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Doorstep Callers and Scams

Bulletin No. 104

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 Formartine area recently had a cold caller at his door who was selling clothing from a large sports bag. The caller claimed to work for a textile company which supported people who had fallen foul of the law and who were seeking to start out on a new course in life. The caller was pleasant enough and presented an ID badge and, due to having bought goods from similar callers in the past, the resident bought some of the clothing, worth around £30.

Unusually, the caller had a contactless payment terminal for taking payment. The resident tried twice with his debit card to make payment but both times the transaction was rejected and eventually his PIN number was blocked. The transaction was then completed by the resident using his credit card and the caller went on his way. (Payments like these are usually made in cash)

Several weeks later the resident received his credit card statement and noted there that he had been charged £80 for the clothes. He then reported the matter to Trading Standards and we investigated the matter.

On gaining more information, it was quickly established that this caller was a Nottingham Knocker (so called as the phenomenon is believed to have started in Nottingham). These are itinerant sellers who go door-to-door usually selling cleaning materials or small garden implements, usually at excessive prices. It has also been noted that these visits often precede property in residents' gardens being stolen.

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Although they appear to be alone, it's normal for a number of these males to work the same area at the same time and for a colleague to be nearby in a vehicle, to transport the men (as they are usually men) from one area to another.

As it transpires, the company named by this caller does not exist.

Some points to consider to manage or deter this type of activity:

- Consider placing a 'No Cold Callers' notice at the garden gate or driveway gate,
- Place a similar sticker by the front or main door,
- Have a nominated neighbour arrangement in place with a nearby, trusted neighbour and summon them if you feel the need, when a cold caller comes to your door,
- If you have a fish-eye door viewer in your door, please use it before opening the door. If you don't like the look of the caller, don't open the door; talk through it. If you don't have a viewer fitted, consider having one fitted,
- Always apply the door chain or door bar before opening the door (this is especially important with Nottingham Knockers as previous reports have pointed out that some of these males appeared to have been under the influence of alcohol or drugs), so that the door cannot easily be pushed open by the caller. If you don't have a door chain or bar fitted, please consider doing so,
- Consider also having a video doorbell fitted at your front or main door, as this may deter the caller from coming to your door. It may also be a further deterrent to place a 'CCTV in use' notice in a prominent location, such as the garden gate so that a cold caller on seeing that notice, will simply keep walking along the street,
- Remember, video doorbells and CCTV depend on good lighting to capture good quality images, especially in winter or at duller times of the day, so this should also be considered,
- Never let these callers into your home,
- The goods these callers have for sale are usually of very low quality and substantially overpriced,
- As with any other caller, our advice is to say "Thanks, but no thanks". No matter how nice they may be, you have no real idea who they are or if they are sober or not, so please remain polite but firm in saying no,
- Do not place any credibility in any ID card they show you. With modern home technology it is very easy to make a fraudulent ID card from scratch or to forge a real one,
- If you are being pressured into making a purchase, keep the cost small and try to make payment in cash, even if you lose the money. As with this

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case, if you pay by card, this may allow the caller to increase the cost of the payment or try to make further transactions with your card details which could cost even more,

- Try not to leave valuable items or means of entry such as ladders or spades in open view in the garden. When you're finished with them, tidy them away again, out of sight and back under lock and key,
- Once such a caller has left, do a quick survey of the garden to see if anything is missing,
- Contact your neighbours to alert them; they may be the next people on the cold caller's list. If you're a member of a Neighbourhood watch or Cold Calling Zone, report the incident to your co-ordinator,
- Please also report the incident to your local Trading Standards office and local Police office as these men are effectively Pedlars and should have a licence, which is issued by the Police. It is illegal to trade without one,
- Remember – if in doubt, keep them out.

Scams etc.

Facebook scam

One resident from the Garioch area recently saw an advert on Facebook Marketplace from a company which advised that they did home deliveries of firewood to customers' homes. As part of the Facebook page there were numerous photos of large piles of chopped wood and the blurb on the page advised that the company could supply oak, maple and birch wood.

The resident messaged the seller to ask for his location and the cost of a quantity of wood. The seller replied to the effect that he was based within Aberdeenshire. As he had a wood burner at home, the resident placed an order for wood costing £200 and a further £100 for insuring the delivery, with the latter sum being refunded on delivery.

The resident then paid the £200 directly into the seller's bank account and an additional £100 via an online banking app called Revolut. He then waited for delivery of the firewood, but this never came. It subsequently became clear that it was all a scam and the matter was reported to Trading Standards. The resident has managed since to recover the £100 insurance costs from Revolut and is in contact with the seller's bank regarding the remainder of the money.

