

Keep Your Money Safe



Surrey Police and Sussex Police Fraud Newsletter

In this issue:

Romance fraud

Celebrity impersonation

Signs of romance fraud

Reverse image search tools

Sextortion

Scamlytics

ROMANCE FRAUD: THE RISING CELEBRITY IMPERSONATION THREAT

Romance fraud continues to be one of the fastest-growing and most emotionally damaging forms of cyber-enabled crime facing communities across the UK. Both nationally and here in Surrey and Sussex, police are seeing a sharp rise in cases where victims are manipulated into believing they are in a genuine relationship with an internationally recognised celebrity - a trend that has escalated significantly over the past year.

While traditional romance fraud has long been a concern, this worrying new modus operandi (MO) involves criminals impersonating high-profile public figures. Locally, in Sussex and Surrey, we have seen a marked increase in cases where victims believe they are communicating with, or even engaged to, a famous personality. Some of the most commonly impersonated names include Elon Musk, Emma Watson, Andrei Rieu, Keanu Reeves, Tom Jones, and Kevin Costner.

Criminals steal publicly available images and videos of celebrities, then create convincing profiles across social media and dating platforms to contact victims. They frequently use excuses to justify why they can't meet in person or hold a proper video call - tactics aligned with typical romance fraud grooming behaviours, where offenders invest weeks or months cultivating trust before requesting money.



Local data shows that 80% of victims are women in cases involving specific celebrity-impersonation fraud; significantly higher than the 50/50 split between men and women when it comes to more typical romance fraud cases across Surrey and Sussex.

“Each month we see many incidents of fraudsters targeting our residents in an attempt to defraud them. We’re working hard to prevent this and support vulnerable victims of fraud or scams. By following our tips and encouraging family, friends and colleagues to do so too, you can reduce the risk of becoming a victim.”

Detective Chief Inspector
Antony Leadbeatter
Surrey Police &
Sussex Police
Economic Crime Unit

Signs of romance fraud

The grooming period involves sophisticated emotional manipulation, including rapid declarations of love (known as love-bombing), promises of exclusive relationships, and claims of personal vulnerability designed to evoke sympathy.

Romance fraudsters most commonly initiate contact through Facebook, Instagram, dating sites and other mainstream social media and messaging platforms, and then move conversations off monitored platforms and onto private messaging services such as WhatsApp or Telegram.

The financial losses involved in these cases are often extremely high, with one Sussex victim losing £275,000. Another victim from Surrey told police:

“I had to buy him gift cards. It started at £20 then went up to all my benefits money. I couldn't even get my grandkids Christmas presents or pay my bills ... he told me not to worry because once we were together, he would pay everything off.

He told me the kids would be happy with all the presents he had already got for them. His bank account had been having problems...if I truly loved him, I would help him. So, I did this and it went on for three years and seven months.”

It is not only the financial loss, but also the devastating emotional impact of losing what victims believed to be a genuine romantic partner.

Using reverse image searching: a simple but powerful tool

One of the most effective early checks you can perform is a reverse image search. These tools allow you to upload or paste an image and see where else it appears online. If a supposed celebrity or online partner's photos appear on modelling sites, press interviews, fan pages, or under different names, it is a strong indication of a fraudulent profile. See below on how to use them.

- Save the images that the person has sent.
- Choose reverse imaging search engine such as:
 - Google reverse image search - <https://lens.google>
 - Facecheck.id - <https://facecheck.id>
 - TinEye - <https://tineye.com>
- Upload the image and review the results
- Verify – cross reference this and additional information that the person has given you.



Take a moment to pause before sending money or personal information. Fraudsters rely on urgency and emotional pressure. **Ask yourself:** Is this person really who they claim to be? Would a true celebrity be messaging me privately?

If you suspect you or someone you know has been a victim of romance fraud, please report it Surrey Police or Sussex Police on 101.

SEXTORTION

Sextortion, also known as financially-motivated sexual exploitation, is when criminals threaten to share sexual pictures, videos, or information about you unless you pay them.

This type of crime disproportionately targets young men in Surrey and Sussex as organised criminals based overseas contact victims on dating apps and social media. In the last year across Sussex and Surrey, we have seen significant increase in reports of sextortion originating from the dating app, Grindr.

Recently, a man from Sussex in his mid-30s was using Grindr and was messaging another man he had made a connection with. Quickly the conversation moved to the messaging app, Telegram. The suspect sent over some explicit pictures and then requested photos in return, which were duly sent. Immediately the tone of the conversation changed with the suspect threatening to share the images with the victim's friends and family via Instagram. To prevent this from happening, a demand for £3,000 was made.

Fearing the images would be shared, he sent the money using an online money transfer service but despite this, the demands continued.

A Surrey man in his 20s responded to a message he received from an unknown person on Grindr. Again, the conversation quickly moved over to Telegram.

Once on Telegram, they swapped intimate photos and the victim then immediately received a call, threatening to share the images with his friends and family unless he paid £1,000. Thankfully on this occasion no money was sent. The victim hung up, blocked the profile and deleted his social media accounts before reporting to Surrey Police.

With the following advice, you can better protect yourself against this crime type:

- Stay on the safe dating platform - if someone requests that conversation is moved over to an encrypted messaging app such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Zangi or Signal please be wary.
- Do not send intimate images to anyone online, once that photo has been sent, you cannot get it back.
- If someone threatens to share intimate images, do not give in to their demands by sending money or gift cards.
- Immediately block the individual and cease all contact.

If you have been a victim of sextortion report this to the police by calling 101.

SCAMALYTICS

Scamalytics provide a mechanism for dating services to check their users against romance scammers identified by the police.

If you have been a victim of romance fraud or sextortion, you can help fight scammers by reporting fraudulent profiles to Scamalytics and adding to their global blacklist of scammers.

<https://scamalytics.com/report-scammers/>