

Complaint against Airport Authority for Mishandling Enquiries about CCTV System Executive Summary of Investigation Report

Details of Complaint

The complainant witnessed a suspected theft at the Baggage Reclaim Hall of the airport and alerted the airport staff nearby, who allegedly took no action. The suspect fled and the complainant later reported the matter to the Police.

2. Dissatisfied with the airport staff's inaction, the complainant wrote to the Airport Authority ("AA") and asked whether the Closed Circuit Television ("CCTV") cameras at the Baggage Reclaim Hall had recorded the incident. Subsequently, the same question was raised by a Legislative Council ("LegCo") Member on his behalf. While AA staff told him the CCTV cameras were for real time surveillance only and that the identity of the staff under complaint could not be confirmed, a different reply was given to the LegCo Member that those cameras were equipped with recording functions. Considering the inconsistent replies, the complainant queried the honesty of the staff concerned and doubted if AA was trying to cover up its staff's inaction.

Our Findings

3. The CCTV system at the airport was installed for safety, security and operation monitoring. AA has established internal guidelines to safeguard data privacy and prevent misuse of CCTV video images. Besides, it has a non-disclosure policy on such information as the locations of CCTV cameras to avoid compromising the effectiveness of surveillance.

4. Regarding telephone requests from public for CCTV records, AA has prepared response guidelines for staff in its training material, under the CCTV internal policy, which cover, *inter alia*, the answer that "CCTVs are used for real time surveillance only". Nevertheless, AA also instructs in the same internal policy that the responsible staff should exercise discretion in case the CCTV footage requested may assist crime/incident investigation.

5. It was only on receipt of the LegCo Member's question about the CCTV system that AA reviewed the said response guidelines and decided to disclose that those cameras were equipped with recording functions.

6. In the said complaint, AA considered the staff concerned to have adhered to the non-disclosure policy in telling the complainant that the CCTV cameras were for real time surveillance. However, AA admitted that it should have proactively notified the complainant of the new response after the aforesaid review. In its email responding to the complainant's query about dishonesty, AA, making excuse of

comforting the complainant “in the best of customer service recovery”, said that “the staff concerned who were not honest in this instance had been suitably admonished”.

7. In handling the complainant’s report of crime, AA had made extensive enquiries with the airport staff on duty, contacted the Police and confirmed that the Police would follow up on the case. Assuming that the CCTV footage would be viewed, the staff handling the complaint decided not to view or retain the footage until the Police investigation was over. AA considered that the staff should have exercised discretion to view the footage. As such, there was room for improvement and AA started a review of the handling procedures for similar situations.

Our Comments

8. The CCTV cameras at the Baggage Reclaim Hall do indeed have recording functions. AA’s instruction to staff about the standard response, i.e. “CCTVs are used for real time surveillance only” did not give a true picture. The staff’s answer to the complainant’s enquiries, in line with AA’s standard response, was therefore false. That said, the staff were following AA’s instructions. AA’s statement that the staff concerned were not honest was therefore grossly unfair.

9. We consider knowingly constructing a standard response which contains false information totally unacceptable. Furthermore, we consider it unjust to put the blame on the staff when the dishonesty actually originated from the management. Such gross act of injustice could not be justified on grounds of good customer service. The readiness of AA’s management not to tell the exact truth and their misapplication of the concept of customer service was worrying and must be corrected.

10. Lying to the public, whatever the motive, is unacceptable. Asking its staff to accept a charge of dishonesty for the sake of appeasing a complainant is unthinkable. In this connection, AA must revamp its training, no matter at management level or at front line staff level to uphold its integrity and credibility.

Conclusion and Recommendations

11. In view of the above, The Ombudsman considered the complaint substantiated.

12. The Ombudsman recommended that AA:

- (1) expedite its review and revision of its CCTV policy and procedures in handling complaints or reports of incidents of irregularities at the airport such that they would enable the viewing and retention of relevant footage of CCTV recordings where warranted; and

- (2) provide appropriate training and/or advice to its management on their mindset as well as to frontline staff on proper customer service which would not compromise the honesty and transparency of AA.

**Office of The Ombudsman
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