

CONSUMER HARM REPORT 2016

National Trading Standards

November 2016

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Foreword from Lord Toby Harris

Every day throughout the country hundreds of people fall victim to criminals who scam them, rip them off or con them. These innocent victims are ruthlessly targeted and exploited by cynical criminals who often focus on the most vulnerable members of our society. The damage they do is huge – victims lose not only their money but frequently their sense of security and dignity is destroyed as well.

To highlight the scale of the problem last year we launched our inaugural Consumer Harm Report. The report provided us with an important opportunity to explain the types of crime that take place, help people understand what new threats are emerging and raise awareness of what can be done to tackle this activity. Each year the type of criminal activity we see at National Trading Standards changes. That's why we are producing the Consumer Harm Report again this year – to provide an updated picture of what is happening in this area.

This year we have continued to see criminals becoming more sophisticated. As technology advances, so do the tactics of criminals. Social media is increasingly being used for this type of criminal activity and our work has had to move rapidly to counter the threat to consumers.

But this doesn't mean the threat from what you might call the more traditional scammers and rogue traders has gone away. Far from it. Our teams still see a large number of doorstep crime cases and millions of pieces of scam mail are sent to consumers. And we know that's just the tip of the iceberg, with many cases going unreported.

The last year also reinforced the crucial role National Trading Standards plays in making sure unsafe products do not enter the UK. 'Hoverboards' became last Christmas' must-have gift. Yet many of the hoverboards being shipped into the country were in fact unsafe – leading to our teams intercepting around 40,000 unsafe hoverboards at the border.

In total over the 2015-16 period the work of National Trading Standards prevented more than £70 million in consumer detriment, over £20 million in business detriment and stopped 450,000 unsafe goods from entering the UK. Our investigations also secured 77 criminal convictions, which led to 161 years' worth of sentences being handed down.

We know that criminals will continue their activities. So we continue to work to ensure people across the country are protected. Right now our teams are conducting investigations, advising consumers and working to bring criminals to justice.

I hope people will find this report enlightening and I would urge anyone who suspects that they, their families or their neighbours may be the victim of wrongdoing to report it to Citizens Advice on 03454 04 05 06.



Lord Toby Harris, Chair of National Trading Standards

OVERVIEW AND CONTENT

Overview of National Trading Standards

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 a response to national and regional trading standards issues. 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 fraud, 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 2015-16 Annual Report, which analyses results for the last measurable full year across all NTS work. This includes the work of the:

- 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
- National Trading Standards Feed Hygiene Delivery Programme

Contents

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

- Tackling criminal activity
- Protecting consumers and vulnerable people
- Protecting small businesses
- Supply chain integrity
- Assessing emerging threats

CHAPTER 1: TACKLING CRIMINAL ACTIVITY

The issue

Taking action against criminal activity to protect consumers and businesses is at the heart of NTS' work. The criminal activity NTS combats varies widely – from illegal money lending to complex eCrime. There are three NTS teams that are dedicated to clamping down on criminal activity - the Scambuster Teams, the eCrime Team and the Illegal Money Lending Teams. These teams lead investigations into potential criminal activity and are usually directly involved in bringing prosecutions against suspected criminals.

Bringing criminals to justice – key 2015/16 figures at a glance:

- A total of **77** criminals convicted
- **161** years' worth of sentences handed down
- Prevented **£93 million** in consumer and business detriment (lost money)

Over the past two years – when all NTS Teams have been fully functional – NTS has secured **£12.63** of economic benefit for every **£1** spent.

NTS team data

NTS Scambuster Teams

There are eight NTS Scambuster Teams working across England and Wales. They target criminals involved with serious doorstep crime, counterfeiting, consumer and business fraud and other related crime. Last year:

- **46** criminals were convicted following investigations by Scambuster Teams
- Those convictions led to **114** years of custodial sentences
- **£215,000** of fines were imposed on criminals as well as **£525,000** in court costs
- **£928,000** was confiscated from criminals as a result of NTS Scambuster Teams investigations

