

Telecommunications Regulatory Affairs Advisory Committee

Implementation of the SMS Sender Registration Scheme and Other Measures to Combat Fraudulent SMS

PURPOSE

This paper updates Members on the measures adopted by the Office of the Communications Authority (“OFCA”) to combat fraudulent messages sent via Short Message Service (SMS).

BACKGROUND

2. The problem of fraudulent SMS is a growing concern for the community at large. There are reports about fraudulent SMS sent to mobile users by fraudsters masquerading as publicly known companies and organisations including telecommunications service providers.

MEASURES TO COMBAT FRAUDULENT SMS

3. With a view to safeguarding the integrity of telecommunications services and the security of communications networks, OFCA has been adopting a multi-pronged approach to combat fraudulent SMS.

Implementation of the SMS Sender Registration Scheme (“Scheme”)

4. In order to help members of the public verify the identity of SMS senders so as to reduce the risk of deception by fraudulent SMS, a technical working group, in collaboration with the Police, relevant mobile service providers as well as the banking sector, was set up in November 2022 to devise and implement the Scheme to combat SMS spoofing.

Overview of the Scheme

5. Under the Scheme, a participating company or organisation is required to apply to OFCA to become a Registered Sender, and register its SMS Sender ID(s) with the prefix “#”. The prefix “#” is newly introduced so as to facilitate members of the public receiving SMS in Hong Kong to easily identify whether the SMS Sender ID contained in the SMS is registered with OFCA and whether an SMS is sent by a Registered Sender. Only Registered Senders are able to send SMS to local subscribers of mobile services using their Registered SMS Sender IDs with the prefix “#”. All other SMS with sender IDs containing “#” but not sent by Registered Senders will be blocked by the telecommunications networks. For the avoidance of doubt, the Scheme is not applicable to 2-way SMS (i.e. SMS which receiving parties are expected to reply to the senders via their phone numbers) since the Sender IDs of 2-way SMS will contain numeric digits only to facilitate direct reply by the recipients.

6. The “#” sign is not allowed in any position of a Sender ID other than in the prefix, and a Sender ID shall start with the prefix “#”, followed by three to ten alphabets, numbers or special characters (excluding “#”). Local subscribers of mobile services are not required to apply for the feature, install any mobile apps or make any changes to their handset settings.

Launch of the Scheme and Latest Development

7. The Scheme was first launched in the telecommunications sector on 28 December 2023. Individual Government departments and the banking sector also joined the Scheme in January 2024. The Scheme has been further opened up to all sectors for participation since 21 February 2024. As at 19 July 2024, more than 280 companies or organisations had joined the Scheme. OFCA will continue to actively invite more Government bureaux/departments, and other companies/organisations which need to communicate with members of the public via SMS to participate in the Scheme, with a view to enhancing the security and credibility of SMS sent from these companies/organisations and providing better protection to members of the public.

8. OFCA has established and maintained the SMS Sender Registry (“Registry”) to keep the latest records of all Registered Senders and their

corresponding Registered SMS Sender IDs since the launch of the Scheme. Members of the public can visit OFCA's website at <https://app2.ofca.gov.hk/apps/ssrs/onlineEnquiry> to check whether the sender ID with the prefix “#” received in any SMS is registered in the Registry and find out the identity of the corresponding Registered Sender.

Code of Practice on Management of Scam Calls and Scam SMS by Telecommunications Service Providers (“Scam CoP”)

9. Meanwhile, the Communications Authority issued the Code of Practice on Management of Scam Calls by Mobile Service Providers on 21 April 2023 to provide practical guidance to mobile service providers in managing suspected scam calls made from local mobile networks and systems as well as ensuring the efficient and reliable operation of mobile networks and systems. The Scam CoP came into operation on 30 June 2023 and was revised on 27 September 2023 to cover fixed service providers starting from 31 December 2023.

10. The Scam CoP was further revised on 29 April 2024 to (a) cover management of suspected scam SMS and (b) enhance monitoring conditions for suspected scam calls. Telecommunications service providers are required to implement the new measures by 31 July 2024¹.

11. According to reports submitted by telecommunications service providers, from July 2023 to June 2024, about 930 000 telephone numbers were suspended under the Scam CoP.

Blocking Access to Suspicious Websites and Suspension of Telecommunications Services of Local Phone Numbers Suspected to be Involved in Scam Cases

12. With OFCA's coordination, the Police and relevant telecommunications operators have established a protocol for implementation of blocking access to suspicious websites and suspension of telecommunications services of local phone numbers involved in scam cases based on information provided by the Police. As of end June 2024, more

¹ The Scam CoP is available at <https://www.coms-auth.hk/filemanager/statement/en/upload/650/cop202401.pdf>.

than 4 200 local numbers were suspended and over 12 200 web addresses were blocked.

WAY FORWARD

13. OFCA will continue to enhance its publicity efforts through TV and radio announcements, exhibitions, community talks and public seminars to raise public awareness of phone and SMS scams and to widely disseminate anti-deception messages to all members of the public. OFCA will also continue to review the various measures from the telecommunications perspectives to curb SMS scams by interception at source, in collaboration with the Police, the telecommunications industry as well as other stakeholders.

VIEWS SOUGHT

14. Members are invited to take note of the content of this paper. Any views and comments from Members are welcome.

**Office of the Communications Authority
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