

From mountain to sea

# Trading Standards Scams Bulletin No. 130

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**

### 'National Highways'

One resident in the Banff and Buchan area recently reported to Trading Standards that she had been cold called by two males who claimed to work for National Highways. The men were wearing hi-viz jackets and were driving an unmarked white van.

These men also claimed to be working near to the resident's home and that they were almost finished the job they were on but had spare tar left over and wondered if the resident would like his private road tarred by them, to avoid wasting the tar. The resident declined the offer and the men left without incident. There was no proof that the men had tar during this visit.

Some points to note:

- Aberdeenshire Trading Standards have taken a number of reports from across the Shire in the last 18 months of men claiming to work for National Highways, sometimes they claim to be working on behalf of Aberdeenshire Council, repairing roads,
- These men do NOT work for Aberdeenshire Council in any capacity,
- The real National Highways company is a part of the UK Government and is tasked with maintenance of motorways and A class roads in England only. They do not operate in Scotland,
- Previous reports have indicated that the prices paid by residents have often been well overpriced, based on the work done,
- This type of situation; roadmen working nearby (possibly on behalf of the Council), job finished or nearly finished, spare tar, avoid waste, cash settlement etc. is a classic rogue trader scam where the outcome is



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usually a poorly completed job (if any work is done at all), rapidly escalating prices once the work has started or the 'workmen' disappear with the money, no work done, never to be seen again.

### Actions to take:

- As with any cold caller at the door, you really have no idea who they are, how truthful they're being and what their real motives are. Far safer to remain polite but firm, thank them for their call and say "Thanks, but no thanks", go back inside then close and lock the door,
- If the callers raise an issue which might have merit, take the time to source a genuine tradesman,
- Call your neighbours to forewarn them if you think these callers might go to their doors too,
- Please remember to report the matter to your local Trading Standards office. Contact details are at the bottom of this bulletin.

### **Scams etc.**

#### Booking Scam, part 2

In bulletin number 128, we reported how a resident from Formartine was almost scammed after booking a stay in an Aberdeen hotel via a booking agency. Since then, a Kincardine resident has also reported that he had a similar experience.

Recently, this resident's wife booked a short stay at a hotel in Edinburgh using the same Netherlands-based booking agency as our resident in Formartine. The resident's wife booked the hotel under her own name, using her own e-mail address and a pre-established account with the booking agency. She also used her own credit card. Soon after this, she received a confirmation e-mail with a reference number from said booking agency. So far, so good.

However, next day, the resident received an e-mail to his e-mail address, apparently from the booking agency, asking him to confirm the booking. The details contained in this e-mail, including the name of and address of the hotel, the dates of arrival and departure and the cost of the stay were all accurate. This resident also has a pre-existing account with the booking agency, from previous bookings.

The resident, already becoming suspicious that the e-mail was a scam, did not click on the hyperlink contained in the e-mail as he suspected that he would then be asked for his credit card details "to confirm the booking" but that it would actually lead to a fraudulent charge on his credit card. Instead, he contacted Trading Standards for advice. He later called the hotel in Edinburgh direct and

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they were able to confirm that his wife's booking was already confirmed and that no further action was needed.

Given the coincidence between both of these incidents, it would be reasonable to conclude that the booking agency has a problem with its data security and that there has been a data breach or genuine employees in the Netherlands are illegally accessing and misusing customers' data. It is still unclear how the scammers made the link between the resident and his wife but this was the crucial factor which alerted the resident to the scam.

Some points to consider/actions to take:

- It would appear that booking confirmation messages are becoming a bit of a 'thing'. It is unclear yet if this will persist or peter out,
- If you receive a 'confirmation' message after making a booking, particularly if you have already received one just after making the booking, treat the new message with great caution and please don't click on any hyperlinks contained within it,
- As in this case, the sender's e-mail address was very similar to the booking agency's real e-mail address, so this could lead some people to believe the subsequent e-mail was genuine when, in fact, it's not so be careful about over-relying on this factor,
- Please do not simply reply to the message as, if it is a scam, replying to the message will simply be replying to the scammer,
- Instead, as with both of the residents in these incidents, phone the venue (hotel, B&B etc.) directly and confirm the booking with staff there,
- If you receive such a confirmation message and you're unsure what to do, please your local Trading Standards office for advice.

### **Misc.**

#### News Article

#### **PHONE SCAMS TAKE SINISTER TWIST AS VICTIMS' VOICES CLONED**

#### ***Chilling new wave of AI-assisted fraud targets older people and clones their voices***

Criminals are using AI technology to clone people's voices and set up unauthorised direct debits over the phone, according to new evidence from National Trading Standards. The advanced voice cloning is part of an organised criminal operation that harvests people's personal data to target victims with a wave of scam and nuisance calls.