Case study: Operation Silk

Evidence and intelligence gathered by the Scambuster Teams identified two police forces as having an interest in a fraud gang who targeted the elderly in a £1m Spanish timeshare scam. Victims were told they had to pay tax and legal fees while at the same time being promised an increased payout on their investments. It was agreed the team's evidence would feed into two police operations and that the CPS would prosecute both cases. West Mercia police still have 13 defendants and almost 500 victims but are not yet ready to run their prosecution. West Midlands police have proceeded in relation to up to 38 people that were tricked into paying out their money to a ruthless 2 year scam, one victim having lost £250,000 and another being left suicidal after being conned. The cold-calling gang have now been jailed for a total of 32 years at Birmingham Crown Court with the victims being mainly in their 70s and 80s, the conspiracy having run from February 2011 to April 2013. One victim was a woman who was wheelchair-bound and suffered from multiple sclerosis. She

had told the gang about her illness but the fraudsters had been “utterly ruthless” in pursuing her. Another victim paid out £165,000 and had been given “promise after promise” that he would get his timeshare sale but the scam lost him his life savings and he later separated from his wife after 28 years marriage.

Seven defendants were given prison sentences for conspiracy: Emma Jelf - 8 years; Luke Jimenez - 8 years; Amarjit Bagharian - 7 years, 2 months; Hivjit Bagharian - 7 years, 2 months; Todd Mann - 5 years, 4 months; Mandy Castellain - 6 years, 7 months; and Richard Buxton - 5 years, 7 months. Three defendants were imprisoned for money laundering: Toby Mann - 8 months suspended, 150 hrs community service and a 12 month supervision order; David Baylie - 12 months suspended, 170 hrs community service; and Neil Poole - 1 year & 20 weeks suspended, 200 hours community service. The financial value of the complaints that were the subject of this investigation is £1,012,969.

NTS Illegal Money Lending Teams

The NTS Illegal Money Lending Teams in England and Wales investigate and prosecute illegal money lenders (or ‘loan sharks’). Illegal money lenders – who operate as a moneylending business without permission from the Financial Conduct Authority – usually target people in vulnerable situations who struggle to access credit through other means. They regularly charge their victims inflated interest rates and often use intimidation and violence to get their money off victims.

In the last year

- **77** suspected illegal money lenders were arrested
- **740** new suspects identified
- **31** people were convicted of illegal money lending, with 22 receiving custodial sentences
- **£164,037** of cash was seized with a further **£598,887** awarded by Confiscation or Forfeiture Order

Case study: Elisa and German Alcomendas

An investigation by the NTS Illegal Money Lending Team led to the prosecution and conviction of Elisa and German Alcomendas. The pair were convicted on seven counts of illegal money lending and each received 14 month custodial sentences. A total of 50 victims were identified, with many coming from the hospital where Mr Alcomendas worked as a nurse. The total value of their loan book was £540,000. Sentencing them His Honour Judge Darling said the case was “a sophisticated, well planned operation and all the customers could be described as vulnerable”. Following the conviction two confiscation orders were made under the Proceeds of Crime Act.

NTS eCrime Team

The NTS eCrime Team investigates a range of online criminal activity. This includes copycat websites, fraud on social media, subscription traps and online shopping fraud. The team is seeing a growing caseload, with suspected criminals often operating on social media.

In the last year:

- an estimated **£3 million** worth of potential fraud was uncovered.
- **64** websites were brought to the attention of hosting companies which have subsequently been taken down.
- Consumer complaints about copycat websites have decreased dramatically following previous activity by the Team to clamp down on perpetrators

More information on an example case is provided below.

Case study: Operation Hector

This was an investigation into websites offering "government backed grants and loans". The defendant pleaded guilty to 20 counts of fraud and money laundering. Sentencing was delayed due to further offending uncovered while the defendant was on bail. The defendant was sentenced to 18 months' imprisonment (suspended for two years) and ordered to carry out 300 hours unpaid work and pay £13,255 in compensation. Costs of £8,776 were also awarded.

CHAPTER 2: PROTECTING CONSUMERS

The issue

Protecting consumers from criminals is the cornerstone of National Trading Standards. This includes providing information to consumers, taking enforcement action against criminals and safeguarding victims.

A number of NTS' teams work directly to support and protect consumers, including the Scams Team, Safety at Ports & Borders Teams, eCrime Team and Scambuster Teams – doing everything from preventing unsafe goods entering the country to preventing people from falling victim to scams. Our teams also often work to protect people and communities in vulnerable situations, who tend to be targeted by criminals.

