

CONSUMER HARM REPORT 2014-15

National Trading Standards

October 2015

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Foreword by Lord Toby Harris, Chair, National Trading Standards

"Scammers. Rogue traders. Dodgy dealers. Fraudsters. Crooks. Whatever name you give them, we face a growing threat from these criminals. They undermine honest businesses. And they target consumers – including some of the most vulnerable in society – to rob them of money, dignity, confidence, their sense of security, and even entire livelihoods. It is important to present a broad picture of the harm that consumers and legitimate businesses are suffering as a result of pernicious criminals that will spot any vulnerability and take advantage. This is why we're releasing the first ever Consumer Harm Report, to give everyone a sense of the types of crimes that exist, to enable people to understand some of the present and emerging threats and help give people the confidence to report unscrupulous behaviour.

"Conmen and women have always existed and those who seek to rip people off for their own gain have always found the most efficient ways to do so. So what's changed? Unsurprisingly, the internet has altered the face of almost every type of fraud-related crime in recent years. As scammers use increasingly sophisticated tactics to convince consumers of their authenticity, and as we become used to carrying out ever more transactions online, never before has the task faced by enforcers been so challenging. On top of this, the global nature of the internet means that UK victims can be targeted by legitimate-seeming crooks from all over the world, and mass marketing fraud has now become easier and cheaper than ever before. This makes it all the more difficult to crack down on these criminals. We have a dedicated team focusing on internet crime, but there is now almost always an online dimension to every one of our investigations.

"Of course there are still plenty of criminals operating face-to-face, or by phone, on home soil. These, too, are becoming more sophisticated. They are better dressed, better spoken and often have an arsenal of professional-looking tools; a slick website, business stationery and an upmarket wardrobe. Why? Because door-to-door or cold-calling criminals have to compete with the explosion in internet-based fraud coming from all over the world and in order to succeed in their endeavours they must neatly exploit the growing consumer desire to 'talk to a real person', by appearing ever more plausible, personable and charming."

"I am delighted to report that during 2014-15 National Trading Standards teams prevented over £252 million worth of detriment to consumers and businesses. This represents a saving of £17.50 for every £1 spent. 100 criminals were convicted of offences as a result of our investigations and are serving a total of 118 years of prison time. The courts have imposed fines of £285,000. I am proud of the work our teams are doing, with limited resources, to bring down as many of those who would seek to target innocent people and damage our economy, as they can. I hope this report will inspire more people to take steps to protect themselves, and loved ones, and to report any wrongdoing to the Citizens Advice consumer helpline on 03454 04 05 06."



Lord Toby Harris, Chair, National Trading Standards

OVERVIEW AND CONTENTS

Overview

National Trading Standards (NTS) was set up in 2012 by the Government as part of changes to the consumer protection landscape. Our role is different to that of local trading standards services in that we provide leadership, influence, support and resources to improve enforcement against criminals causing consumer and business detriment nationally, regionally and locally. We bring together trading standards representatives from across England and Wales to prioritise, fund and coordinate national and regional enforcement cases.

NTS is responsible for gathering important intelligence from around the country to combat criminal activity and tackle a number of priorities. These priorities currently include mass marketing and internet scams, illegal money lending and other enforcement issues that affect consumers and businesses beyond traditional local authority boundaries.

In this report NTS presents a range of insight and data based on its [2014-15 Annual Report](#), which analyses results for the last measurable full year across the NTS teams and additional work areas, which include:

- National Trading Standards eCrime Team
- National Trading Standards Illegal Money Lending Teams
- National Trading Standards Scambuster Teams
- National Trading Standards Estate Agency Team
- National Trading Standards Scams Team
- National Trading Standards Safety at Ports and Borders Teams
- National Trading Standards Intelligence Team
- Feed Hygiene Delivery

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Chapters have been split by NTS' key priorities, covering:

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CHAPTER 1: TACKLING CRIMINAL ACTIVITY

The issue

When people think about 'trading standards', they may think about rogue traders misinforming consumers, applying high pressure selling tactics, or selling low quality goods at inflated prices. All of these are indeed within the scope of the trading standards officer – but so is preventing injury, death, bankruptcy – these are serious issues and bringing dangerous criminals to justice is at the heart of the work of National Trading NTS. Three NTS teams focus on combatting fraud and clamping down on criminal activity: Scambuster Teams, eCrime Team and Illegal Money Lending Teams (IMLTs).

