning cases received by the CFS last year, (iv) the number of cases received (and the number of persons involved) in each year from 2021 to 2023, and (v) the changes in the figures upon comparisons between the numbers in (iii) and (iv), and set out in Table 2 the corresponding breakdown;

Table 2

(i) (set out according to the number of cases involved in descending order)	(ii)	(iii)	(iv)	(v)

(3) of the prosecutions instituted against and penalties imposed on the food premises involved in the cases mentioned in (1) last year, as well as the difference between the penalties imposed on licensed and unlicensed premises;

(4) regarding the causes of food poisoning mentioned in (2), whether the Government has conducted studies on the reasons for the increase in the number of cases arising from the corresponding causes, for example, whether it was due to the failure to fully observe the relevant food safety guidelines as a result of manpower shortage in the catering industry; if it has, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(5) regarding the various measures mentioned in (2)(ii), whether the Government will consider supporting restaurants in making better use of technology to reduce food safety risks (e.g. requiring the use of food containers with temperature keeping functions for transportation of raw oysters), and exploring the feasibility of including such requirements in the relevant licensing requirements; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(6) regarding perishable food such as raw oysters and dairy products, apart from formulating the relevant food safety guidelines, whether the Government has provided relevant training for the practitioners; whether the Government has taken relevant actions against the practitioners who are found during inspections to have breached the guidelines;

(7) as it is learnt that a number of food poisoning cases are related to "preparing food too early in advance", but there are views that it is inevitable for food suppliers of take-away and catering food, rice with two

sides, etc, to prepare food in advance, whether the Government will, apart from formulating guidelines on food safety, step up inspections and monitoring efforts (especially in respect of the handling of perishable food such as poon choi, siu mei, etc); if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(8) given that there were cases in which food poisoning incidents occurred repeatedly in the same food premises, of the number of food premises which had been prosecuted by the Government more than once within a short period of time in the past three years; how the Government assesses the effectiveness of the existing monitoring and punishment mechanism, and whether it will take further improvement measures; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(9) whether the Government has currently provided clear information about the channels for pursuing claims and the related support services for members of the public affected by food poisoning, so that they can claim compensation from restaurants and food suppliers; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

In consultation with the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health (DH), my reply to the question from the Hon Steven Ho is as follows:

(1) The number of food poisoning cases referred to the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) by the CHP of the DH each year and the number of persons involved are tabulated as follows:

		2022	2023	2024
Number of food poisoning cases involving food premises (number of persons involved)	First quarter	6 (15)	107 (365)	52 (184)
	Second quarter	25 (74)	42 (182)	68 (181)
	Third quarter	40 (215)	40 (173)	22 (154)
	Fourth quarter	46 (196)	30 (118)	50 (220)
	Total	117 (500)	219 (838)	192 (739)
Number of food poisoning cases involving licensed food premises (number of persons involved)	First quarter	6 (15)	106 (363)	52 (184)
	Second quarter	24 (68)	42 (182)	67 (180)
	Third quarter	39 (213)	39 (171)	22 (154)
	Fourth quarter	46 (196)	30 (118)	50 (220)
	Total	115 (492)	217 (834)	191 (738)

Number of food poisoning cases involving unlicensed premises (number of persons involved)	First quarter	–	1 (2)	–
	Second quarter	1 (6)	–	1 (1)
	Third quarter	1 (2)	1 (2)	–
	Fourth quarter	–	–	–
	Total	2 (8)	2 (4)	1 (1)

(2) and (4) Overall, from 2020 to 2022, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Hong Kong at that time, the authorities implemented a series of regulatory measures to safeguard public health, resulting in fewer food poisoning cases in food premises during that period. The number of food poisoning cases related to food premises in 2024 was similar to that of 2023.

In 2024, the three most common causes of food poisoning cases were consuming raw food, food contamination by dirty utensils, and undercooked food. Relevant information is tabulated below:

Causes	Number of cases in 2024 (Note) (number of persons involved)	Number of cases in 2021-2023 (Note) (number of persons involved) (Annual average)	Degree of change in the number of cases
Consuming raw food	78 (259)	81 (279)	-3.7%
Food contamination by dirty utensils	31 (121)	66 (254)	-53%
Undercooked food	40 (115)	37 (137)	+8%

Note: Each case may involve more than one cause.

Upon receipt of notifications of suspected food poisoning cases from the CHP of the DH, the CFS will promptly collaborate with staff of the Environmental Hygiene Branch of the FEHD to investigate the relevant food premises, review food preparation processes and hygiene conditions, collect food and environmental swab samples for testing, and instruct food premises operators to carry out cleaning and disinfection as well as to improve the food handling/cooking processes. To address the causes of suspected food poisoning cases, the CFS will also provide the food trade with relevant food safety guidelines and preventive measures recommendations, as well as offer food safety and health education to food handlers.