How we protect consumers – key 2015/16 figures at a glance:

- **£108,750** in compensation secured for victims
- Nearly **450,000** unsafe items prevented from entering the country
- More than **£70 million** of detriment to consumers prevented

NTS team data

NTS Scams Team

Each year mail scams are estimated to cause between **£5 billion and £10 billion** worth of detriment to people across the UK. Mail scams often take the form of fake competitions or non-existent lotteries, which victims – particularly people in vulnerable situations – are lured into entering. The NTS Scams Team works to tackle these scams at source by working with partners to tackle criminal groups based overseas and by empowering families, neighbourhoods and communities to identify and report suspected cases of mail fraud.

Last year:

- **3,339** scam victims were identified by the Team from repeat victims lists
- More than **£3.6 million** of consumers' money was saved due to action taken by the Team
- Secured total savings of **£26,692,692**, including **£23,022,308** as a result of interventions such as cancelling mail contracts and investigations

People who are scammed often experience loneliness, shame and social isolation – and many criminals continue to prey on this. More than **220,000** names of victims have been shared between criminals on 'victims lists' and the average age of scam victims is 75. It can be difficult for family members, friends and neighbours to convey some of the problems of scam mail to victims and a key role of the team is to provide guidance, training and practice – this has seen the recent launch of the Friends Against Scams campaign, which aims to empower communities to 'Take a Stand Against Scams' through a programme of free training sessions.

In 2015-16, the Scams Team also began work to tackle telephone scams and doorstep crime through a series of pilots. An example of its work to help protect victims from telephone scams is provided below.

Case study: Call blocker pilot

The Scams Team worked on a pilot programme focused on blocking scam calls. The installation of a unit designed to block scam calls as part of the pilot saw 34,804 scam calls blocked. It is estimated that the total savings achieved through the pilot amount to over £65,000. The pilot also found that the majority of victims prevented were living alone.

NTS Safety at Ports & Borders Teams

The NTS Safety at Ports and Borders Teams work across 14 local authorities at ports, airports and postal hubs. The types of products seized by the Teams range from unsafe electrical items to dangerous health products – prominent examples include laser pointers, teeth whitening kits, skin lightening creams, children's toys and LED lights.

In the run up to Christmas 2015 the work of the Safety at Ports & Borders Team included the detention of dangerous self-balancing scooters, otherwise known as 'hoverboards'. Tens of thousands were assessed as unsafe, with most carrying the potential to cause fires or explode. In total, **44,878** hoverboards were intercepted at border points across the UK, with 89% of those being declared as unsafe. The Teams' activity prompted a ban of hoverboards on major airlines and product recalls from several large retailers and led to liaison with international authorities to help protect consumers.

It is estimated that in just the last year the work of the Safety and Ports & Borders Team has resulted in **1,035** serious injuries being avoided, **887** fires being prevented and **three** lives being saved.

NTS Scambuster Teams

Closely linked with its work to tackle criminal activity, an important element of the work of the Scambuster Teams is to protect consumers. Last year their work led to more than **£9.4 million** of consumer detriment being avoided and **£29,500** of compensation awarded to victims. Many of their operations also prevent additional consumer detriment – for example Operation Angel, which targeted fraudulent kitchen sales, resulted in a number of websites of business engaged the fraudulent kitchen sales being taken down.

Case study: Operation Angel

Operation Angel was one of the biggest ever investigations taken on by NTS. The case related to a number of kitchen business operating out of Oldham which were unlawfully using the B&Q trademark to mislead customers and making false claims about the kitchens they were selling.

A two-year investigation by the NTS Scambuster Team (Yorkshire & The Humber) found that the business had cost consumers £2.6 million and that 1,700 complaints about the companies had been received. The investigation concluded successfully in March 2016 with the conviction of six individuals, who were sentenced to a total of 5 years and 9 months of prison time.

NTS eCrime Team

Alongside the continued growth in internet use and proliferation of social media in recent years, crime conducted using the internet has been growing. While mail scammers and doorstep criminals still exist, many criminals are now operating online. The eCrime Team responds to this by conducting investigations into online criminal activity and taking action to protect consumers.

One of the most prominent examples of this was Operation Jasper, which specifically targeted the use of social media for selling illicit goods. In the second phase of this operation which took place in 2015/16, 7,500 social media profiles, pages and images were taken down. The eCrime Team also rolled out nationally its 'notice and takedown' protocol with Facebook, which provides a clear process for local authorities requesting, via the eCrime Team, for content to be removed.

CHAPTER 3: PROTECTING SMALL BUSINESSES

The issue

Small businesses can often be undermined by criminals operating illegally, both from the UK and abroad, undercutting prices, stealing customers and damaging consumer confidence. Small businesses can also be targeted by criminals through fraudulent business deals, often leaving family-run businesses bankrupt.