Some points to note:

- Facebook and Revolut took no active part in this scam; their services were simply misused by the scammer,
- Further information about Revolut can be found on the [BBC website here](#),

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- Facebook Marketplace has been found to be problematic in the past, as can be found on the [CTSI website here](#),
- On looking at the seller's Facebook page, it can be seen that there are many people's questions about where the seller delivers to, none of which have received an answer,
- It can also be seen that there are no indications of where the seller is based, such as a town or postal address, or if he is even in Great Britain,
- The web link for the seller's own website leads to a dead web page,
- Registration numbers for delivery lorries in Facebook photos have been pixelated so that they are unreadable,
- The Facebook page is less than two years old so may have been set up for this express scam,
- In all of the posts on the Facebook page there are many 'angry face' emojis, suggesting a substantial level of people's dissatisfaction with some aspect of the business. When the comments to each post are set at 'all comments' the number of comments visible is far below the advertised number, suggesting some comments have been removed or hidden,
- Remember to treat any advert on Facebook with caution. There are many scammers and criminals who use it to snare victims,
- When making purchases online which are over £100 in value try to use a credit card, for the Section 75 protection provided by the card issuer (see Bulletin 36 for more details about this topic),
- Alternatively, try to use online payment platforms like PayPal because of the built-in protections they offer,
- If you do need firewood, particularly at this time of year, ask friends and family and try to source a local provider with a good reputation and a verifiable postal address rather than going online and dealing with someone who you know nothing about,
- As always, please report these sorts of incidents to your local Trading Standards office. Contact details are below.

Misc.

Please find below a recent article from the Journal of Trading Standards about one of our 'sniffer' dogs, Boo, who has also been utilised with some success in the Aberdeenshire area.

Sniffer dog Boo scares illicit sellers

East Ayrshire TS enlisted the help of Boo, despite a chilli reception from shopkeepers.

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East Ayrshire Trading Standards, supported by Police Scotland, has seized illicit tobacco products from two local businesses thanks to the discerning nose of specially trained sniffer dog Boo – who found the items despite an attempt to conceal their whereabouts with chilli powder.

Visits to three premises in Kilmarnock and Stewarton following tip-offs from members of the public resulted in the seizure of the illicit goods when Boo, a four-year-old Labrador/German Wirehaired Pointer Cross, led Officers to their hiding place.

Councillor Graham Barton, Cabinet Spokesperson for Trading Standards at East Ayrshire Council, said: “Thanks to a culmination of intelligence from various sources, including vigilant members of the public, we were able to pinpoint the premises and carried out our visits accompanied by our colleagues in Police Scotland.



Boo poses for the camera (image credit: East Ayrshire Trading Standards)

“Boo proved her worth as always, quickly finding the products we were after, despite the best efforts of the culprits to conceal the evidence – in one case Boo was able to find them even although they were concealed behind a false panel at the back of a cupboard which contained large quantities of chilli powder in a futile attempt to foil her sense of smell.

“This is another important step in our bid to protect both businesses and public from the hazards presented by this illicit trade. We already know that ordinary tobacco is dangerous enough to health, but fake cigarettes are much more harmful both healthwise and financially.

“The people making and supplying these products use the proceeds to fund further crimes including the smuggling of weapons, drugs, and human beings across the globe.

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“In local terms they’re also undercutting genuine businesses, avoiding tax and depriving the Treasury of funds which could be contributing to our health services, schools and infrastructure.

“The good news is that thanks to Boo, her handler and our dedicated Trading Standards team, we’ve now seized illicit tobacco eight times over the last 30 months, including the largest ever individual seizure of illicit tobacco by a TS service in Scotland.

“Over this time, we have removed 23,573 packets of illicit tobacco from circulation – this equates to a cost of £359,723 to the genuine trade at an approximate cost of £15.26 per pack (this is the cost of an average packet according to Ash Scotland).

“While we can be satisfied that the culprits in this crime have been caught this time and will face punishment, we know that it’s an ongoing issue. And we can’t stress enough how grateful we are to all those whose vigilance and the care they take to report suspicions and supply information are vital to our teams.

“In East Ayrshire we pride ourselves in working together with partner organisations, our businesses and communities to improve wellbeing and prosperity for all, building wealth in the community. The success of this latest mission is proof that this partnership approach works very effectively to improve life and safety for all.”

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 Trading Standards. If you would prefer, you can report the information anonymously to Crimestoppers on 0800 555 111.



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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](#).