

Legislative Council Panel on Security

Guidelines and Procedures for Disposal of Computers in Use by the Police

Purpose

This paper seeks to provide information on the Police's guidelines and procedures for disposal of computers, as well as a brief account of the recent reported incident that a computer disposed of by the Police contained confidential files.

Police's Guidelines and Procedures for Disposal of Computers

2. The Police have specific guidelines and procedures on the disposal of government computers. In order to ensure that data stored in the hard disk will not be released to unauthorized person, whenever a computer is to be disposed of, the hard disk of the computer will be physically detached. The detached hard disks will be returned to the Information Systems Wing (ISW) of the Police Force for centralized disposal. All these returned hard disks will then be degaussed centrally by ISW to ensure that no information can be recovered from the hard disks by any ways or means. The degaussed hard disks will finally be centrally destroyed. Other obsolete computer parts without any data storage will be sold through auction.

3. There are also guidelines concerning privately-owned computers used for official purposes. If these computers are to be removed from the office, prior notice must be given and all official data must be completely erased before removal. All staff of the Force have been properly briefed of the above guidelines and instructed to strictly adhere to them.

4. Salient points of the existing guidelines are as follows : -

- Prior approval from formation commander must be obtained prior to the use of privately-owned computers in the office;
- Approval is subject to conditions such as requirements for licensed software;

- All software used for official purposes must be capable of recording data in a compatible format to those of government computers;
- Prior notice has to be given before a privately-owned computer is removed from the office;
- All official data must be completely erased before the privately-owned computer is removed from office;
- Files in the computer are subject to inspection by formation security officer.

The Recent Incident at Wanchai Police Station

5. Enquiries conducted by the Police Force revealed that in early 2002, an officer previously attached to a Wanchai Divisional Crime Investigation Team brought his privately-owned computer back to the team office as an aid to paper work. Upon his transfer out of the team, he left the computer behind for others to use. In early March 2003, the computer malfunctioned and was removed from the team office during a tidying up exercise. Subsequently, on 4 March 2003 the subject computer was discarded at the refuse collection point inside the Police Station's New Block compound on the opposite side of Jaffe Road. The station compound is also used by the Police Married Quarters for junior officers on the same site. That same day, the computer was picked up as domestic refuse by a scrap dealer who later sold it to a citizen. Seven documents containing personal data were found stored on the hard disk of the computer. The incident was brought to the attention of the Police through a reporter on 7 March 2003 and an enquiry was initiated. The incident was first reported by a local newspaper on 12 March 2003. The hard disk was later returned to the custody of the Police on 20 March 2003.

6. Enquiries so far have not revealed any criminality. However, failure to observe guidelines and procedures on the use of privately-owned computer for official purposes is believed to be the cause of this isolated incident, in that the official data was not completely erased before the privately-owner computer is removed from the office. There has been no similar case in the past.

Remedial Action

7. Despite the return of the hard disk, the Police have advised both the newspaper and the citizen concerned on the provisions of the Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance to prevent any unauthorised disclosure.

8. Existing provisions governing the use of privately-owned computers for official purposes have been reviewed and are considered to be adequate for general regulatory purposes. Members of the Force have been reminded to strictly adhere to these procedures and guidelines, in particular the need for prior approval for use of privately-owned computers for official purposes, the safe storage of official data and the need for official data to be removed before disposal of the equipment.

9. Appropriate disciplinary action will be taken against any officer found to have neglected the procedural requirements.

10. In addition, the Police are reviewing the security of Wanchai Police Station, taking into consideration its uniqueness with the Police Married Quarters for junior officers enclosed in one part of the station compound.

Security Bureau
April 2003