

From mountain to sea

Trading Standards Scams Bulletin

No. 129

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

One resident of the Garioch area recently had a cold caller attend at his front door, claiming to be a tree surgeon. The caller also advised the resident that he was doing some work in the area and was cutting back some trees for a nearby neighbour. The caller went on to point out that with the neighbour's trees gone, his trees would be more susceptible to strong winds and stormy weather and implied that this could be problematic and cause damage nearby.

As a result of this, the resident rather reluctantly agreed to have a limited amount of work done to his trees and a price was set. The caller advised that he would get started in about 30 minutes, then left.

A short time later the caller returned with what looked to be members of his family and started work. The resident became somewhat alarmed when he saw that the workers had no personal protective equipment (PPE) and no climbing aids to climb one of the larger trees. He also noted that one young lad, aged about 15 years old, was using a chainsaw to do some of the work on branches of the trees.

Thankfully, the work didn't take long. Afterwards the caller provided the resident with his bank account details and the agreed payment was made. The caller then left again, this time for good.

Later the same day, the resident visited his neighbour and spoke about this work. The neighbour advised that although he had the caller at the door, he hadn't agreed to have any work done at all. Later still the resident did some online research and learned that he had paid substantially over the odds for the

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work which had been done. It was about this point that he realised that he had been scammed, so later reported the matter to Police Scotland and Trading Standards. Enquiries are still ongoing.

Some points to consider:

- This scam is a slight variation on the cold caller 'Good Samaritan' scam where a cold caller/tree surgeon/gardener claims to have been passing when they happened to notice a problem with a tree or trees in the garden which would cause a resident serious problems. In this instance, the caller lied to the resident about doing work for a neighbour (and may even have told that neighbour that he was doing work for the resident, to encourage the neighbour to get work done too). Outright deceit is a common, fundamental, tactic of scammers,
- The cold caller was claiming to be a genuine tradesman and thereby an expert in his field and used this 'expertise' to manipulate the resident,
- The cold caller also claimed that there would be serious problems if the resident didn't follow his advice (a doomsday scenario) but if he did, doomsday could be avoided. This is another common tactic of scammers and is often employed together with the 'expert' tactic,
- The cold caller returned a short time after agreeing the work with the resident and got started with the work. There are a number of reasons for this: the first one is that the sooner the work was finished, the sooner the cold caller would be paid; another is that once the work has started, the resident has given away his option to a 14 day cooling off period for contracts (which should be put in writing) agreed at the consumer's home and his right to change his mind; it was also hidden behind the caller's claim that the resident's work could be done quickly whereas the neighbour's work was a bigger job and would need more planning,
- At no time did the cold caller provide the resident with proper details of who he was or a written estimate in durable form (e.g. headed paper or an e-mail) with company details etc. as required by law (see Bulletin no. 105 [here](#) for more information on this). The resident was also not provided with details of his Right to Cancel, which is also required by law and it is an offence not to provide this. This should have been a red flag to the resident,
- The resident was reluctant to disclose how much he had paid for the work but it is the norm for cold callers like this to overcharge substantially, as they know that residents will not be familiar with current costs,
- The ages of the other workers and the lack of PPE should have been a massive red flag to the resident that he was not dealing with a genuine tradesman and, had something gone badly wrong and someone had been injured, the resident may have incurred some legal liability for it,

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Actions to take:

- As with any cold caller at the door or on the phone, you really don't know who you're dealing with. You only have their word that they are who they say they are, that their intentions are honest and that they are capable of undertaking work in a professional manner. As we have seen here, scammers are wont to lie to get work and ultimately money from a victim. Instead, remain calm but polite, thank them for their concern and then tell them that your brother/son/nephew/cousin is a tree surgeon (even if they're not; the point is to get the caller away from your door) and that you'll get them to look at it,
- If you have a fish-eye door viewer fitted, have a good look at who's at the door before you open up. If you don't like the look of them, you don't have to open the door. Instead, talk to them through the locked door or talk to them not at all,
- If you have a door chain or door bar, apply it before you open the door,
- If they won't leave the doorstep once you've spoken to them, tell them that someone came to your door just 5 minutes before they did and that they're waiting in the living room for you, so you really must go to see what they want,
- If the caller still won't leave the doorstep, tell them you'll call the Police (so have a mobile phone or community alarm pendant handy – preparation is often the key to deal with scams). If they still won't leave, close and lock the door then summon assistance, even if it's just a nearby neighbour,
- Please also remember to report all instances like this to your local Trading Standards office.

Scams etc.

E-mail scam

A resident in the Deeside area recently sent an e-mail to a relative to wish him a happy birthday. Very shortly afterwards she received an e-mail back claiming to be from the same relative, advising her that he was in hospital. This e-mail appeared to come from the relative's genuine e-mail address (but in truth was from a scammer).

