



From mountain to sea

Trading Standards

Doorstep Crime, Scams & Safety

Bulletin No. 20

Doorstep Crime

This week marks the start of the annual Shut Out Scammers 2021 campaign which will run until the last week of May. The campaign has several objectives, which include reducing the number of victims of doorstep crime, raise awareness about the issue, encourage the reporting of these crimes to Police Scotland and/or Trading Standards and to provide prevention advice to the public.

Doorstep crime falls mainly into two categories, bogus callers and rogue traders, but there are others.

Bogus callers are scammers who turn up at peoples' doors unannounced pretending to be someone they're not. Sometimes they will have a hard luck story such as their car having broken down just out of view and could they have a jug of water for the radiator, or the need to take prescribed tablets and could they have a glass of water, please? These types tend to be slightly more opportunist in nature. There is also the more organized scammer who purports to be from a well-known organisation such as the 'gas board', or 'the water board'. The essential elements of this scam are deception and distraction.

With the request for a jug or glass of water, the householder is asked to leave the front door to fill the container. Whilst they're doing so the scammer sneaks into the house and steals what he takes a fancy to. Mobile phones, purses, wallets and anything else small and valuable will be a prime target. It may well be that when the householder returns to the door, the scammer is gone and later still the householder will notice that their property is also gone.

With the bogus representative from the gas board, water company etc., the scammer may even have an ID card to 'prove' their identity. Bear in mind that these cards are easy to make with a decent printer and laminator or steal, alter and reseal. The organized type may even be carrying a clipboard or wearing a Hi-Viz jacket, to boost their credibility. The householder will then be sent on a wild goose chase, such as going to a back room to smell for gas or to run a tap for signs of discoloration in the water, all buying time for the scammer to sneak in, steal and make good his escape.



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A newer variation is that the scammer may say that they're from an energy company and that they're offering grants for new boilers or solar panels and would like to discuss this with the householder, usually inside the house and away from public view again with a view to stealing. It may also be that the caller actually does work for one of these companies but they may use pressure and intimidation to get the householder to sign a contract to pay for a good or service.

On occasion scammers will work in a pair with the principle taking up the householder's time and attention, perhaps discussing market research, solar panels or a new heating system whilst the front door is left unlocked, allowing an unseen accomplice to sneak in and do the stealing. This scam also provides cover for the principle when property is found to be missing as they were with the householder at all times and would have seen trying to steal, which they weren't.

There are a number of things householders can do to deal with this. These are:

- Affix one or more 'No Cold Callers' signs in a prominent place at the front door and simply do not answer the door to unexpected callers.
- If the door must be answered, security devices like a door chain or door bar should always be applied before the door is opened so that if the door is pushed it cannot be pushed all the way open. Smart doorbells, where a householder doesn't actually have to go to the door, are also becoming popular.
- If a householder must leave the front door unattended, they can excuse themselves and advise the caller that they're going to lock the door, then do so. Householders should not feel guilty about doing so and genuine callers will understand the caution. This will also prevent unseen intruders.
- If an ID card is shown, ask to borrow it to verify the details on it. Don't take at face value that it is genuine. Use a utility bill, statement or Yellow Pages to get a true contact number and call the organisation to confirm that they have an agent/employee as named on the card and that that person is operating in your area. If you're not satisfied with that, decline politely to deal with the caller and close the door.
- Many of the organisations involved are aware of householders' worries and will try to help. Householders can call them up and ask to arrange to be notified which dates they will have people in your area. A password can be agreed with the organisation, so that when the caller arrives, they give the householder the password, so the householder can have confidence that the caller is genuine.



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- If a bank card or a cheque has been used to make a payment, contact the bank to see if they can help recover the payment or cancel the cheque.
- Some people who dislike answering the door to unexpected callers have an arrangement with a trusted neighbour that when a cold caller attends, the householder calls the neighbour who then comes over and deals with the caller.
- Above all else, don't allow cold callers entry until you're satisfied that they're genuine.

The other main type of doorstep criminal is the Rogue Trader. This is the 'workman' who just happened to be driving by when they spotted something. This could be a problem with a roof (Oh, that's just going to get worse!), a tree (If that branch/tree falls, it will damage your neighbour's property next door and they'll take you to Court) or a lucky break (We were working just round the corner and we have this spare material and I couldn't help but notice that your drive could do with a spruce up. So rather than waste the tar we could save you a bit of money...). The essential elements of this type of scam are scare tactics designed to circumvent rational thinking in the householder (roof/tree) or appealing to the householder that they're getting a bargain (driveway).

