

From mountain to sea

Trading Standards Bulletin

Bulletin No. 34

Doorstep Crime/ Cold Calling

One resident in Garioch area recently had a man call at her door who offered to do some gardening for her. As she lives alone and due a medical condition, she accepted this offer. The man then did about 4 hours work, tidying up and power washing, then told the resident that the cost would be £800, which she paid partly in cash and partly by cheque. Later, after having second thoughts, the resident stopped the cheque but became fearful for her safety, should the male return.

In these circumstances (and many others) residents can contact Police Scotland on 101 (or if the incident has been reported to Trading Standards, ask the Trading Standards Officer) to arrange for a Domestic Security Survey to be done on their home. A Crime Reduction Officer will then contact the resident and make an appointment to come and survey the dwelling from the perimeter fence inwards, including the garden, any garages, sheds or greenhouses, external and internal security measures which are in place. They will then make simple, cost-effective recommendations to increase the physical security of the dwelling and make the resident feel more secure at home.

If requesting through Trading Standards, all that is required of the resident to pass their details to Police Scotland is permission in writing, such as an e-mail, signing the Trading Standards Officer's notebook or providing a hand written note to that effect.

We have also recently received reports of males going from door to door in the Turriff area, sometimes trying to sell garden gloves and sometimes simply asking for donations. Strictly speaking they should have a Pedlar's Certificate, granted by the Police to trade like this, which the males claim to have. Trading Standards would urge caution if people like this come to your door as the goods they sell are often very overpriced and, sometimes, these types of trader also scout gardens for items which they return later for and steal. We would always suggest that you remain polite but firm and decline their offer of any goods. Keep a discreet eye on them until they leave then report the matter to Police Scotland and/or Trading Standards.

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Scams

One resident of south Aberdeenshire went online recently to use a 'PDF to Word' service for converting documents. After choosing one such service he found there were a number of options available, so chose the single document option at a cost of 2 Euros. The resident made payment and received the converted Word document but two weeks later he was alerted by a further payment of 30 Euros which had been made to the company from his account, which he queried. It was then established that buried in the small print of the conditions was a clause which authorised automatic payments for the full service every 4 weeks. The position of this clause was also concerning in that dependent on the monitor's settings, that particular clause may not even be visible.

After a bit of wrangling, the resident was able to reclaim their money and cancel the automatic payments, but it would be worth bearing in mind for others who might need to use such a service as it would be all too easy to miss or overlook such payments and would not take long for a sizable cost to accumulate.

We have also received reports of scammers advertising tickets for winter festivals in the Glasgow and Cardiff areas on social media, taking payment from customers then failing to deliver the tickets, leaving the customers out of pocket. Trading Standards urges caution when looking to book tickets like these. If looking to book tickets like this:

- On the 'home' page, look for the small blue dot with the white tick to the right of the company name as this shows that the page has been verified by that social medium.
- Look for information about when the page was created; genuine businesses are likely to have been established for a number of years whereas scammers' pages will have been created recently, for that scam.
- Browse the comments made by other members of the public. If there appears to be a high percentage of comments alleging that it's scam or dissatisfaction with the service they've received, then it would be best to avoid dealing with this company.
- Look for information about the company's own website then go onto that site and look around. If the site has a number of pages which look and feel professionally designed, it's likely to be genuine. If there is only one or two web pages, especially if they look amateurish with no 'contact us' information (phone numbers, company address etc.), it's likely to be a scammer's page.
- If in doubt: avoid, avoid, avoid.

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Misc.

One topic which has been in the news a lot recently is that of disposable vapes. You may have heard them referred to as 'geek' or 'elf' bars. If you've seen them, you may have noticed that many of them look like highlighters pens and come in bright colours. They are one-time only e-cigarettes which cannot be customised or refilled and are intended for disposal once the liquid within has been used up. Most retail for around £5. Clearly they're aimed at the younger end of the market.

However, some issues with these disposable vapes are:

- Some disposable vapes are not registered with the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA).
- Vapes with a tank capacity over 2ml are illegal.
- Vape liquids containing more 2% nicotine are illegal.
- Vapes sold without suitable health warnings are illegal.
- Vapes sold without an accompanying information leaflet are illegal.
- It is illegal for a business to sell vapes without being registered with the Scottish Register of Tobacco and NVP Product Retailers.
- It is illegal to sell tobacco products, disposable vapes or regular e-cigarettes to people who are under 18 years of age.
- It is illegal to sell tobacco products, disposable vapes or regular e-cigarettes without a written Age Verification policy.
- Any business which wishes to sell tobacco products, disposable vapes or regular e-cigarettes must follow the Challenge 25/ Think 25 process to confirm that the customer is legally old enough to do so to avoid prosecution.

Given all of the above, there is a clear potential risk to the health of our young people. Thankfully, so far, worrying reports from around Aberdeenshire have been small in number. In an effort to start addressing this, the Scottish Government has contacted all registered sellers of e-cigarettes and disposable vapes to provide guidance similar to that above. More locally, Aberdeenshire Council's Trading Standards department will be building on this guidance by undertaking a programme of visits and inspections to these types of premises, to provide further guidance and to take enforcement action as required.

If you have any information about the sale of disposable vapes which concerned you, please feel free to get in touch with Aberdeenshire's Trading Standards department using the contact information below.

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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 a scenario such as the ones discussed here where fear, panic and alarm are often tools used deliberately by scammers, you will know what to do at that time. Remember, after the initial panic is over, you may have rights which Trading Standards can help you with.

If you have been the victim of a Doorstep Crime or an attempted crime, whether Bogus Caller or Rogue Trader, please report the matter to Consumer Advice Scotland so that Trading Standards can build a detailed, ongoing picture of the activities of these scammers throughout 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, 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 urgent Trading Standards matters, contact Aberdeenshire Council's Trading Standards at 01467 537222. For non-urgent enquiries, please contact Consumer Advice Scotland at <https://www.consumeradvice.scot/> or on 0808 164 6000.

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

For more information about scams please visit Friends Against Scams at <https://www.friendsagainstscams.org.uk/> or Take Five at <https://takefive-stopfraud.org.uk/>

Please direct any media queries to news@aberdeenshire.gov.uk or 01467 538222 during office hours.

All previous Trading Standards bulletins can be found at:
<http://publications.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/dataset/trading-standards-crime-and-scams-bulletin>