(3) The FEHD has established guidelines on handling food poisoning cases. Apart from conducting thorough inspections to the food premises concerned, the FEHD will increase the frequency of subsequent inspections and continue to monitor their environmental hygiene and food safety conditions. If any irregularity is found in the premises, the FEHD will take appropriate action in accordance with the relevant legislation.

The numbers of prosecutions instituted by the FEHD against licensed and unlicensed food premises which had contravened the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance (Cap. 132) (the Ordinance) and its subsidiary legislation over the past three years are set out below. The FEHD does not maintain breakdown figures on inspection reasons for prosecution cases (such as whether suspected food poisoning cases are concerned).

	Number of prosecutions against licensed food premises	Number of prosecutions against unlicensed food premises
2022	905	3 592
2023	1 099	3 624
2024	777	3 337

If any person is found operating food business without permission, the FEHD will institute prosecution. The maximum penalty is a fine of \$50,000 and imprisonment for up to six months, plus a daily fine of \$900. As for other environmental hygiene-related legislative requirements, etc, the penalties vary according to the severity of the offences. For the above prosecution cases, the maximum penalty imposed is a fine of \$50,000.

(5) and (6) The CFS has all along been promoting Good Hygiene Practices to the trade through different channels and providing training resources, such as preparing and organising seminars, compiling publications, developing educational materials, and holding regular trade consultation forums. The CFS has issued food safety guidelines for certain high-risk foods, such as raw oysters and frozen confections, to identify critical control points in the food production process for food businesses' reference and application. In addition, the CFS conducts on-site inspections at concerned food premises where food incidents occur and provide food safety advice to the persons-in-charge, as well as health education to the relevant food handlers on the causes of the incidents.

The Food Hygiene Code published by the FEHD facilitates food businesses to comply with the various environmental hygiene and food safety requirements as stipulated in the Ordinance and its subsidiary legislation, including the approved sources and other food safety practices for high-risk foods such as raw oysters and milk. Any food business operator who contravenes the relevant legislative requirements may be prosecuted.

(7) The FEHD adopts a Risk-based Inspection System to regulate licensed food premises. It will assess the risk potential of individual food premises (including the types and risk level of the food sold, the mode of operation, any history of food poisoning cases and any previous prosecution on environmental hygiene matters) so as to determine the inspection frequency. The FEHD will review the system as well as the risk type of individual premises from time to time to make optimal use of inspection resources and ensure food safety and environmental hygiene. In the event of food poisoning in licensed food premises, the FEHD will elevate the risk potential and

enhance the inspection frequency.

The CFS has issued food safety guidelines and organised trade seminars on takeaways and meal delivery and the safe handling of various high-risk foods (including "rice with two sides", poon choi, and siu mei). It has also compiled relevant publications and educational materials for the food businesses' reference and application. In addition, the CFS also organises regular trade consultation forums to strengthen communication with the trade and promote good hygiene practices.

(8) In addition to taking out prosecution against non-compliant licensed food premises, the FEHD implements the Demerit Points System (DPS). Under the DPS, licensees who are prosecuted and convicted for contravention of food safety and environmental hygiene-related requirements in the Ordinance and its subsidiary legislation will be registered with demerit points by the FEHD. The number of demerit points ranges from five to 15. Upon accumulation of 15 points, licensees may, depending on the situation of the case, face suspension or even cancellation of licence. The number of demerit points registered depends on the nature and severity of the offence. For example, in cases involving sale of adulterated or unfit food, 15 demerit points will be registered. The numbers of cases in which a food business licence was suspended or cancelled under the DPS in the past three years are set out below:

	Number of cases (Year)		
Penalty	2022	2023	2024
Suspension of licence for 7 days	60	94	54
Suspension of licence for 14 days	13	10	9
Suspension of licence for 21 days (Note)	2	3	3
Cancellation of food business licence	1	1	6
Total	76	108	72

Note: These cases had been subject to a 7-day licence suspension (first suspension), immediately followed by a 14-day licence suspension (second suspension).

The existing penalties under the Ordinance and the DPS already have a strong deterrent effect on licensed food premises. The FEHD will continue to conduct inspections to food premises based on risk assessment, and take enforcement actions and execute the DPS against irregularities.

(9) The FEHD is responsible for regulating food premises in accordance with the Ordinance and its subsidiary legislation, but it generally does not intervene in civil proceedings.