Bringing criminals to justice – key 2014/15 figures:

- In total **100** criminals convicted
- Serving a total of **118** years behind bars
- In total NTS teams prevented consumer and business detriment (lost money) of more than **£252 million**.¹

NTS team data

Scambuster Teams

The eight NTS Scambuster Teams, spread throughout England and Wales, target criminals involved with doorstep crime, counterfeiting, consumer and business fraud and other related crime. Last year:

- **55** criminals were convicted sentenced to over **75** years in prison between them
- Scambuster teams commenced **29** operations and concluded **54**
- Scambuster teams' fines imposed: **£275,880**.

Illegal Money Lending Teams (IMLTs)

Illegal money lending (loan sharking) is a criminal offence and unlicensed lenders often target vulnerable people who cannot get access to credit through other means. The NTS Illegal Money Lending Teams in England and Wales have an important function in investigating and prosecuting illegal money lenders, as well as providing support to the victims and raising awareness among communities (*ch. 2*). In the last year:

- The teams identified over **750** suspected illegal money lenders and seized nearly **£500,000** in cash and restraining assets worth over **£1.2 million** under the Proceeds of Crime Act
- The teams commenced **365 operations** in one year, and charges were brought in **28** cases
- **43** individuals were charged or had proceedings instituted against them.

¹ Based on detriment calculations by the eCrime Team, IMLT Teams, Safety at Ports and Borders Teams, Scambuster and Scams Teams

eCrime Team

The NTS eCrime Team monitors and investigates online fraud including dating website scams, misleading websites, subscription traps and online shopping fraud. The team provides national-level support to all local authority areas in England and Wales to help tackle the increasing threats to businesses and consumers from internet scams and rip-offs. In the last year:

- The team led or assisted **44** operations and uncovered potential fraud estimated at **£15m**
- The team's Digital Evidence Unit provided support to **37** investigations by local authorities and NTS Scambuster Teams by forensically examining **89** computers, **46** mobile phones and **71** other devices.

eCrime Team case study – flight booking scam:

Operation Digger

This investigation related to websites offering a flight booking service. Customers booked flights in advance but were then asked for various additional fees and charges just a few days before their flights were due to depart. The defendant pleaded guilty to various Consumer Protection Regulation offences and was ordered to pay compensation of **£9,704** to affected consumers, along with a **12 month** community order, **150 hours** of unpaid work and a **£1,000 fine**. **Costs of £1,000** were also awarded.

CHAPTER 2: PROTECTING CONSUMERS AND VULNERABLE PEOPLE

The issue

National Trading Standards works to protect a wide range of consumers and in particular those who are more vulnerable as they can be disproportionately affected by criminal activity. For example, the average age of a mail scam victim is 74.

National Trading Standards teams aim to tackle this criminal activity (*ch. 1*), but importantly they also have a role in securing compensation and supporting victims. Three NTS teams have a particular function in the protection of vulnerable people; Scams Team, Illegal Money Lending Teams (IMLTs), Scambuster Teams.

Key 2014/15 figures:

- During 2014/15 teams secured over **£385,000** worth of compensation to be returned to victims²
- The NTS Scams Team has so far identified nearly **200,000** potential victims who appear on so-called 'suckers lists' used by scammers
- The average age of victims of mail scams is **74**, showing that these criminals tend to prey on older – and often more vulnerable – members of society
- The total amount of money lost by **10,843** identified victims of mail scams is **£1,184** per person, or just over **£13 million** in total³.

