Aberdeenshire COUNCIL

From mountain to sea

Doorstep Callers and Scams Bulletin No. 109

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

One resident in the Buchan area recently reported to Trading Standards problems he had with a trader he had engaged to lock block his driveway.

The resident had searched on Facebook for a paver and found this trader. Arrangements were made to have the trader view the location where the work was to be done.

The trader provided the resident with a verbal quote for almost £10,000 for the work. It was also agreed that the trader would start work the very next day. During the conversation, the trader told the resident that he lived locally but he only gave a general idea of the location. The trader also mentioned that he had only recently set up his business but that he had a website, details of which he also gave the resident.

The trader did arrive the next day and began work by digging up the area to be lock blocked. Once a considerable area had been dug up, the trader advised the resident that he would need almost half of the quoted price up front, to be able to proceed with the work. The resident then paid this sum in cash.

The work was eventually finished, despite the trader missing a few days in between, and the resident paid the balance of the quotation, again in cash.

Unfortunately, this situation highlights quite a number of things people should not do when looking to get work done. For instance:

- Please, never go looking for traders on Facebook or any other social medium. Social media are frequently the place where rogue traders go looking for their next victim,
- Also, please never ask for recommendations for traders on social media. Many of the recommendations given will be by people who you don't know and who may be friends of the trader. Some of the recommendations given will have the trader's interest at heart and not yours. It may also not be clear if the person making the recommendation has had work done by this trader and so can speak to its quality, or not. This increases the risk to people looking for a genuine trader,
- Instead, look for a trader on reliable websites such as Aberdeenshire Trusted Trader, Trustatrader.com or Checkatrade.com,
- Failing that, ask friends, family or neighbours if they can recommend a trader – but only if they have actually had work done and can speak to its quality,
- Facebook took no active part in this situation, their platform was simply used by the trader to advertise his business,
- Try to avoid going with the first trader you find. Instead, try to obtain at least 3 quotes (in writing) for the work to be done and assess each trader carefully for things like professionalism and competitiveness of the cost (but be wary of quotes which are substantially under the other two quotes). These quotes should contain the trader's business address, telephone number (so you're sure of EXACTLY who you are dealing with), the total prices of the goods and services to be provided (including taxes), any delivery charges, the duration of the work to be done and thereby the contract's duration and how the contract can be extended or cancelled by either party. Cancellation rights should be provided by the trader to the consumer/resident by law and it is an offence for a trader not to do this,
- When a trader has been selected, contracts which are agreed (preferably in writing) at a resident's home give that resident a 14 day cooling off period by law, during which the resident can change their mind and cancel the work without cost (although if the trader has gone to some expense already, these expenses can be negotiated). This is a valuable time for residents/consumers, so should not be lightly discarded,
- It should also be about this time that agreements are made as to how payments will be made, when they will be made (either with small deposit up front, in instalments or at the end of the work or some combination thereof) and how they will be made. In cases like this one, where there was no urgency involved, this is well worth taking time over. Try to avoid paying large sums in cash unless you can be sure that you will receive a receipt (which contains similar information as the quote). Simply handing over large sums of cash provides no proof of who paid whom, by how

much, what for, or even that a payment was made at all. If possible try to use a different method, which will provide a paper trail of the payment such as a cheque, credit card or bank transfer. Your assessment of the trader should still be continuing during this time,

- It is a common tactic of rogue traders to start work at a resident's home then to increase the price drastically once the resident is committed. Often this is done on the grounds that 'the job is more complicated than first thought' or something similar, so please ensure that the trader makes a thorough and detailed assessment before any work actually starts. These rogues know well that once the work has started, many residents will be desperate to get it finished rather than being left with half their garden dug up or a large hole in their roof, and so will be more susceptible to being pressurised about costs,
- In this trader's case, the web address he gave to the resident led to an unused web domain which was up for sale,
- Also, going with a trader who says they have just set up business increases the risk for a resident looking for work to be done as the business may not have a steady cash flow yet,
- In this instance the only paperwork this resident received was a receipt of sorts from the trader when the work had been completed. It is quite possible in the above circumstances that the trader could have taken the deposit, left the job and never returned and the resident would have no proof that any work had been done by him and no legal recourse to have the trader come back and finish the work or to take legal action against him to recover the deposit.