A number of our teams' work supports and safeguards honest businesses, including the Scambuster Teams, eCrime Team, Estate Agency Team and the Safety at Ports and Borders Teams.

NTS team data

NTS Estate Agency Team

The NTS Estate Agency Team protects consumers and businesses by enforcing the Estate Agents Act (1979). The team leads investigations, provides advice and guidance to agents and works with colleagues across the enforcement community to help ensure a fair marketplace.

Cases under investigation by the Team include offences of insider trading, fraud, theft, violence, kidnapping and breaches of the Estate Agents Act such as failing to declare a personal interest in property. Recent activity has also seen the team offer information and training across the sector, this included a series of seminars with the National Association of Estate Agents and the publication of a 'Guidance on Property Sales' document.

Last year, the Estate Agency Team:

- **Received 171** complaints made about individuals and businesses across the UK
- Issued **12** prohibition orders and **3** warning orders
- Saw **6** individuals or businesses banned from engaging in estate agency work

NTS Scambuster Teams

Criminal groups who deliberately defraud consumers effect consumer confidence in legitimate businesses, harming their prospects. A number of criminal groups also target small businesses, leaving family-run businesses bankrupt, destroying livelihoods and causing distress for business-owners.

Key cases that targeted businesses last year included:

- Operation Galion – the North West Scambuster Team worked with the Merseyside Police Economic Crime Unit to uncover a UK-wide publishing fraud that caused considerable business detriment and saw 11,000 victims. The multi-million pound scam conned thousands of family-run businesses into paying for advertising in a fake emergency service magazine that the criminals claimed was distributed to emergency services across the UK. The main perpetrator was sentenced to more than seven years in prison.
- Operation Superb – the main culprit behind a group of criminal traders who targeted schools, health centres, community centres and religious establishments was sentenced to more than one year in jail following an investigation by the South West Scambuster Team, which found that the group lied by posing as the Local Authority/Highways Agency to pressurise organisations into agreeing to painting markings in their car parks, before undertaking sub-standard work and demanding higher fees than originally quoted

NTS Safety at Ports & Borders Teams

Any individual can set themselves up as an online business by purchasing goods for onward sale over the internet. This has led to millions of dangerous and counterfeit goods arriving at UK entry points every day via entry points across the country, whether arriving by mail, by sea or by air. This can damage honest business because traders selling unsafe goods often lure people in with unfair prices, do not meet safety standards and under-declare the value of their imports to pay less VAT.

The NTS Safety at Ports and Borders teams – based 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’.

This year, the Teams also worked to identify compliance across the sector and the risks of individual businesses, enabling the team to help compliant operators be exempt from future controls. In addition, intelligence provided by the Teams helped lead to **5** prosecutions for product safety offences and **38** businesses were identified as high-risk importers.

Case study: Safety at Ports and Borders Teams

One of the teams received a referral about an exporter, importer and agent who had previously been involved in the import of unsafe electrical products. As part of the investigation the local Trading Standards authority identified that the importer was linked to another business with previous unsafe products in their area working from the same premises, as well as an established fulfilment house in the next town. The local authority now makes regular visits to the company’s warehouse to assess compliance.

CHAPTER 4: SUPPLY CHAIN INTEGRITY

The issues

Product safety

Product safety controls in the UK are very strong and consumers have more information about products than ever, with a wealth of information at their fingertips via the internet. Nevertheless, with more and more items being purchased online – there was an 11% increase in UK online spending in 2015 – people are increasingly ordering products from websites they know nothing about.

Luring consumers with prices that are 'too good to be true', many of these websites conceal their company information and consumers are unable to check the quality of the product they are buying, leading to thousands of dangerous items – including clothes, children's toys and electrical devices – arriving at national entry points. The NTS Safety at Ports and Borders Teams play important roles in trying to prevent dangerous products from entering the supply chain.

Helping ensure a safe food chain

For the second year in a row NTS has helped to ensure the safety of the food chain. Through its inspection of animal feed – an industry worth more than £4 billion to the UK economy – NTS works with local authorities to helping maintain a healthy food chain. Incidents where unsafe animal feed contaminates the food chain can trigger outbreaks of disease amongst livestock, for example BSE, and damage the economy, such as the outbreak of foot and mouth in 200, which cost the UK economy more than £8 billion.