NTS team data

Scams Team

Mail scams such as fake competitions and non-existent lotteries cause approximately **£3.5 billion** of detriment to UK consumers each year and that is why the NTS Scams Team works to investigate the operations of the perpetrators. Often the people affected are vulnerable, elderly and are targeted mercilessly by crooks who trade in the contact details of those most likely to send money.

It is estimated that prize draw scams cost the UK public £60 million per year, with an estimated 380,000 members of the public falling victim each year. Prize draw scams are notorious for targeting the elderly and other vulnerable people, who are less likely to realise that the mail is a scam. It is often very difficult to persuade these individuals that letters telling them they have won large sums of money are scams. So as well as leading investigations, the team provides guidance, best practice and acts as a centre of excellence to train and help local authorities to support victims and take local enforcement action.

The team works closely with Royal Mail to combat mail scams and has delivered training to more than 2,000 postmen and women to help them recognise the tactics used by mail scammers and to identify potentially vulnerable households.

² This figure is based on compensation awarded as a result of operations by IMLT Teams, Scambuster Teams and eCrime Team

³ <http://nationaltradingstandards.uk/news/vulnerable-consumers-saved-over-5-million/>

Scams Team case study – scam mail addiction:

Merthyr Tydfil officers dealt with a Mrs M, who was addicted to responding to scam mail. Mrs M's life savings were spent and she was living on food supplements provided after a recent serious stomach operation. Officers spent a lot of time with her, showing her DVDs of how scams work and how she could take control of her finances and seek the help of her family. Eventually this advice was taken on board and Mrs M did confide in her family and promised to stop sending her money away.

Merthyr Tydfil visited Mrs M again in April 2015, who proudly told them that she had at last saved her money, bought herself a lovely new handbag and taken all her grandchildren to the cinema to see the new Cinderella film. She then showed them that day's mail and began ripping the scam letters up and said she was now in a much happier frame of mind, had money for the first time in years, and was beginning to enjoy life again.

Scambuster Teams

The Scambuster Teams regularly carry out investigations to bring the perpetrators of organised crime to justice, such as cold callers or doorstep criminals who prey on vulnerable and elderly people. In the last year:

- Operations by the teams prevented detriment to consumers and businesses of over **£139 million**, representing **£48** of economic benefit for every **£1** spent
- Compensation of over **£270,000** was awarded to victims
- Proceeds of Crime confiscation awards of over **£6.5 million**.

Scambuster case studies – doorstep criminals posing as builders:

Case 1: Operation Cosgrove

Operation Cosgrove was the largest operation of its kind in Wales into a criminal gang that made unsolicited calls to elderly people, offering work on their houses, patios or driveways. Once they started work on properties they reported false defects to the customer and offered to repair at vastly over inflated prices. The work that was carried out was described as substandard and unnecessary. The total taken from 13 householders amounted to just under £70,000 and victims were aged between 61-98 years old. The leader of the gang was sentenced to just over 3 years in prison, and ordered to pay compensation to all his victims.

Case 2: Operation Summit

This case saw gang members ruthlessly deceive older and vulnerable people on their own doorsteps, pressurising them into paying extortionate prices for shoddy and unnecessary building work on their properties. Six members of the group pleaded guilty in January 2015 and received sentences ranging from 18 months to 6.5 years in prison.

Illegal Money Lending Teams (IMLTs)

The NTS Illegal Money Lending Teams not only prosecute criminals, they also have an important function in supporting victims and witnesses, offering emotional support and advice as well as referring on to credit unions, housing, debt advice and mental health services. The teams in England and Wales run the Stop Loan Sharks project, which brings together specialist officers who investigate and prosecute illegal money lending and related activity and LIAISE officers who support victims and raise awareness of the dangers of borrowing from illegal money lenders. In the last year:

- IMLT Teams made savings to victims totalling over **£10 million** and provided support to more than **1,650 victims**
- Total number of arrests made as a result of the teams' work: **108**
- Amount of cash seized: **£480,777**.

