



From mountain to sea

Doorstep Caller and Scams

Bulletin No. 66

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.

Doorstep Callers

Trading Standards have very recently been contacted by residents of the Mearns to advise that they have received a flyer through their letterboxes from a company which promises qualifying customers free solar panels, boilers, heaters and other heating equipment. These residents were somewhat suspicious of these promises, so reported the matter.

On closer inspection, the leaflet only provides a mobile number to contact the company (which has no answering service and cuts off after a short time), has no company address or VAT number included, but does have a UK Government logo which it should not have.

In one instance a quote was provided for work worth tens of thousands of pounds but only after a 'returnable deposit' was paid. This appears to be a classic case of something which is too good to be true as no company can survive if it is supplying labour and heating products for free and is only charging a returnable deposit.

In Scotland, various Government grants and interest free loan schemes may be available for home improvements, such as insulation and replacement doors or windows, or both. Residents should be aware that where grant funding through the Scottish Government is available to them, it's very likely that a financial contribution will be sought from the applicant. This contribution is likely to be a nominal sum, but it will not be free. Before responding to any such adverts or flyers, residents should take time to consider contacting Home Energy Scotland at <https://www.homeenergyscotland.org/> or on 0808 80822082, where their advisors will be able to provide genuine information on what funding is available.

Trading Standards would also ask that where these sorts of flyers are posted through residents door, that the matter be reported to Trading Standards for us to monitor.

From mountain to sea

Scams etc.

Counterfeit Vapes

One resident of the Formartine area recently reported to Trading Standards that he had purchased a number of disposable vapes online which he believed to be genuine but turned out to be counterfeit. All of the vapes were of the same brand and flavour but when the resident tried to use the vapes, each of them failed within a couple of minutes as the batteries gave out.

On checking each of the QR codes on the vape boxes with his mobile phone's QR reading app, the QR codes led to a Chinese website which bore no relation to the supposed brand of the vapes.

As we have discussed in the past, disposable vapes are sold in the millions every week in Britain and is a lucrative market. Although each individual vape costs only a few pounds, already the legitimate UK market is worth over £1bn per year. Because of this, it is also a market which has attracted the attention of counterfeiters looking to make an easy buck, usually through sales made online via social media or their own websites. It can also lead to genuine retailers unwittingly buying in and selling on counterfeit stock as, unlike tobacco products, there is no track and trace system to follow a product from manufacture or import to its final sale in the shops.

Some points to consider when buying vapes, to avoid buying counterfeits, wasting your money and endangering your health unnecessarily:

- If a manufacturer is willing to make any counterfeit goods, profit is always their aim. There is no guarantee that the ingredients in counterfeit vapes are safe to consume or that they have been made in hygienic conditions. The cheapest ingredients often will do and counterfeits may well contain chemicals or contaminants which the genuine article does not,
- If you are looking to buy vapes in the physical world, stick to 'high street' names as they will have their own supply lines from importers. They also have a reputation to uphold and if there is a problem with your vapes, you will have a shop which you can return to, to seek redress as well as pursuing your consumer rights (which Trading Standards can advise on),
- Avoid buying vapes in some back street or similar, or from some Flash Harry or Arthur Daly character. You have only their word that the goods are genuine (which thereby command a higher price) – but their motivation is to shift the goods and make money, so it's unlikely that they will admit that the vapes are counterfeit as this would reduce the selling price,

From mountain to sea

- If you intend to buy online (where larger consumer sales proliferate, as do many counterfeit sites) the same principle applies; stick to well-known companies to reduce the chance of inadvertently buying counterfeits. A good place to start looking would be the UK Vaping Industry Association website (UKVIA is the UK's main trade body on vapes) [here](#),
- Check the individual vape box if you can for a QR code or a shiny (possible holographic) authenticity label. Scan the QR code with your mobile phone's camera or a QR app and it should lead to a webpage belonging to the manufacturer. If not, the vape may be counterfeit. Alternatively, type in the label code to the manufacturer's website (details of the manufacturer should be on the box). The result given, or if there is no manufacturer listed, should indicate if the vape is counterfeit or not,
- The number of puffs on a legal vape in the UK should not exceed 600. Anything above this is most likely illegal and possibly counterfeit,
- The maximum strength of the nicotine contained within the vape should not exceed 2%, sometimes expressed as 20 milligrams of nicotine per millilitre of liquid or nicotine salt. Anything above this is also most likely illegal and possibly counterfeit,
- Look for spelling errors, blurry pictures or washed out colours on each individual vape box. The vape should also be in a sealed packet inside. Genuine manufacturers package their products well; counterfeiters are not so fussy,
- Genuine vapes are silent when shaken and when sucked upon. Counterfeits often rattle when shaken and tick when sucked upon. They may also produce a burning smell or taste.

Counterfeit vapes have been reported as causing health problems such as extremely sore throats, migraine-like headaches, nausea, blurred vision and respiratory problems, so are best avoided at all costs.

As with everything else in these bulletins, Trading Standards can provide advice about counterfeit vapes.

Misc.

Aberdeenshire Trading Standards will once again be taking part in the annual Shut Out Scammers campaign which, runs from Monday 17th April until 14th May 2023.

Shut out Scammers is an annual campaign coordinated by Trading Standards Scotland in partnership with Police Scotland and supported by Local Authority Trading Standards teams. It is intended to reduce the impact of doorstep crime

From mountain to sea

by providing information and advice to consumers on how to protect themselves from rogue traders and misleading information.

Each week of the campaign will focus on a different issue which is likely to affect Scottish consumers. These are:

- Week 1 (17-23 April) – Empowering Consumers
- Week 2 (24-30 April) – Impersonation Scams
- Week 3 (1-7 May) – Maintenance/Home Improvement Scams
- Week 4 (8-14 May) – Cost of Living Scams

The campaign can be followed throughout the month on our social media pages. For Facebook, please click [here](#) and for Twitter, please click [here](#).



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



From mountain to sea

Trading Standards. If you would prefer, you can report the information anonymously to Crimestoppers on 0800 555 111 or to Keep It Out at <https://keep-it-out.co.uk/anonymous-reporting/>

Contact Info

For non-urgent Trading Standards enquiries in Aberdeenshire, please contact Consumer Advice Scotland at <https://www.consumeradvice.scot/> or 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 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>