

From mountain to sea

Doorstep Callers and Scams

Bulletin No. 77

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](#).

Doorstep Callers

One elderly resident in the Formartine area was out in his garden recently doing some tidying up when he was approached by a doorstep caller who represented a roofing company. On seeing him in the garden, the representative engaged the resident in conversation and told him the roofing company was doing work in that area. The resident invited the salesman into his house, more for company than anything else, but the conversation quickly turned to the salesman's company doing work for the resident. The resident declined the offer but the salesman insisted that he would send a surveyor out in a couple of days to inspect the house anyway.

Several days later, a surveyor arrived at the resident's door to undertake a survey of the exterior of the resident's home. After sustained refusals by the resident that he didn't want any work done, the surveyor finally left and the resident reported the matter to Trading Standards, clearly stressed by the whole experience. Enquiries by Trading Standards are still ongoing but the company concerned has an unenviable record.

Some points to consider:

- As we have said on previous occasions, dealing with cold callers is an inherently risky business as you have no idea who they really are, how honest and reliable they and their company are, apart from what they tell you or what the flyers they may hand out say they are. The truth may be vastly different,
- In all likelihood, this rep was actively looking for opportunities to engage people in conversation, to get his 'foot in the door' and start on the hard sell and spotted this resident as a 'mark',

From mountain to sea

- In you are caught in a similar situation and it becomes clear that the person you're talking to is a sales rep, be firm and polite with them, don't be afraid to say 'no' and stick to it,
- If the topic of conversation turns to work being done, don't be afraid of cutting the conversation short and walking away. Use an excuse if you have to, such as you can hear the phone ringing in the house,
- NEVER invite a cold caller into your home. This is what they dream about; getting in somewhere warm and comfortable where they can park themselves on your sofa and politely refuse to move until you agree to getting work done and even perhaps sign a contract,
- As the old adage goes, "If in doubt, keep them out",
- NEVER sign a contract with a cold caller. If you feel any matter they raise may genuinely have merit, get your own tradesman. A good starting point would be the [new Aberdeenshire Trusted Trader page](#),
- In these sorts of circumstances, the sales rep's actions may amount to an offence under Unfair Trading regulations,

Instead, follow the above advice, try to note of the sales rep's description, a description of any vehicle he's using, hold on to any flyers or other paperwork he hands out and please report the matter to your local Trading Standards office. Contact details are at the end of this bulletin.

Scams etc.

Car Sales Scam Part 2

In the last bulletin we discussed car buyers from England who were trying to buy vehicles from what they thought were legitimate businesses apparently based in Aberdeenshire then paying for the vehicle then discovering that neither the business nor the vehicle existed.

Further to this, today's article is where the shoe is on the other foot; one resident in the Formartine area recently saw a car for sale on Facebook Marketplace so he made enquiries with the seller, apparently a small business down in Hatfield, Hertfordshire, by e-mail and received a glowing report about the car, written assurances from the seller about the high customer service standards that they strove to achieve and for £135 they would also take care of the paperwork and delivery of the vehicle.

The resident made some enquiries of his own and was satisfied that the company seemed to be a legitimate company. Based on what he was told about the vehicle and his own research and once he had received the sales contract, the resident went ahead and paid £4000 deposit for the vehicle by direct bank

From mountain to sea

transfer. For this transaction, the resident had been asked by the seller to ensure that the transaction type was classed as 'international' and that payment should be made in Euros, which he did and that confirmation of payment should then be sent to the seller, which he also did. Almost immediately after this, all contact from the seller ceased.

The truth of the matter, unfortunately, is that this was a scam. In all likelihood, the car did not exist or was not owned by the seller who may have used misappropriated photos to pretend to the resident that it did exist.