Quote from a victim of a loan shark after receiving help from the IMLT: *"My life has restarted. Before I could have killed myself and tried on a number of occasions. Now I feel I have the strength to deal with life."*

IMLT Team case study: Operation Goldplate

In March 2015 a carer who operated a loan shark business targeting "desperate and exceptionally vulnerable" people was jailed.

Georgina Balboa Serrato, 42, was sentenced to two and a half years after a court heard how more than a quarter of a million pounds passed through her bank accounts during an eight year period. One victim who took out a £2,000 loan to send to her son in the Philippines, who was suffering from cerebral palsy, ended up paying back over £11,000 and was still making payments at the time Serrato was arrested in 2013.

Serrato pleaded guilty to operating without a consumer credit licence and two counts of illegal money laundering at Leeds Crown Court. Serrato's husband Nestor, 42, also pleaded guilty to money laundering, allowing use of his bank accounts. He was given a ten-month sentence, suspended for two years, and ordered to do 200 hours unpaid work.

Judge Neil Clark, said: "It was a mean and unpleasant thing to do. You were taking money from people who were desperate and exceptionally vulnerable."

CHAPTER 3: PROTECTING SMALL BUSINESSES

The issue

Small businesses are crucial to the UK economy, with a combined annual turnover of £1.2 trillion⁴. But the livelihoods of millions of legitimate small business owners, from niche importers to local estate agents, from builders to beauty therapists, are under threat from criminals operating illegally, both from the UK and abroad, undercutting prices, stealing customers and damaging consumer confidence. NTS teams, including the Estate Agency, Scambuster, Safety at Ports and Borders and eCrime teams work to protect honest small businesses from detriment by ruthlessly targeting those who undermine their efforts.

NTS team data

Estate Agency Team

The NTS Estate Agency Team protects honest estate agents and consumers in its role in enforcing the Estate Agents Act (1979). The team investigates rogue agents, dealing with offences from insider trading and fraud to violence and kidnapping. It maintains a public register of agents ordered to stop trading or warned about changing their practices. It helps estate agents to comply with relevant legislation, provides advice to help them treat consumers, business customers and competitors fairly and also manages the scheme in place to support in disputes between consumers and their estate agent. Ultimately, the reputation of the industry is tarnished by the unscrupulous few which can impact honest traders. In the last year:

- The Estate Agency Team received **109** complaints about the activities of individuals and businesses across the UK
- **8** individuals or businesses were banned from engaging in estate agency work due to unscrupulous practices.

Scambuster Teams

As well as undermining consumer confidence in legitimate businesses, some criminals actually target small businesses, which can cause untold distress to business owners who are often running a very tight ship financially and whose livelihood can be destroyed by rogue companies. Key cases in the last year included:

- Operation Pilot: A Central England prosecution leading to a rogue builder receiving two years' imprisonment for not completing domestic building work that he'd been paid for – and not paying sub-contractors either
- Operation Neptune: In East of England, London and the South East, four defendants were convicted of **19** counts of fraud by false representation for an £80,000 scam involving the supply and maintenance of water coolers to businesses.

⁴ Gov.UK

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/377934/bpe_2014_statistical_release.pdf

Scambuster case study – doorstep criminals:

Operation Starling

Mark Jenkins was operating a business in Wales called Pro-Fit Builders. Complaints were received in Bristol and South Wales that Jenkins was taking large sums of money upfront from householders for major domestic building work such as extensions, kitchens etc. – but was not completing the work. Jenkins was also failing to settle accounts with local traders and suppliers.

In April 2014, Jenkins was arrested and then interviewed by the officers from the Scambuster Teams in the South West and Wales. Jenkins indicated that he would plead to a charge of Fraudulent Trading and take all other matters into consideration as he wishes to start again with a clean slate. On 23 October 2014 Jenkins was sentenced at Bristol Crown Court to 5 years' imprisonment. Evidence to date shows the detriment to businesses and traders of Jenkins' operation was **£1.5m**, with a similar figure lost by consumers.

