

From mountain to sea

# Doorstep Callers and Scams

## Bulletin No. 96

The articles in these bulletins are based on real life complaints made to Aberdeenshire Council's Trading Standards department, unless otherwise stated, to make them as relevant as possible to readers. Names, exact addresses etc. have been withheld to avoid identifying complainants and to comply with GDPR so please feel free to share the contents with friends, family, neighbours or any community groups you are a part of. For details of scams reported in other parts of Scotland please click on the [Trading Standards Scotland Bulletin page](#).

### **Bogus Callers and Rogue Traders**

Residents in the Mearns area are being asked to be vigilant after a very recent report of possible rogue traders who were seen acting in a suspicious manner, paying unusual attention to houses after telling a resident that they were working on street lamps. The males concerned were also seen to be peering over a homeowner's shoulder when chatting at the doorstep.

Enquiries are ongoing but anyone who sees anything they believe to be suspicious is asked to report the matter to Trading Standards and/or Police Scotland. Contact details are available at the end of this bulletin.

### **Scams etc.**

#### Housing Scam

Further to our recent articles about suspected scammers calling residents about housing repair surveys, one resident in the Kincardine area, who is a Council tenant and who had had repairs done recently to her home, recently received a phone call on her mobile from a woman claiming to be from 'Housing Repairs'. The caller even gave her name as a genuine member of Aberdeenshire Housing staff.

Unfortunately for the caller, the resident had previously spoken to the genuine member of staff in the past and immediately knew that the caller was not who she claimed to be. As well as her voice being quite different, the caller's manner was quite abrupt and rude, completely unlike the genuine member of staff. The caller was also quite plainly spoken and sounded as if she was in her 30's or 40's.



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Further to this, the caller was calling from a 0331 number on the Caller ID and the call took place on a Saturday afternoon. The matter was later reported to Trading Standards, who are investigating the matter.

Some points to consider:

- As we have mentioned previously, 0331 are non-geographic numbers and the caller could be based pretty much anywhere in Europe,
- Genuine Council employees will most likely show on a Caller ID screen as calling from an Inverurie (01467) number or another, local, area code,
- This particular number has been looked up over 3800 times on the [Who Called Me website](#) and has almost 40 entries against it as being involved in Housing repairs scams,
- Should you receive a phone call from someone claiming to work for Aberdeenshire Council and you're uncertain if they are genuine, please try to note their name, department and the phone number being displayed on the Caller ID. Don't be afraid to ask them to re-state or confirm their details,
- Please don't divulge or confirm any further personal or financial information, ask them to confirm the reason they're calling then make an excuse such as there being someone at the door, ask them to call back later and hang up,
- Check the caller's number on the Who Called me website (it's quite simple to use) and note the information which comes back,
- Call the generic Aberdeenshire Council phone number of 03456 081208 to confirm if a staff member as per the details given by the caller does work for the Council and in the department claimed. Ask to speak to them and note if you're told if they're working that day or not,
- If you are still concerned that the call may have been a scam, please report the matter to Council Call Centre staff and ask that Trading Standards be advised.

### Gift Voucher scams

One type of scam which Trading Standards receive regular reports on are gift voucher scams. These usually take the form of people receiving pre-recorded messages (often from callers with American accents) on their phones from callers claiming to be a tax authority or law enforcement agency such as the IRS, HMRC or even the FBI.

These messages claim that the recipient of the call has been made the subject of an investigation and to avoid prosecution they should press 1 on their phone's keypad. The resident of the call is then directed to buy several hundred pounds' worth of gift vouchers from Amazon, Apple or Google and to send the serial

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numbers of these cards to a particular number, to avoid being prosecuted. Victims, who have been greatly alarmed by the call, often do as instructed immediately. Often this type of scam affects the most vulnerable in our communities.

On other occasions, people have been contacted via social media such as Facebook and advised that they have won a large cash prize but to release the prize, they have to send gift voucher details to the competition organiser to cover admin fees.

A more recent variation of this theme which has been brought to our attention is where residents receive a message via WhatsApp advising them that by sending the serial numbers of the vouchers to the message sender's number, they could buy merchandise from popular celebrities or to even meet them. Again, the residents have sent the serial numbers on, only to thereafter be left disappointed and left out of pocket.

Some points to remember:

- Facebook and WhatsApp play no part in these scams, they are simply the media used by the scammers,
- Similarly, Amazon, Apple and Google are not involved in these scams. Their vouchers are simply the ones preferred by the scammers,
- Genuine law enforcement agencies and tax authorities do not accept payment by way of gift vouchers,
- Nor will they contact a suspect to advise that an investigation is ongoing against them,
- Should they offer to accept any payment, in cash, gift vouchers or any other means, this would be corruption of the highest order,
- Anyone who claims to be a law enforcement agency or tax authority and asks for payment by way of gift voucher details is much more likely to be a scammer,
- Celebrities do not contact fans by WhatsApp to sell their merchandise; they have websites for that,
- Nor do they offer 'meet and greets' by WhatsApp messages sent out randomly. Any such message coming from any 'celebrity' is much more likely to be coming from a scammer,
- The use of the celebrity's name (undoubtedly without their knowledge or consent) is simply to subvert people's caution,
- Many victims think that as they still physically possess the vouchers that they can still spend them, despite sending the serial numbers on to the other party. This of course is not the case. As soon as the serial number has been



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sent, it can be used by the scammer and the physical vouchers become useless,

- If you become aware of anyone who has bought or is buying large amounts of gift vouchers, especially if they are elderly or vulnerable, please ask them tactfully what the vouchers are for. If they provide an explanation similar to the scenarios described here, please gently advise them that it is likely to be a scam, to keep their vouchers and to save themselves a great deal of disappointment,
- If you receive any such message from someone asking for payment in gift vouchers, please, please ignore it; it is a scam.

### **Misc.**



Trading Standards staff were out in Methlick last week building bridges with Cairnorrrie SWI and passing on scams information in a short talk. Topics covered included bogus callers, rogue traders and phone scams.

If you think your community group would benefit from a similar talk, please e-mail [robert.mckinney@aberdeenshire.gov.uk](mailto:robert.mckinney@aberdeenshire.gov.uk) to discuss further.



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## **Conclusion**

Please note that the advice given in these bulletins has been deliberately kept simple, so that if you are faced with such a scenario where fear, alarm and panic are tools often used deliberately by scammers, you will know what to do at that time.

If you have been the victim of a Bogus Caller or other form of scam, please report the matter to Consumer Advice Scotland so that Trading Standards can maintain a detailed picture about scammers operating in 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 or disposable vapes, 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.

## **Contact Info**

For non-urgent Trading Standards enquiries in Aberdeenshire, please contact the [Consumer Advice Scotland](#) website or call them on 0808 164 6000. For urgent Trading Standards matters, contact Aberdeenshire Council's Trading Standards at 01467 537222.

Aberdeen City Council's Trading Standards department can be contacted by calling 0300 0200 292 or e-mailing [tradingstandards@aberdeencity.gov.uk](mailto:tradingstandards@aberdeencity.gov.uk)

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

For more information about scams please visit the [Friends Against Scams website](#) or [Take Five](#) at their website.

Please direct any media queries to [news@aberdeenshire.gov.uk](mailto:news@aberdeenshire.gov.uk) or 01467 538222 during office hours.

All previous Trading Standards bulletins can be found on the Aberdeenshire Council website on the [Trading Standards Scams Bulletin page](#).