The relative's e-mail went on to say that his niece was also in hospital with Stage 4 cancer and asked if the resident would be willing to help fund an iPad for the niece, to keep her spirits up and allow her to keep in touch with people. Shocked by this news, the resident immediately agreed to help.

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The resident then went on to the Tesco website and purchased an Apple gift voucher for £300 with her credit card, the details of which she then e-mailed to her 'relative'.

The relative then e-mailed back to see if the resident would be willing to spend a bit more, to get the niece a top of the range iPad. At this point the resident became suspicious and phoned her relative who confirmed that he was fit and well and that he had not been in hospital and neither had any niece of his. The resident thereafter reported the matter to her bank, to Police Scotland and to Trading Standards and, indeed, it was found to be a scam.

Some points to consider:

- Neither Tesco nor Apple played any part in this scam. Their services had simply been misused to facilitate it,
- The e-mail which the relative (scammer) had used to send the messages from had been one which the genuine relative had used in the past but had all but forgotten about. It had a very simple password to it, which the scammer appears to have been able to crack and then hack the e-mail account,
- With this hacked account the scammer was able to e-mail the resident with a fictitious story, asking for money,
- This incident, where the deceit was based on a lie about a niece suffering from an advanced cancer illustrates just how low scammers are willing to stoop to deceive people,
- Although the resident would have retained details of the gift voucher she sent the scammer, it's very likely that the scammer would have spent the voucher as quickly as possible before it was blocked,

Actions to take:

- If you think that you've been the victim of any similar scam involving your bank accounts, bank cards or credit cards, as a matter of urgency, use the Stop Scams telephone short code of 159 to contact your bank and report the matter,
- This sort of scam is a clear crime and should also be reported to Police Scotland either [online](#) or via the 101 non-emergency phone number,
- If you are concerned that any e-mail address you currently use or may have used in the past might have been hacked, you can check on the free [Have I Been Pwned website](#),
- It may also be worth checking with the security suite on your device if they have a similar pwning service and can e-mail you alerts when an e-mail address has been compromised,

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- If your e-mail address is on such a list, immediately log on to that e-mail account and change the password to a strong password (at least 12 characters long, with at least one upper case letter, one number and one special character such as an exclamation mark, a question mark etc.), or a password with three completely random words such as 'wine.stamps.blue' which is very difficult for a hacker to guess. Remember to save this password somewhere, such as a notebook (but keep it secure too), your internet browser or a dedicated password manager program/app.
- Alternatively, ask your browser to suggest and remember a strong password, so you don't have to remember anything but the one password needed for your browser's account (which should also be a strong one),
- Please also remember to report incidents like this to your local Trading Standards office, so that we can keep abreast of these types of scams, offer advice on them and forewarn other people through our bulletins, community talks and radio interviews.

Misc.

One resident in the Kincardine area recently saw a jacket on the Sofia Maris website, Sofiamaris.co.uk, (not to be confused with the UK company Sofia Maria Limited) which she quite liked, so she placed an order for it and paid £45 online, by debit card, for the item.

Several days later, a jacket arrived with the resident but it bore little or no resemblance to the jacket that she ordered. This one was of a poorer quality, different design and unlined – NOT at all what the resident wanted.

The resident e-mailed a complaint to Sofia Maris and rather than being offered a refund, she has been made 'offers' by the seller which would cost her even more money. She later reported the matter to Trading Standards.

Our enquiries reveal that despite the 'co.uk' suffix on the website, that the seller is actually based in Hong Kong. This means that the seller is beyond UK law and possibly the reach of her bank, though the resident has been advised to report the matter to her bank, just in case they can help. It was also noted that customer satisfaction ratings on Trustpilot for this company is low/very low.

Other points to note are that the seller's returns policy states that the cost of returning any goods lies with the buyer and can cost between £5 and £25 per item and that the seller will take a 20% handling fee from any refunds issued, in this case that would be £9.

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The resident has also been referred to the [UK International Consumer Centre](#) to see if the situation can be resolved with their assistance.

As can be seen, where goods are bought from foreign sellers, there may be increased risks and fewer protections for buyers. While we would not wish to dissuade consumers from buying from foreign sellers, we do recommend that prior to buying these goods, checks such as with [Trustpilot](#) and the company's address and returns policy from their own website would be worthwhile.

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 Consumer Advice Scotland at <https://consumeradvice.scot/contact/> or call them on 0808 164 6000.

For urgent Trading Standards matters or doorstep crime matters, contact Aberdeenshire Council's Trading Standards at 01467 537222 or via trading.standards@aberdeenshire.gov.uk

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

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

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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 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](#).