Safety at Ports and Borders Teams

Millions of unsafe and counterfeit goods are entering the UK every day via entry points across the country. Anyone anywhere can set themselves up as an online business. This can damage honest business because traders selling unsafe goods often lure people in with prices that are too good to be true. Businesses find it hard to compete when the rogues' websites look as legitimate as their own – and their own reputations can suffer if they are tarred with the same brush. The NTS Safety at Ports and Borders teams, based across 14 local authorities at ports, airports and postal hubs, work to intercept as many of these items as possible, but their work is recognised as being just the 'tip of the iceberg'; teams with limited resources working hard to stem a rising tide of unsafe and noncompliant products coming in from all over the world.

National Trading Standards Safety at Ports and Borders Teams take a nationally coordinated approach to border controls and business practices, which enables them to identify business practices that undermine the work of compliant businesses. One example includes businesses that under-declare the value of their imports to pay less VAT and duty, which harms legitimate businesses, competition and the UK economy. The teams also identify and detain unsafe or counterfeit products that are destined for businesses including health devices, such as dental drills and equipment for baby heart monitors. Such intelligence is gathered by the teams and passed onto the relevant authorities to take the appropriate action.

eCrime Team

A large proportion of the eCrime Team's work is focused on small businesses or sole traders, such as builders and electricians. Such businesses are a major target for online fraudsters and can be vulnerable to losing more to scammers than their consumer counterparts. Many companies are bombarded daily with sales emails or come across misleading websites as they seek suppliers. Whilst most business owners would consider themselves savvy it is easy to fall prey to deceitful fraudsters looking to make money – the team has seen business owners forking out hundreds and sometimes even thousands of pounds to criminals. These are not victimless crimes and small businesses have collapsed due to the cost of online fraud.

CHAPTER 4: SUPPLY CHAIN INTEGRITY

The issue

With the tight regulations on product safety in the EU, many of us – whether consumers or businesses – are used to assuming that any item we buy to eat, wear, apply or use will be safe and meet the standards we expect. But with the explosion in online shopping, people are increasingly ordering goods from companies they know nothing about and can find it difficult to check the quality or safety of a product. The NTS Safety at Ports and Borders Teams regularly uncover shipments of dangerous items originating from outside of the EU and intended for sale in England, Wales and other European markets.

Whether buying groceries from supermarkets or eating at a local restaurant, consumers also expect their food to be safe. Livestock farmers also rightly expect to purchase feed that is safe for their animals. However, there are incidents where unsafe animal feed has contaminated the food chain, triggering outbreaks of disease amongst livestock and damaging the economy. Take the outbreak of foot and mouth in 2001 which cost the UK economy over £8 billion, or BSE, which infected over 3 million animals and led to disease in more than 200 humans. Both of these tragic events were caused by products fed to animals. In 2013 NTS was tasked with delivering the new Feed Hygiene Delivery programme, working with local authorities in England to ensure feed safety standards are met nationwide.

Keeping consumers safe – key 2014/15 figures:

- NTS Safety at Ports & Borders Teams prevented 2,582,692 unsafe or non-compliant items from entering the supply chain, with a monetary value of £79,546,900
- In its first full year of operation the NTS Feed Hygiene Delivery inspection and sampling programme engaged **95%** of local authorities in England and undertook **12,500** activities that included inspections, sampling and checks at the ports and borders.

NTS team data

Safety at Ports and Borders Teams

More than 500,000 unsafe items and 2 million non-compliant items were prevented from entering the supply chain last year by NTS Safety at Ports and Borders Teams. Many of these products have caused damage to consumers, including house fires, burns and other injuries. Such items include:

- Unsafe electrical goods such as phone chargers and LED lightbulbs
- Toys for children, including scooters and toys
- Beauty products including soap, face wash, shampoo, tooth-whitening kits and skin-whitening creams
- Mechanical equipment without the required safety mechanisms, such as chainsaws.

