

## FSD responds to media enquiries on white foam found at Siu Chik Sha, Tseung Kwan O

In response to media enquiries about white foam found in a water pond at Siu Chik Sha, Tseung Kwan O, last night (April 17), a Fire Services Department (FSD) spokesman gave the following response today (April 18):

The FSD received a report last night regarding the discovery of white foam in a water pond at Siu Chik Sha in Tseung Kwan O. It was noted that the FSD conducted a test of "biodegradable fluorine-free firefighting foam" yesterday at the Fire and Ambulance Services Academy (FASA) close to the location concerned. It is suspected that some of the firefighting foam did not divert into the pipes of the foam treatment system during the test and inadvertently went into the stormwater drainage system.

The FSD attaches great importance to the incident, and had immediately cleaned the stormwater drainage system of the FASA and taken samples at the scene for further testing by the Government Laboratory. An inspection of the foam treatment system by the contractor has been arranged. A contractor has also completed the cleaning work at nearby channels late afternoon today. The FSD will closely monitor the situation of the nearby channels these few days and take appropriate follow-up actions if any more foam is found. In addition, the FASA has suspended all drills involving firefighting foam until the cleaning work and inspection of the foam treatment system are completed. The FSD will continue to co-operate with relevant departments for follow-up.

The foam concentrate used in the test is a fluorine-free firefighting foam that is biodegradable and does not remain in the environment as a persistent organic pollutant.

The FASA is equipped with a foam treatment plant with collection and storage tanks for decomposing foam liquid. The storage tanks can hold foam liquids up to a volume of 250 cubic metres in total, while the foam liquid produced from the firefighting foam test yesterday had a volume of 52 cubic metres. The system is regularly inspected and maintained by a contractor.

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## Hong Kong Customs dismantles money laundering syndicate with over \$1.8

# billion laundered

Hong Kong Customs mounted an operation codenamed "Racer" on April 17 and successfully cracked down on a money laundering syndicate. Three local persons suspected to be connected with the case were arrested and they were suspected of using a cryptocurrency exchange trading platform and a number of company bank accounts in various local banks to deal with money from unknown sources exceeding \$1.8 billion.

Acting upon intelligence, Customs officers targeted three local persons and initiated a financial investigation. It was revealed that the three persons set up a number of local companies and bank accounts between June 2021 and July 2022 to deal with over 1 000 suspicious transactions, including funds transferred from a cryptocurrency exchange trading platform, and the amount totalled over \$1.8 billion. Subsequently, Customs conducted an enforcement operation on April 17 and raided four residential units and seven companies, among which two were money service operators. The three local persons aged between 42 and 60, comprising two men and one woman, were arrested for a suspected conspiracy to "deal with property known or reasonably believed to represent proceeds of an indictable offence" (commonly known as money laundering) under the Organized and Serious Crimes Ordinance (OSCO). They were believed to be the core members of the syndicate.

Customs officers also seized a batch of items suspected to be connected with the case, including a number of mobile phones, company documents and stamps, bank cards and remittance documents, during the operation.

An investigation is ongoing. The three arrested persons have been released on bail pending further investigation and the likelihood of further arrests is not ruled out.

Customs reminds members of the public that they may risk committing the crime of money laundering if they use personal or company bank accounts to deal with money from unknown sources, regardless of whether a monetary reward is involved.

Under the OSCO, a person commits an offence if he or she deals with any property knowing or having reasonable grounds to believe that such property in whole or in part, directly or indirectly represents any person's proceeds of an indictable offence. The maximum penalty upon conviction is a fine of \$5 million and imprisonment for 14 years while the crime proceeds are also subject to confiscation.

Members of the public may report any suspected money laundering activities to Customs' 24-hour hotline 2545 6182 or its dedicated crime-reporting email account ([crimereport@customs.gov.hk](mailto:crimereport@customs.gov.hk)) or online form ([eform.cefs.gov.hk/form/ced002](http://eform.cefs.gov.hk/form/ced002)).

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## **HKMA welcomes commencement of service of "Credit Data Smart"**

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

The Hong Kong Monetary Authority (HKMA) welcomes the joint announcement of the Hong Kong Association of Banks, the Hong Kong Association of Restricted Licence Banks and Deposit-taking Companies, and the Hong Kong S.A.R. Licensed Money Lenders Association Limited (collectively as the Industry Associations) today (April 18) on the commencement of service of "Credit Data Smart" on April 26.

The HKMA has been working closely with the Industry Associations to introduce more than one consumer credit reference agency (CRA) in Hong Kong, with a view to promoting the market competition of consumer credit reference services in Hong Kong, enhancing the service quality of consumer CRAs and reducing the operational risk of having only one commercially run service provider in the market, particularly the risk of single point of failure.

