Aberdeenshire COUNCIL

From mountain to sea

Trading Standards

Doorstep Crime, Scams & Safety Bulletin No. 22

Doorstep Crime

One elderly resident in the Deeside area recently had a ‘salesman’ from an alternative energy company come to his door. The salesman managed to get the resident to sign an agreement to purchase a solar powered water heating system. The resident then parted with a four figure sum of money for the equipment. Part of the agreement signed also waived the resident’s rights to the 14 day cooling off period for doorstep sales and permission for the work to start immediately. As it transpired, the resident felt pressurised into signing the agreement. Reputable companies will not behave in this way. If it can be proved that duress was used to get someone to sign an agreement, it may be that the terms of the agreement breaches legislation (The Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations 2008) and could be found to be non-binding. Trading Standards are investigating this incident. If you find yourself in a similar situation, contact Trading Standards for advice. Contact details are at the bottom of this bulletin.

Scams

There have been quite a number of incidents reported to us recently of elderly residents around the Shire receiving unwanted calls from people claiming to be employed by BT, HMRC and other official agencies. Many of these calls can be quite distressing, making claims about illegal internet downloads, outstanding debts and making threats of arrest. All were scams. One effective way of dealing with these calls is to install a call blocker on your phone’s land line. This is a small device which intercepts any unknown callers and asks them to identify themselves, even before the resident is aware of the call. Most scammers and sales people will simply hang up at this stage and move on to the next number on their list. Genuine callers are put through to the resident (who can then log that number on their ‘safe’ list for the future) to complete their call. These devices are fairly easy to install and use and tests have shown they can be about 95% effective at cutting out nuisance and scam calls. As with so much else though, it pays to do your research on the different brands of call blocker, to get the one most suitable for you. Also, try to avoid simply buying the cheapest device you find, as this approach can often be a false economy.

There have also been a small number of reports of residents receiving calls or texts from Aberdeen Health Village asking the recipient to call a given number to arrange Covid vaccinations. Please note that Aberdeen Health Village have not been making such calls and/or texts and it's suspected that they are part of a Covid scam. If you receive such a call or text, please do not call the numbers given in the call or text. Simply ignore or block the caller's number.

From just outwith the Shire, but useful for us to share; Trading Standards are aware of the Treasurer of a community group receiving an e-mail, apparently from another member of the same committee, asking for a considerable sum of money for genuine works being carried out to be paid into a new bank account for the contractor. This is a variation on an old business e-mail scam. In all likelihood the supposed sender's e-mail address has been compromised and spoofed (so that what the recipient sees is the supposed sender's genuine e-mail address) and the contractor has no knowledge of the requested change. If you receive such a request by e-mail, please NEVER simply comply with the request. Instead, hover your computer cursor over the sender's e-mail address and see if a different e-mail address appears. If so, this is the real sender's e-mail address and they are likely a scammer. Also, it would be worth phoning or speaking in person to the supposed sender to discuss the request. NEVER simply reply to the e-mail for confirmation, as your e-mail will go straight to the scammer and they will be only too happy to confirm the request. It is important that a different medium is used to contact the supposed sender. If it's confirmed to be a scam, the supposed sender should change their e-mail password to a 'strong' password (details can be found on this Government cybersecurity website https://www.ncsc.gov.uk/cyberaware/home#section_2) and consider implementing 2 step verification, if available. Consideration should also be given to reporting the attempt to Police Scotland and the relevant bank who hold the targeted account.

In another incident, one resident advertised their old golf clubs for sale on a well-known selling website and within a short time had had two separate(?) enquiries to buy them. Both inquirers offered to use a well-known third party payment site to send the seller a link, with the intention that the seller provide the inquirers with details of his bank card for them to make the payment for the clubs. Both inquirers also used mobile phones and WhatsApp to contact the seller. Smelling a rat, the seller wisely called the sale off, suspecting that the inquirers only wanted his bank card details to access his bank account or rack up debt on his card. When buying or selling items online, please always use reputable third party payment sites and try to avoid making or receiving payments directly from or to your bank account. It may or may not have been coincidence that two people replied to this advert almost simultaneously, most likely not though.

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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 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.

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.