

From mountain to sea

Trading Standards Bulletin

Bulletin No. 37

Doorstep Crime/ Cold Calling

Trading Standards have received a couple of reports recently about people coming to residents' doors claiming to be 'officials' (unfortunately, I'm unable to disclose any further detail at this time), then gaining entry to the house, and in one instance misleading the resident who then lost a substantial amount of money as a result.

Can I take this opportunity to remind everyone that when a cold caller comes to your door, please don't take them at face value no matter who they say they are. Keep them on the doorstep, ask for identification and ask what they want. If they offer identification, accept it, advise the caller(s) that you will lock your door then verify their identity by calling their HQ (remember to obtain the phone number from the Phone Book or Yellow Pages – don't use the contact information on the ID card as it may be fake), then call the agency concerned to ask if they have employees as detailed on the ID card and if they should be at your door.

Examine the card carefully for signs of tampering in case it has been stolen and altered. You may also wish to call a friend or neighbour to come over to support you in this sort of situation.

Remember too, no-one can legally force their way into your home without a warrant (and if they have one, they should show it to you) except a Police Officer in uniform and only when trying to quell a disturbance, responding to cries for help or when in close pursuit of a suspect, otherwise you can refuse them entry.

If you have any concerns about a cold caller at your door, especially one who is becoming problematic, call Police Scotland on 101 or, if it's an emergency, call 999.

Scams

Amazon Scam

One resident in south Aberdeenshire recently received a phone call purportedly from Amazon, advising that an £800 mobile phone had been ordered on her Amazon account. Immediately discounting the matter correctly as a scam, she hung up.



From mountain to sea

The truth of the matter was that the call had nothing to do with Amazon and its intent was to frighten the resident into taking action to stop the 'sale'. Similar reports from outwith the Shire suggest that the scammers are trying to get residents to press a number on their phone keypad to sort things out about the phone, but what actually happens is that the resident is transferred to a high tariff phone line where they are put on hold, all the time racking up a large phone bill which is later credited to the scammer's account.

If you receive such a phone call, be like our resident and simply hang up.

Courier scam

A resident in the Formartine area recently tried to sell his old bicycle on social media. Shortly after advertising the bike, he was contacted by a person who was keen to buy. He was advised that payment would be handed to him via private courier, but there would be an additional charge for insurance, for transporting the cash in a sealed envelope. The resident was also advised that he would have to pay the courier first for the total amount but the envelope would contain a full reimbursement.

In truth of course, there would be no money in the envelope which would likely only be discovered once the courier had left, leaving the resident out of pocket to the tune of several hundred pounds.

Thankfully, the resident realised very early on that it was a scam and took the offer to buy no further. Sharp-eyed readers will also recall a similar scam in Bulletin 31 involving second hand beds.

Misc.

Over the last few weeks, after the effects of Storm Arwen and the high winds we've had recently, Trading Standards have received a substantial number of complaints about problems with rogue roofers. Needless to say, the excellent work done by genuine tradesmen goes unremarked. These problems have involved 'roofers' who: ask for money up front before any work takes place; fail to turn up at the agreed date to start work; fail to respond to customers' messages; are aggressive or intimidating with customers; produce shoddy work and fail to remedy the problem they were employed to remedy; fail to provide written quotes or invoices, take cash payments then deny payment had been received and more besides.

Problems with rogue roofers is a subject we have covered a number of times in previous bulletins. In summary, some points to consider:



From mountain to sea

- Many of these problems start when customers ask for recommendations on social media or advertise on certain websites for tradesmen to do work for them. This is a risky strategy. Too often this results in the customers having no way to check a tradesman's history, so the customer goes into the transaction blind and they end up with shoddy work and a large bill.
- Normal practice is that the customer will arrange for the tradesman to view the work required and arrangements made between both parties. The tradesman then gives the customer a quote, usually written or e-mailed, which is also proof that a particular company had been approached about doing the work. The quote should cover the type of work required, an approximate cost and an estimate of how long the work will take. This document, which is required by law, is an important document should a dispute arise, so should be kept safe by the customer.
- Tradesmen do not normally ask for a deposit before any work commences. They usually have the financial resources to cover the work and invoice the customer on completion or, if it's a big job, once the work has reached a particular stage. This latter point should be agreed beforehand with the customer. Where a tradesman asks for a deposit upfront, it may be a sign that a company might struggle financially to complete the work.
- Once the work is complete or when big jobs reach certain stages, the tradesman usually invoices the customer for all costs; time, materials and any incidentals incurred BEFORE payment is made. Like the quote it should be in durable form (written or e-mailed). This is also an important document as it shows that the company took on the work and now considers it complete. This document should also be kept safe by the customer, in case a dispute arises. With both the quote and invoice, they should be provided wholly by the tradesmen and the customer should not be involved in compiling these, as has happened in the past.
- Should a tradesman become aggressive or intimidating to a customer, this should be reported to Police Scotland immediately.
- Where tradesmen fail to turn up to start work or progress it or fail to reply to respond to customers' messages, these could be grounds for ending the contract. If a customer decides to do this they should advise the tradesman in writing or by e-mail as soon as possible. This message should also be dated, to show when the contract was ended.

From mountain to sea

- Likewise, where the work has been completed to an unsatisfactory standard, the customer should allow the tradesman the opportunity to remedy this. Where the work hasn't been remedied, this too may be grounds for ending the contract. Please note though that with these terminations, there may still be costs payable by the customer for work already done or expenses incurred by the tradesman.
- Where payment of any sort is made to a tradesman, cash should be avoided unless a signed and dated receipt for the cash is provided as unscrupulous traders have claimed that cash payments they've received were not actually paid. Where possible traceable methods such as cheques or direct bank transfers should be used as these will show up on bank statements at a later date and can assist in tracing missing tradesmen. Also, please don't be tempted by promises of avoiding taxes by paying cash as this could lead to more serious problems with HMRC.

It is strongly recommended that the above advice is followed when dealing with tradesmen, to reduce the likelihood of problems. Reputable tradesmen will probably already follow these rules.

Please see bulletins nos. 20.25 and 28 for further details about precautions to take, Rights and Simple Procedure. All previous bulletins can be viewed at <http://publications.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/dataset/trading-standards-crime-and-scams-bulletin>

Conclusion

Please note that the advice given in these bulletins has been deliberately kept simple, so that if you are faced with a scenario such as the ones discussed here where fear, panic and alarm are often tools used deliberately by scammers, you will know what to do at that time. Remember, after the initial panic is over, you may have rights which Trading Standards can help you with.

If you have been the victim of a Doorstep Crime or an attempted crime, whether Bogus Caller or Rogue Trader, please report the matter to Consumer Advice Scotland so that Trading Standards can build a detailed, ongoing picture of the activities of these scammers throughout the Shire. This would be a great help to us to tackle this sort of crime.

If you have any information to share about the unlawful sale of tobacco, please use the Contact Info below to pass that information to Trading Standards. If you would prefer, you can report the information anonymously to Crimestoppers on 0800 555 111.



From mountain to sea

Contact Info

For urgent Trading Standards matters, contact Aberdeenshire Council's Trading Standards at 01467 537222. For non-urgent enquiries, please contact Consumer Advice Scotland at <https://www.consumeradvice.scot/> or on 0808 164 6000.

Contact Police Scotland on 999 if you need urgent Police assistance or 101 for non-urgent matters.

For more information about scams please visit Friends Against Scams at <https://www.friendsagainstscams.org.uk/> or Take Five at <https://takefive-stopfraud.org.uk/>

Please direct any media queries to news@aberdeenshire.gov.uk or 01467 538222 during office hours.

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<http://publications.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/dataset/trading-standards-crime-and-scams-bulletin>