The HKMA is fully supportive of the implementation of "Credit Data Smart", which is an initiative under the "Fintech 2025" strategy in creating the next-generation data infrastructure and driving fintech development in Hong Kong. The commencement of service of "Credit Data Smart" will mark a milestone in consumer credit reference services in Hong Kong. The HKMA looks forward to seeing the public being offered with secure and reliable consumer credit reference services from multiple CRAs.

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## **Strategic Public Policy Research Funding Scheme 2024-25 opens for application**

The Chief Executive's Policy Unit (CEPU) today (April 18) announced that the Strategic Public Policy Research Funding Scheme (SPPRFS) 2024-25 is open for applications between now and June 5, 2024.

The SPPRFS is a government-financed funding scheme dedicated to supporting evidence-based public policy research by higher education institutions and think tanks in Hong Kong. The CEPU is its Secretariat. As the Government's internal research unit, the CEPU was set up to enhance the

Government's capabilities in research and advocacy on long-term and strategic issues. One of its tasks is to build up external policy research capacity through measures including administering the SPPRFS. This will be conducive to the achievement of the CEPU's objectives, including to advocate for and assist in the formulation of long-term and strategic policies from a forward-thinking perspective; to keep abreast of national development and analyse and suggest areas of significance in the integration into national development; to examine international relations and situations, and analyse opportunities and risks; and to grasp the sentiments of Hong Kong citizens to understand the general direction and focus of their concerns.

In light of the research needs and policy priorities of the Government, six strategic themes have been identified for the SPPRFS 2024-25. They are: (a) Development Opportunities from the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area under the National 14th Five-Year Plan; (b) Achieving Carbon Neutrality; (c) Hydrogen Economy; (d) Sustainable Development of Elderly Care Services with an Ageing Population; (e) Healthcare Innovations; and (f) Education. Under each strategic theme, there are specified research areas on which researches should be conducted.

Applications for the SPPRFS 2024-25 must be made under one of the specified strategic themes and in line with the specified research areas. Those falling outside the specified strategic themes and specified research areas will not be considered generally.

Each SPPRFS project may be granted a maximum of HK\$5 million and last from one to five years.

Assessments will be conducted by an Assessment Panel which comprises experienced academics. The Assessment Panel will also take into account comments of external reviewers who are local and non-local experienced academics and experts during the assessment process. To ensure policy relevance of the research proposals, suggestions and views of relevant government bureaux/departments will also be sought for reference by the Panel. A declaration of interests system is in place to ensure that the assessments are fair and impartial.

Research quality and strategic relevance to public policy development in Hong Kong are the primary considerations in evaluating research proposals under the SPPRFS. Other factors that will be taken into account by the Panel include the deliverables of the research, the research team's capability, the feasibility and practicality of the proposal, the implementation schedule, and the proposed budget. Institutional support towards capacity building in public policy research and any external funding sources and support will also be taken into consideration.

Separately, the major themes and indicative research areas of the Public Policy Research Funding Scheme (PPRFS), which is also administered by the CEPU, have been updated having regard to Hong Kong's current and long-term development as well as the need for research on various social issues. Applicants are encouraged to prepare proposals with reference to the six

strategic themes and specified research areas for the SPPRFS 2024-25, as well as eight other major themes with 29 indicative research areas. As compared to the SPPRFS, the PPRFS focuses on research studies of a shorter duration and smaller scale. Applications for the PPRFS are accepted throughout the year and the results of each batch of applications will be announced on a quarterly basis in general.

For details of the SPPRFS and the PPRFS, including eligibility criteria, research areas, assessment mechanism, application method and other related information, please visit the CEPU website ([www.cephu.gov.hk/en/PRFS](http://www.cephu.gov.hk/en/PRFS)).

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## **CSSA caseload for March 2024**

The overall Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) caseload in March showed a drop of 457 cases, representing a decrease of 0.2 per cent compared with that of February, according to the latest CSSA caseload statistics released by the Social Welfare Department today (April 18).

The total CSSA caseload at the end of March stood at 199 205 (see attached table), with a total of 271 440 recipients.

Analysed by case nature, low-earnings cases registered a month-to-month decrease of 1.0 per cent to 1 530 cases. Unemployment cases decreased by 0.6 per cent to 16 943 cases. Single parent cases were down by 0.5 per cent to 20 192 cases. Both old age cases and permanent disability cases dropped by 0.2 per cent to 111 633 cases and 17 104 cases respectively.

Ill-health cases remained steady at 27 855 cases.