Safety at Ports and Borders case study – unsafe 'Frozen' dolls:

In Warwickshire, officers detained a significant number of Chinese imported fake and dangerous 'Frozen' dolls at the Coventry Postal Hub. Dolls that were tested revealed that they contained phthalates, chemicals that have been linked to damage to the reproductive system and increased risk of cancer and asthma. The regional safety group then conducted a survey on 'Frozen' dolls that were on the high street. Of those seized and sampled, 20% of dolls contained higher than permitted levels of phthalates. In three cases phthalates were 30% higher than permitted levels and in the worst case, 51% higher.

Feed Hygiene Delivery

A number of recent incidents show how significant animal feed is to animal and human safety. Unsafe feed can lead to contaminated meats in supply chains across various countries, threatening the health of consumers and harming markets and productivity.

NTS supports inspections and sampling and coordinates regional intelligence to help keep livestock animals healthy, whilst cutting red-tape for farm-assured and reputable feed businesses. Since NTS began working with local authorities on feed safety, 99.6% of inspections have been achieved and – for the first time ever – England has a nationally coordinated sampling programme. Recent projects include:

- 44 authorities in England traced surplus food from retailers to final destination and found a number of premises where it was illegally being used as animal feed; stopping the diversion has protected the UK food market
- A national sampling project revealed significant numbers of producers with illegal levels of feed additives in their finished products; this resulted in feed withdrawal thus protecting the food chain
- A snapshot of online feed sales has revealed that **all** test-purchased products failed legal requirements and these producers have now been helped to meet the necessary standards.

CHAPTER 5: ASSESSING EMERGING THREATS

As well as investigating live cases, NTS has a major role in collating intelligence about emerging threats within the consumer protection landscape. The following predictions are based on intelligence gathering from across all NTS work areas. Of course, with ever more crimes committed via the internet there will be an online dimension to almost all of NTS' activity in the coming year.

Top 7 rogue trading threats for 2016

1. Energy saving scams

With the Government announcing it is to cease funding the Green Deal (providing loans for energy-saving home improvements), NTS is predicting that scams like solar energy or other home efficiency scams will take their place. Increasing numbers of cases involving energy-related scams are now being dealt with its officers – many focused around nuisance calls.

John Jacobs, NTS Scambuster Team South West, said: "We have had reports of cold callers pestering consumers with offers of doing energy-saving work on their homes. We will be monitoring the situation and in the meantime, if you're planning to get this kind of work done, always check references and credentials before you part with any money. If in doubt contact your local trading standards team or Citizens Advice on 03454 04 05 06."

2. Criminals selling on social media

There has been a huge increase in the variety of goods being sold by unscrupulous sellers on social media, as it's so easy to set up multiple accounts that don't require too many details. This makes it difficult to check a seller's credentials on these sites, and people's generally relaxed attitude when using them means they may be less cautious about what they're buying. The most concerning trend is the increasing variety of just what can be bought through Facebook, Gumtree and other sites – for example there's been a spate of 'clocked cars' (where a car's mileage is adjusted downwards to add value) being sold in this way.

Mike Andrews, NTS eCrime Team, said: "Whilst selling boots that claim to be designer when they're not, for example, is not legal and not right, our growing concern is with the sale of 'big ticket' items such as electrical goods and clocked cars that are not only expensive but could potentially put lives at risk. We would always urge shoppers to use reputable dealers or retailers for all purchases, particularly when substandard products could cause harm."

3. Telephone preference scams

Both regionally and nationally, the Scams Team has seen a growing number of companies selling 'call blocking' devices that are ineffective and lead to unexpected charges. Known as telephone preference scams, the scammers cold call people claiming to be from the Telephone Preference Service (TPS) and then charge them for registration or for useless call blocking devices.

Louise Baxter, NTS Scams Team, said: "This is a sad and cynical scam that targets people who are actively trying to protect themselves or vulnerable relatives. Please remember that the TPS never cold calls and its service is always free. Just register with the TPS and, if you still get nuisance calls, report them to the Information Commissioner's Office at www.ico.org.uk. If you do want to fit a call blocker, ask your local trading standards team about their preferred suppliers."