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## LCQ4: Tobacco control and combating trading activities of duty-not-paid cigarettes

Following is a question by the Hon Lai Tung-kwok and a written reply by the Secretary for Health, Professor Lo Chung-mau, in the Legislative Council today (February 26):

Question:

At present, the Tobacco and Alcohol Control Office (TACO) of the Department of Health is mainly responsible for matters relating to tobacco control and taking enforcement action under the Smoking (Public Health) Ordinance (Cap. 371). From time to time, TACO conducts plainclothes inspections or test purchases, and conducts investigations in the form of joint operations with other law enforcement departments, while the Customs and Excise Department (C&ED) combats smuggling and trading activities of illicit cigarettes on different fronts. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) of the number of inspections conducted and fixed penalty notices issued by TACO in each of the past three years, together with a breakdown by smoking offences;
- (2) of the respective establishment and strength of frontline law enforcement officers of different ranks in TACO in each of the past three years;
- (3) of the details and results of C&ED's efforts to combat smuggling and trading activities of illicit cigarettes in the past three years;
- (4) on import cases, of the following information in each of the past three years: the number of referrals received by TACO from C&ED and the number of summonses issued, the number of cases convicted in the court, and other details of the relevant cases;
- (5) on in-town enforcement, of the number and results of various investigation actions (including plainclothes inspections, test purchases, and joint operations) conducted by TACO in each of the past three years; and
- (6) how the authorities plan to enhance interdepartmental collaboration in the future to combat the sale of duty-not-paid cigarettes and alternative smoking products?

Reply:

President,

Having consulted the Department of Health (DH) and the Customs and Excise Department (C&ED), the consolidated reply to the various parts of the Hon Lai Tung-kwok's question is as follows:

The Tobacco and Alcohol Control Office (TACO) of the DH is the principal enforcement agency for the Smoking (Public Health) Ordinance (Cap. 371) and the Fixed Penalty (Smoking Offences) Ordinance (Cap. 600) (with the number of full-time enforcement staff in the approved establishment provided at Annex I). The TACO mainly enforces (i) offences relating to illegal smoking in statutory no-smoking area (including aiding and abetting smoking offences and obstruction of inspectors' duties); (ii) offences relating to tobacco advertisement and sale; and (iii) offences relating to alternative smoking products (ASPs). The C&ED is the principal enforcement agency responsible for the suppression of smuggling activities, including collecting and protecting revenue from dutiable commodities stipulated in the Dutiable Commodities Ordinance (Cap. 109). At present, combating illicit cigarettes is mainly the responsibility of the C&ED. The numbers of inspections conducted, fixed penalty notices (FPNs)/summonses issued by the TACO between 2022 and 2024 for smoking and other related offences are at Annex II.

As regards illegal smoking offences, under the prevailing legislation, any person who commits the act of smoking in a designated no smoking area is liable to a fixed penalty of \$1,500. To effectively mitigate the impact of secondhand smoking on the public and enhance the deterrent effect against illegal smoking, the TACO has flexibly deployed resources and adopted new enforcement strategies since 2023, which included extending the time of surveillance and inspections in no smoking areas, deploying plain-clothes officers to take proactive enforcement actions, and would issue FPNs to smoking offenders without warning.

The number of prosecutions against illegal smoking has surged due to the aforementioned new enforcement strategies. The number of FPNs issued increased from 6 296 in 2022 to 10 261 in 2023 and 13 488 in 2024. Besides, to step up efforts in targeting venues (e.g. bars and restaurants) that offer waterpipe tobacco to customers, the TACO, on its own and in conjunction with the Police, has taken over 400 enforcement actions in the past three years. In addition to prosecution against illegal smoking, the TACO has also initiated prosecutions against persons suspected of inciting, aiding and abetting smoking offenders (including bar operators who have committed aiding and abetting smoking offences).

As regards smoking product advertisements, under the prevailing legislation, no person shall display or distribute smoking product advertisements (including leaflets) or place smoking product advertisements on the Internet. Offenders are liable to a fine of \$50,000. The TACO has been actively conducting market surveillance, and in order to further curb the situation of illicit cigarette leaflets, the TACO has been strengthening joint operations since 2023, including joint operations with the Police, the Housing Department (HD) and the C&ED against complaints of distributing illicit cigarette leaflets. A total of over 250 joint operations were conducted in the past three years. Since 2021, the TACO has successfully prosecuted 17 offenders for distributing smoking product leaflets. The

highest penalty for these convicted cases was a fine of \$8,000. For online advertisement, apart from conducting investigations and prosecutions upon receipt of complaints or referrals, the TACO also actively carries out online surveillance. Upon identification of smoking product advertisements, the TACO will ask the relevant internet service providers and social media platforms to remove such contents as soon as possible. The TACO has removed over 3 200 webpages and social media accounts or posts involving smoking product advertisements in aggregate in the past three years.