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The process begins with a so-called ‘lifestyle survey’ phone call – seemingly harmless, but in fact designed to gather detailed personal, health and financial information. The criminals use this data to develop AI-generated voice clones used to simulate consent for direct debits, deceiving even legitimate businesses and financial providers. These details appear then to be passed or sold to other criminal operations who, with the details, can easily circumvent the banks and set up payments without the victim’s knowledge. Victims often do not realise payments are being taken.

The details are revealed as new data, released today by National Trading Standards, show that\*:

- On average, UK adults receive 7 scam calls or texts per month
- 1 in 5 (21%) receive scam calls or texts most days – and almost 1 in 10 (9%) receive them every day
- NTS blocked nearly 21 million scam phone calls and shut down 2,000 numbers in a six-month period.

**Louise Baxter, Head of the National Trading Standards Scams Team, said:** “What we’re seeing is a deeply disturbing combination of old and new: traditional phone scams supported by disturbing new techniques. Criminals are using AI not just to deceive victims, but to trick legitimate systems into processing fraudulent payments. This is no longer just a nuisance – it’s a coordinated, sophisticated operation targeting some of the most situationally vulnerable consumers in society. We urge everyone to speak to friends and relatives about scam calls, check bank statements regularly and report anything suspicious.”

**John Herriman, Chief Executive at the Chartered Trading Standards Institute (CTSI), said:**

“This alarming new twist in phone-based fraud shows just how quickly criminals are exploiting emerging technologies to prey on the public. Voice cloning takes scam calls to a sinister new level, making it even harder for legitimate businesses and consumers to distinguish real interactions from fraudulent ones.

“Trading Standards teams across the UK are working tirelessly to disrupt these operations, but we need the public to stay alert, talk to loved ones about the risks, and report anything suspicious. Protecting consumers, especially those most vulnerable, requires all of us to stay informed and work together to tackle these modern day and emerging examples of fraud.”

Through Operation Dardap, NTS has blocked nearly 21 million scam phone calls and shut down 2,000 numbers in the last 6 months. The operation began in 2022 when it was identified that UK consumers were being cold called and

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coerced into providing financial and personal details to the criminals who then took continuous payments from consumers' accounts.

### Actions to take:

AI is a subject which causes a fair bit of anxiety and this latest news article touches on one aspect which will undoubtedly heighten that anxiety. Bear in mind though that the use of AI only, at the moment at least, only alters how the scam is committed, not the essence of the scam or what the scammers' objectives are. While no preventative measure is perfect, there are ways which people can reduce the risk of falling victim to a scam like this.

### For instance:

- Such is the prevalence of phone scams these days, it pays to be careful when answering any phone call,
- Before you answer, take a moment to consider the caller's number on the Caller ID. Do you recognise it? Remember, some scam callers can spoof genuine phone numbers. If the answer is yes, you do recognise the number, you might go ahead and answer but remain cautious until you can confirm the caller is someone you already know,
- If you don't know the caller's number or are unsure, you might still answer but remember you have no obligation to do so,
- If you decide to answer an unknown caller, remain cautious and cagey. Let the caller do all of the talking and explain who they are and why they're calling you. If the caller sounds like a slick salesperson, a 'wide-boy', or starts asking questions and/or is pushy to get answers from you or generally just gives you a bad feeling, just hang up. Don't get involved in a conversation, just hang up,
- If you do decide to speak to the caller, keep your answers short. The shorter, the better and the more difficult it will be for an AI programme to clone your voice,
- If in any doubt at any time during the call, just end it without warning. You don't have to explain yourself,
- If the caller's number is one you don't recognise, it may be helpful to let the call go to the answering service to see if the caller leaves a message. If they do, you can screen and assess the call from that service more safely than dealing with the caller in real time. If they don't, they don't,
- Never call these numbers back to see what the caller wanted. You may simply be giving them another opportunity to scam you,
- Trading Standards are always keen to hear about AI being used in potential scams, so please consider reporting these matters to us.

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### **Stop Press**

A word from my colleague, Marlene:

#### How to Avoid Fake Online Reviews & What to Do If You're Misled;

Common red flags include:

- Repetitive wording across reviews,
- Reviewers with no other review history,
- Only 5 star reviews,
- Lack of “verified purchase” status,
- Reviewers pushing you to buy.

As fake reviews account for an estimated 11–15% of reviews in popular product categories, please check for red flags such as repetitive comments, unverified purchases, and reviewers with no history.

Suspicious reviews should be reported to the platform, and cases of being misled by a UK business can be escalated to Trading Standards. If a fake review leads to a bad purchase, consumers may be able to recover their money through Section 75 for credit card purchases over £100 or through chargeback for debit card or smaller transactions.

These issues are most common on platforms like Amazon, Etsy, Trustpilot, and Google Reviews but can arise anywhere that publishes reviews.

Businesses found engaging in fake-review activity can be fined up to 10% of their annual turnover.

### **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



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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 [tradingstandards@aberdeenshire.gov.uk](mailto:tradingstandards@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](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](#).