4. New opportunities for loan sharks

The biggest emerging threat identified by the NTS Illegal Money Lending Team stems from the combined effect of the introduction of the Universal Credit single benefit and the cap on pay day loans. Loan sharks are expected to take advantage of those on a low income who may struggle to obtain credit via other means, seeking to exploit them as they get to grips with the changes to their finances.

According to recent research:

- 2.5 million people will require support to manage their money in the move to Universal Credit – this same group of people are also likely to be financially excluded
- 42% said monthly payments would make budgeting more difficult⁵
- 73% of people likely to be eligible for Universal Credit will need help managing their monthly payments⁶.

Tony Quigley, NTS Illegal Money Lending Team said: "As people get used to budgeting under the new system and find it harder to access legitimate short-term loans, we expect many to be tempted into the arms of the sharks. This is not a recommended route as people can end up in much more debt and dealing with some pretty ruthless individuals. If people are worried about a loan shark in their community – or have become a victim – they can call us in total confidence on 0300 555 2222."

5. Subscription traps

The use of subscription traps is on the rise, thanks mostly to the increase in social media advertising and email offers. Consumers or businesses are enticed to sign up to a free trial of a product or to pay a small fee to access an offer. But the offer is – intentionally or not on the part of the company – misleading and so without realising it, the victim is then trapped into making costly monthly payments without their informed consent, which can be difficult to stop.

Mike Andrews, NTS eCrime Team said: "Always be suspicious of any offer that looks extremely cheap, particularly if you see it in social media or in an advert online. And if you do get caught out by one of these offers, remember you have the right to cancel the payments by getting in touch with your bank or credit card company as soon as you can. I would also urge people to report possible subscription traps to Citizens Advice via the consumer helpline on 03454 04 05 06 – we need your help to clamp down on the scammers."

6. Investment scams

Changes to pensions that came into effect in April 2015 mean that people can access to their pension money when they reach the age of 55. Criminals have been quick to seize the opportunity to take advantage of these changes and new scams are already being reported. One such scam is a 'pension liberation scam', which claims to be able to release money from your pension fund before you turn 55, enabling you to invest it elsewhere. In reality though, taking money out of your pension early could incur tax of up to 55%, plus charges to the company that does it for you. Another type of scam is a free pension review, where criminals will contact you and offer a review, looking to transfer your pension fund into a high risk investment.

Louise Baxter, NTS Scams Team, said: "The chance to increase your pension fund with a high-reward investment might be an attractive proposition, but I would urge anyone who has been contacted by email, phone, text or mail with an offer that sounds too good to be true to be wary of a potential scam. We don't want to see anyone parted with their life's savings, so if you are being targeted with an offer that sounds too good to be true, speak to a friend, neighbour or an adviser you trust for informal advice, check the credentials of the company with the Financial Conduct Authority or report them to Action Fraud on 0300 123 2040."

⁵ According to a DWP survey of benefit and tax credit recipients

⁶ According to surveys from Citizens Advice

7. Secondary ticket sales

Whilst unauthorised sellers selling counterfeit or duplicate tickets for concerts, festivals and sports events is nothing new, NTS views this as a growing problem that's been particularly highlighted in the run up to the Rugby World Cup this year. With the explosion in secondary ticket selling platforms such as StubHub and SeatWave and more people than ever informally selling tickets on social media platforms such as Twitter, it has never been easier for fraudsters to pose as official dealers or genuine fans with a couple of spare tickets to sell.

Mike Andrews, NTS eCrime Team, said: "This problem is growing and with the multiple places tickets for events are made available, keeping on top of the crooks is a challenge. Key events next year include the Rio 2016 Olympics & Paralympics and the UEFA Euro 2016 finals in France and we're concerned that criminals both at home and abroad may try to capitalise on the build-up by selling fake tickets in the UK. We'll be looking to crack down on this type of activity and encourage fans to make sure they buy their tickets from official sources."