Some points to consider:

- Facebook took no part in this scam, it was simply the medium used by the scammers,
- Buying vehicles unseen via the internet is inherently riskier than dealing with a bricks and mortar business you can visit in person,
- In this instance the 'seller' was apparently based in Hatfield but the bank account details given to the seller were for a bank in Madrid, Spain. This should have been a red flag to the buyer,
- The transfer of funds was 'international' and in Euros, which should have been another red flag that the money was going abroad, raising risks even further as it would then be beyond the reach of the seller's bank and Scots Law should something go wrong with the sale, which it unfortunately did,
- The resident's research on the seller indicated that it was a genuine company. Unfortunately, although it was a genuine company, it was one which had no part in the transaction. Its details had been hijacked by the scammers,
- The vehicle in question was apparently keenly priced as it had been obtained by the seller via an auction. The truth was that it could be keenly priced because the seller didn't own any such vehicle and the asking price which was paid was mostly pure profit for the scammer,

Some precautions to take (in addition to those provided in the last bulletin), should you still wish to proceed with such a transaction:

- When conversing with the seller, if online ask to see the Form V5C (often referred to as the log book) or a scanned copy by e-mail, to show that the vehicle exists and that they have possession of it for selling,
- Try to arrange an inspection and test drive of the vehicle. Be suspicious if the seller keeps putting this off,
- Use Google Street View to scour the area where the seller is based. If it's a business selling, look for company signs showing that they occupy the address they've provided,

From mountain to sea

- Facebook provides a page called [Facebook Vehicle Scam Alerts](#) to people wishing to buy a vehicle. It may be worth going on to that page and using the search facility (using the little magnifying glass button on the right of the screen) to search for information about the seller. Please heed any information you might uncover, especially any negative information,

Should you feel that you've been the victim of such a scam, please report the matter to Police Scotland, your bank and your local Trading Standards office. All previous Trading Standards bulletins can be found on the Aberdeenshire Council website on the [Trading Standards Scams Bulletin page](#).

Misc.

Please find below a recent article from the Journal of Trading Standards. Hopefully it will be of interest and although it's a rather extreme example, it also highlights the predatory nature of some scammers and the impact it has, both financial and emotional, on their victims. It's also good to see these scammers get their just dessert.

Jail for home repairs fraudsters

A rogue trader who targeted vulnerable pensioners, charging tens of thousands of pounds for poor quality and unnecessary work while under a suspended sentence for similar previous crimes, has been jailed for 32 months following a successful prosecution brought by Carmarthenshire Trading Standards.

Danny Vaughan McClelland from Cilcennin, Lampeter, was described by his victims as 'a thief, a liar and a conman'.

McClelland carried out supposed repair works on homes in Bronwydd, Carmarthenshire and Borth, Ceredigion between March and July 2021. He charged his victims more than £20,000 for work that was conducted to such an incompetent standard that it required rectification costs of more than £10,000.

One expert witness surveyor stated that work carried out by McClelland for which he had charged £14,750 had no value whatsoever other than the potential value of the salvageable materials.

McClelland charged one couple £1,750 for just two and a half hours of unnecessary work, and in the third case demanded immediate payment from a victim after removing her roof.

From mountain to sea

McClelland, who traded as Weathershield Roofing and Property Maintenance, had previously received a caution for consumer protection offences in 2018 and was given a suspended sentence in December 2020 after pleading guilty to a fraud offence against a blind widower from Ceredigion.

However, McClelland did not heed that warning from the court, and went on to commit further offences on which he stood charged at Swansea Crown Court.

On 23 August McClelland appeared before His Honour Judge Paul Thomas KC for sentencing after entering guilty pleas to three charges of fraud at an earlier hearing. The judge said that McClelland had intimidated and bullied his victims, leaving them distressed, angry and upset.

McClelland was jailed for two years and eight months for the first fraud charge; for each of the other two charges, he was sentenced to 16 months imprisonment with an additional three months for breaching the suspended sentence. All of the sentences are to run concurrently.

Councillor Aled Vaughan Owen, Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Decarbonisation and Sustainability for Carmarthenshire County Council, said: "Let this be a warning to all rogue traders that seek to prey on the most vulnerable in our society, we will come after you.

"I would like to thank our Trading Standards Team for pursuing this case and getting justice for the victims. I would also like to thank Ceredigion Trading Standards Service for their support on this case."

Ceredigion County Council Cabinet Member for Public Protection, Matthew Vaux, said: "Most workmen are decent and reliable but characters like McClelland undermine that trust. At a time when a lot of households are struggling financially, this case shows the valuable work that our Trading Standards service does to protect individuals in our community against rogue traders, and I hope this conviction sends a clear message to any unscrupulous traders that we will take action to stop this type of criminal activity."

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.



From mountain to sea

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 the [Consumer Advice Scotland](#) website or call them on 0808 164 6000. For urgent Trading Standards matters, contact Aberdeenshire Council's Trading Standards at 01467 537222.

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.

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](#).