Please be aware that these types of 'workmen' are nothing of the sort. They are unqualified charlatans. Frequently, they will ask for a deposit up front (to get the work started, to buy the materials needed for the job) then disappear, never to be seen again. Other will come back and will start 'work' which is frequently botched and requires a genuine tradesman to rectify. Occasionally, the rogue trader causes the problem that they claimed to have noticed in the first place. Sometimes, the scammer will claim that the job is more complicated than first expected and the cost will go up to several times the first figure agreed. If the householder has already paid a deposit and work has started, it can be extremely difficult to back out especially when pressure is applied on the householder or they're taken to the bank, to withdraw the cash.

Our advice in these circumstances is:

- Don't deal with a 'tradesman' who cold calls at your front door. Remain polite and resolute, thank them for their concern and advise them that you will get someone to look at the problem. It may even be justified, if they are pushy, to fib a bit and tell them that your son/son-in-law, nephew etc. is in the trade and you'll get them to do the work.
- If you find yourself being steamrollered into getting work, don't part with money up front, wait until the work is finished.
- If you are offered any paperwork by the 'tradesman', accept it and keep it safe. Take notes of any vehicles used, such as the registration number,



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make, model, business name and phone numbers on the side. Also take a note of the description of the tradesmen, especially their spokesman. Keep these notes safe too.

- Work agreed in the home with a cold caller (including the solar panel salesman above) gives the householder a statutory 14 day cooling off period even if a contract is signed. Don't agree to have the work started within those 14 days as although you can still back out of the agreement, you may to pay for any work already done and/or materials purchased prior to exercising your right to cancel; use this period to think carefully about proceeding. Do not feel guilty about opting out of the agreement.
- If you do decide to cancel the agreement, the onus may be on you to prove this at a later date, so please do so in writing such as a letter or e-mail, dated, provided to the tradesman timeously.
- If you do need work done, even urgent work, get a qualified tradesman to do it; get at least three quotes in writing so the cost doesn't skyrocket later and choose the tradesman you think will meet your requirements best.
- The Yellow Pages, trade bodies and Which? Trusted Traders are reliable sources of information for genuine tradesmen. Also ask friends and family for their recommendations.
- If you are taken to the bank or building society to withdraw cash for tradesmen, ask to speak to the Manager in private and tell them what's going on. They should then call the Police.
- If you feel that you may be getting scammed or have been scammed but are too embarrassed to admit it, please resist this feeling and seek professional help from Police Scotland and/or Trading Standards. We may be able to help and we may be able to stop these scammers from cheating other people.

One other type of doorstep crime which we have seen in the past is the Nottingham Knocker (as the scam originated in Nottingham) or duster sellers. This is where a cold caller calls at the door with a large holdall to sell dusters, polishes, tea towels etc. usually at inflated prices. Often, they are also scouting the garden and grounds for valuable items they can come back and steal later. To deter these callers, placing 'No Cold Caller' signs at the entrance to the garden may help and politely but firmly decline the offer to buy their goods. Do not invite them inside.

Our watchwords are in all cases: 'If in doubt, shut them out'.

Scams

A message from Trading Standards Scotland:



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With international travel restrictions still in place, many Scots will look to book getaways within the UK this summer, following the reopening of tourist accommodation and relaxation of travel restrictions across Scotland on 26th April.

However, holidaymakers are being warned to be wary of scams after a significant number of consumer issues with holiday bookings were reported in 2020. These included fake accommodation listings on social media, cold calls and unsolicited emails offering holiday deals, scam websites and fake reviews on travel websites.

Demand for popular destinations is likely to be high, particularly during the summer months, and scammers may look to take advantage of this by creating fake social media accounts and websites to advertise accommodation that does not exist or that has already been booked.

Find out more about holiday scams at <https://www.tsscot.co.uk/holiday-scams/>. Report holiday scams to Advice Direct Scotland, either on 0808 164 6000 or via [scamwatch.scot](https://www.scamwatch.scot). If you have been the victim of fraud, report it to Police Scotland on 101.

Notes

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.

Contact

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.



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

For more information about scams please visit Friends Against Scams at <https://www.friendsagainstscams.org.uk/>

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