

Keep Your Money Safe



Surrey Police and Sussex Police Fraud Newsletter

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ROMANCE FRAUD

World Romance Fraud Day was first launched in 2023 to raise awareness of romance fraud and the serious impact it can have on victims. Observed annually on 3, October, the campaign encourages people to recognise the warning signs of online relationship scams, have open conversations about the risks, and learn how to protect themselves when forming connections online.

In support of this year's awareness campaign, this month's fraud newsletter is dedicated to romance fraud and its associated variations, providing information on how these offences occur, the tactics used by fraudsters, and the steps people can take to stay safe.

Genuine relationships should bring trust and happiness, not emotional distress or financial loss.

Online romance fraud

Romance fraud involves offenders creating a fake, usually online relationship to gain a victim's trust and manipulate them into sending money. Often perpetrated overseas, these scams begin on dating sites, including Match.com, Tinder, Bumble etc. or increasingly, social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. Fraudsters will encourage conversations to move off legitimate platforms and onto private messaging apps like WhatsApp or Telegram.

They will target people of any age, though the highest financial losses seen across Surrey and Sussex come from victims over 50 years old.

“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

They will often use a tactic known as 'love bombing', making early declarations of love or affection to build an emotional connection. Once trust has been established, the requests for money start to come, for supposed medical emergencies, visa or travel problems, legal issues, or other unexpected situations. In some cases, we've even seen claims they have been kidnapped and need a ransom payment. Victims are being asked to send large sums of money by bank transfer, gift vouchers such as Apple, Amazon or Steam cards, or through online money transfer services including Sendwave, TapTapSend and Remitly. Recently, in Surrey, a man in his sixties met someone on a dating app and the conversation continued by her request via Telegram. He sent a total of £5000 to the fraudster who was claiming to be his girlfriend, before his bank thankfully intervened.

Celebrity romance fraud

Surrey Police and Sussex Police continue to receive reports of celebrity romance scams that often start through unofficial fan pages on Facebook, Instagram and TikTok. Fraudsters again target both men and women equally and will often encourage conversations to move onto private messaging apps such as Telegram, Zangi, WhatsApp and Signal. Victims are often vulnerable and may receive a large number of kind and affectionate messages designed to build trust and create an emotional connection. The fraudster will then ask for money, typically Apple or Amazon gift voucher codes. Celebrities most commonly impersonated include Prince William, Kevin Costner, Tom Jones, Tom Hanks and George Clooney. We also believe that Artificial Intelligence is increasingly being used to create convincing fake videos, images and messages, making it harder for victims to recognise that they are communicating with a fraudster rather than the genuine celebrity.

In one recent example a lady in her seventies from Surrey, sent £25,000 to fraudsters believing herself to be in a relationship with the actor George Clooney. This convincing fraud caused devastation and heartache for both her and her family.

Use D.A.T.E.S. rule to keep yourself and loved ones safe from romance fraudsters:

- **Don't rush** into online relationships
- **Analyse** profiles for inconsistencies
- **Talk** to trusted friends and family
- **Evade** scammers—never send money or share financial details
- **Stay** on secure dating platforms and their messenger service.

Above all, never send money, share personal documents, or transfer funds to someone you've only met online.

Stop. Report. Support.

If you suspect you or someone you know has been a victim of romance fraud, please call the police on 101.

Sextortion cases continue to rise

Sextortion is a form of blackmail where a perpetrator threatens to reveal intimate images of the victim online unless they give in to their demands. These demands are typically for money or further images.

Surrey Police and Sussex Police are seeing an increase in incidents where offenders use social media platforms, including TikTok, to make initial contact with victims. While TikTok is primarily intended for sharing short videos and connecting with others, criminals can misuse features such as direct messaging, comments and live streams to build trust, gather personal information and persuade victims to move conversations onto other private messaging platforms.

In a recent case reported to Sussex Police, a man in his early twenties became the victim of sextortion. He was contacted through TikTok and exchanged messages for a short period. The conversation initially appeared friendly and harmless. The perpetrator suggested continuing the conversation on Instagram, and the victim shared his profile details. Shortly afterwards, he was encouraged to move the conversation to WhatsApp. From here, he was asked to send intimate photographs, which he did. The scammer then demanded money and threatened to share the images with his friends and family through Instagram if he refused. The victim was instructed to make payments by purchasing Amazon and iTunes gift cards and providing the voucher codes. He complied with these requests but further demands for additional vouchers followed. At this point, the victim decided to block the woman and thankfully there has been no further contact since.

Typical signs of Sextortion attempts may include:

- They're moving too fast.
- They try to develop a relationship with you very quickly. Some may even send a sexual / indecent image to you first.
- They pressure you to do sexual things you're not comfortable with.
- They might tell you they've hacked you or that they have access to your contacts.
- Some blackmailers might tell you they've got embarrassing images or information about you from your device.
- They might threaten to share this information unless money is given to them.

If this has happened to you, it is not your fault and there is help and support available. Do not panic. Do not pay. Do not talk any further to the criminals.

If you think you are being or have been a victim of Sextortion, call the Police on 101 or 999 in an emergency.

Warning Over Scam Dating Websites Charging for Messages

Surrey Police and Sussex Police have seen an increase in reports recently from individuals who have lost money, sometimes significant amounts, through fraudulent online dating websites, many of which are hosted overseas. A growing concern involves platforms that require users to purchase "credits" or virtual tokens to send and receive messages. Victims report being encouraged to spend increasing amounts of money communicating with individuals who often appear attractive, engaging, and highly responsive.

In many cases, victims later discover that the profiles they were communicating with may not be genuine. Some sites appear to contain large numbers of fake profiles, automated accounts (bots), or operators whose purpose is to encourage users to continue purchasing credits. Conversations are often designed to keep users engaged while avoiding genuine meetings, video calls, or other forms of verification. Online dating can be a positive way to meet new people, however, please remain alert to websites and individuals whose primary aim appears to be generating money through prolonged paid conversations rather than facilitating genuine relationships. Early reporting helps protect both yourself and others from becoming victims of similar scams.



**Talking to
somebody
new online?**

Romance Fraud

Never send money to someone
you haven't met in person.



Report cyber crime and fraud:
reportfraud.police.uk