If you are looking to get a substantial amount of work done at your home and you're unsure of your rights and how to avoid falling victim to a rogue trader, please contact your local Trading Standards office for advice – before the work starts.

Scams etc.

Text scam

One resident in the lower Deeside area recently reported that he had received a text apparently from Royal Mail advising him that his parcel could not be delivered due to incomplete or corrupted address information.

The text went on to ask the resident to reply to the text with a Y (for Yes), then to exit the text and access the webpage where he would then have to update his contact details and delivery address. He was also instructed that he had to do so within 12 hours, to ensure a timeous delivery of his parcel.

The resident was not expecting the delivery of any parcels and, being a reader of this Bulletin, he was aware that this sort of message is often a scam where people are asked to pay a small fee with a bank card, to fund the successful delivery of the parcel. Instead, he forwarded the text to the 7726 scam/spam text line which is run by telephony companies to weed out these sorts of scams. He then reported the matter to Trading Standards.

Some points to consider:

- Correctly, the resident surmised that this is a common type of scam, one which has nothing to do with Royal Mail. Their name is simply being misused in the scam,
- If you receive such a text, stop for a moment to consider if you're expecting a parcel or not. If not, the text is likely to be a scam,
- Consider also, even if you are expecting a parcel and it might have been damaged in transit, where would Royal Mail get your mobile number to text you on?
- If you suspect it is a scam, please never reply to them. This simply alerts the scammer to your mobile number being a live one and they may then target you with even more scam texts,
- Also, if you think that the text is a scam text, never click on any links in such a text. When I tried the https://ssubmitf.top/uk website, I got a security warning advising me that the website was dangerous and not to proceed any further (so I didn't),
- The 12 hour deadline mentioned in the text is simply a means for the scammer to try to manipulate people, to get them to act hastily and without stopping to consider what might really be going on,
- The normal outcome of scams like these (in the scammer's favour) is that the unwitting victim does as they're asked, goes to the suggested website and makes a small payment with their bank card. This information, along with the victim's surname and address (they already have the mobile phone number from the 'Y' response), is then used by the scammer to facilitate other purchases, usually online, at the victim's expense,
- The best course of action with these texts is to forward them on to the 7726 scam/spam text line, block the sender's number and either delete the text or report it to your local Trading Standards office. More information about the 7726 scam/spam text line can be found on the Ofcom website.

Misc.

A message from our colleagues in Police Scotland:
Beware of Broadband Supplier Scams

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Already this year in the North East, the Police Scotland Crime Reduction Team have seen several instances of phone scams targeting broadband customers. The scammers usually employ the following tactics:

- Claim to be from your broadband provider and state there is a fault with your service,
- Request personal information such as your account number, password, or bank details,
- Instruct you to download and install remote access software (e.g. AnyDesk, TeamViewer) to troubleshoot the issue. This allows scammers to gain control of your computer,
- Demand immediate payment to rectify the alleged fault, often pressuring you to make a quick decision.

If you do receive a call from your supplier, please take these steps to protect yourself:

- Never provide personal information to any unsolicited caller, even if they claim to be from your broadband provider,
- Do not download and install any software recommended by unknown callers,
- If you suspect a scam, hang up immediately,
- Contact your broadband provider directly using the phone number on your bill or official website to verify any reported issues,
- Be wary of unexpected calls regarding your broadband service,
- Install and maintain up-to-date anti-virus and anti-malware software on your devices.

If you believe you may have been a victim of a scam, contact your bank or financial institution immediately.

Report to Police Scotland directly by calling 101 or online via Contact Police Scotland - Police Scotland Every report assists police investigations, provides intelligence, informs national alerts that protect all communities, disrupts criminals and reduces harm.

In the UK you can forward scam text message to OFCOM on 7726 (free of charge), and forward suspicious emails to report@phishing.gov.uk.

Conclusion

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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 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.