As regards the ASP ban, with effect from April 30, 2022, no person may import, promote, manufacture, sell, or possess for commercial purposes ASPs, in accordance with the Smoking (Public Health) Ordinance (Cap. 371) and the Import and Export Ordinance (Cap. 60). The C&ED is responsible for intercepting illegally-imported ASPs at import level with intercepted cases referred to the TACO for follow-up and prosecution, the TACO is also responsible for market surveillance and instituting prosecution.

For cases involving import of ASPs, as at December 31, 2024, the TACO issued 1 272 summonses to offenders of importing cases, of which offenders in 694 cases were convicted by court and were fined \$300 to \$42,000. During the same period, the C&ED detected 52 cases involving offences under the C&ED's enforcement and illegal import of ASPs concurrently, of which 26 were convicted and the highest fine and sentence imposed were \$5,000 and four months' imprisonment respectively. Besides, the TACO also monitors the sale of ASP on the Internet, and conducts test buy for follow-up investigation, as well as liaises with relevant organisation to assist in removing the illegal online content. For cases of suspected sale or possession for commercial purposes of ASPs, the TACO issued 24 summonses to offenders, of which 20 cases were convicted by court and sentenced to two months' imprisonment at most.

The relevant ban on ASPs has been in force for nearly three years. At present, there are no legal channels to import or purchase ASPs, and ASPs purchased for personal use before the ban came into effect should have been largely consumed after a certain period of time. Prevailing legislation does not prohibit the possession of ASPs for non-commercial use. To suppress the continued circulation of ASPs, which are hazardous novel tobacco products, in Hong Kong and to tackle the problem of using e-cigarette devices to abuse drugs at its root, the Health Bureau will further strengthen the regulation of ASPs, including banning the possession of relevant products. Details will be announced later.

On the other hand, as an important pillar under the tobacco control strategy, the Government will spare no efforts in combating illicit cigarettes. At present, combating illicit cigarettes is mainly the responsibility of the C&ED. The C&ED will continue to adopt a multi-pronged approach and take stringent enforcement actions at all levels to combat the sale of illicit cigarettes. The C&ED exchanges intelligence with the Police from time to time and conducts joint operations in a timely manner, including combating cases of cigarette smuggling and illicit cigarette storage in downtown. In addition, the C&ED has been maintaining close intelligence exchange and co-operation with the Mainland and overseas law enforcement

agencies to combat cross-boundary cigarette smuggling activities.

The enforcement figures against illicit cigarettes (including smuggling, storage and distribution as well as sale) in the past three years are set out at Annex III. The increase in the number of seizures of illicit cigarettes reflects the effectiveness of the C&ED's stepped-up actions against illicit cigarettes and the success of its enforcement strategy does not denote an expanding scale of illicit cigarettes activities. The Government announced the "10 measures for tobacco control" in June last year. Stepping up actions against illicit cigarettes was accorded the highest priority among the 10 measures, including:

- (i) introducing a duty stamp system to distinguish duty-paid cigarettes from non-duty-paid cigarettes;
- (ii) requiring tobacco products being sold at a price lower than the tobacco duty need to be proved duty-paid;
- (iii) increasing the maximum penalty for handling, possessing, selling or buying duty-not-paid cigarettes; and
- (iv) listing the relevant offences under the Schedule of the Organized and Serious Crimes Ordinance (OSCO) (Cap. 455), so as to enable the C&ED to freeze and confiscate illicit proceeds and assets associated with illicit cigarette activities by virtue of the OSCO.

On duty stamp system, taking into account factors such as enforcement effectiveness and cost-effectiveness, the Government proposes to require the affixing of duty-paid labels on the retail packages of cigarettes at this stage. Through the application of anti-forgery features and related digital technologies, frontline officers of the C&ED would be able to distinguish duty-paid cigarettes from duty-not-paid ones in a more effective manner, thereby enhancing enforcement efficiency. The C&ED expects that a pilot scheme on the duty stamp system will be rolled out in the middle of this year to work out the practical operating requirement of the relevant scheme, which will then be launched next year at the earliest. The Government expects that the above measures will increase the deterrent effect and enhance the effectiveness of law enforcement departments in combating illicit cigarettes.

The relevant Government departments, including the TACO, the C&ED, the Police and the HD will continue to work together to enhance intelligence exchange and deepen the co-operation mechanism, as well as to make adjustments to their enforcement strategies having regard to the actual situation, and to take joint enforcement actions and refer suspected illegal cases, with a view to taking forward the work of tobacco control and enforcing the relevant legislation.