NTS team data

NTS Safety at Ports and Borders Teams

The NTS Safety at Ports and Borders Teams – based at 14 local authorities at ports, airports and postal hubs – work at national entry points to intercept thousands of dangerous items aimed at consumers. Last year, the teams:

- Prevented more than **440,000** unsafe items – which could have caused explosions, fires, burns and other injuries – from entering the supply chain
- Identified, held or reworked **1,031,750** non-compliant items
- Helped avoid an estimated **1,035** serious injuries to consumers, preventing an estimated **887** fires

Examples of unsafe and non-compliant items prevented from entering the supply chain – which led to an estimated saving to society of **£45,523,724** – include:

- Health and beauty products including tooth whitening products containing the prohibited substance sodium perborate, which has been linked to a number of health conditions
- Dangerous electrical products, including unsafe and non-compliant hair straighteners, kettles, 'hoverboards', digital timers, LED lights, travel adaptors and digital alcohol breath testers that gave inaccurate readings
- Laser pointers – or laser pens – many of which were too powerful for general use as they could cause eye injuries
- Children's toys and clothing, including counterfeit Disney onesies, remote-controlled toys and children's scooters

Case study: 'Hoverboards'

Around half a million people purchased a self-balancing scooter – known as 'hoverboards' – in the run-up to Christmas 2015 and large numbers of dangerous hoverboards were detained at national entry points in November-December 2015. This saw 44,878 hoverboards intercepted at border points across the UK, with 89% of those being declared as unsafe. Assuming a retail value of an average of £225 per product, the total potential retail value of the intercepted products was £10,097,550.

The Teams issued warnings through the media to warn consumers and retailers about the dangerous products, which led to unprecedented levels of voluntary product recalls. The Teams' activity also prompted a ban of hoverboards on major airlines enquiries from international enforcement authorities to help protect consumers.

Fulfilment Houses

As online shopping continues to see items ordered from small businesses based abroad, the role of Fulfilment Houses – which are used to store products, receive orders, package and dispatch ordered items to end-consumers – has grown. This has led to questions being raised about the quality of the products that are being stored, which are often low-cost goods being handled on behalf of businesses based abroad and who is legally liable for them when things go wrong.

Last year, NTS supported programmes to tackle some identified high risk fulfilment houses and supports local trading standards services to gather intelligence, investigate and take enforcement action to help protect consumers from dangerous products being sold via Fulfilment Houses. 32 Fulfillment Houses across the UK have been subject to criminal and regulatory breaches relating to unsafe and counterfeit goods and over 70,000 dangerous products have been removed from the supply chain.

Case study: Enfield Council

More than 28,000 dangerous electrical items destined for UK households were seized in a raid by trading standards officers from Enfield Council – on behalf of NTS – before they ended up in people's living rooms at Christmas. This formed part of a national project funded by NTS aimed at combatting dangerous imports being sold in the UK.

The raid saw more than 28,000 dangerous electrical items seized, including potentially lethal laptop chargers and adapters, PC tablets, Christmas lights, disco lights, shavers, nail drills, UV gel nail dryers, sat navs, walkie talkies and other electrical products. The items were found to have dangerous chargers without fuses, unsafe cabling and battery problems, which can increase the risk of devices overheating, exploding or catching fire. The goods – which have since been destroyed by heavy-duty shredders and recycled – had an estimated retail value of over £232,000.

Feed hygiene delivery

Animal feed is hugely significant to animal and human safety and NTS supports inspections, sampling and coordinates regional intelligence to help keep animal feed safe, whilst cutting red-tape for farm-assured and reputable feed businesses.

This is the second year of NTS feed hygiene delivery, which has again seen success in terms of activities delivered and further work undertaken to promote effectiveness, value for money and address potential gaps in that delivery.

Key achievements in the last year have included:

- **13,507** feed hygiene inspections and checks completed, including **3,467** inland feed inspections and **2,691** feed and food hygiene inspections at farms
- Delivering training to **56%** of local authority feed lead officers to improve consistency
- Investigations of three high-risk areas of feed hygiene delivery, including surplus food from retail premises ending up in animal feed, the import of nuts for wild bird feed and an investigation of online sales, including a sampling programme of feed purchased online, which found **92.5%** of products sold online sampled to be non-compliant.
- An increase in business compliance – from 55% in year 1 to **80%** in year 2 – in managing the contamination of coccidiostats and veterinary medicines into other feeds following work with feed businesses. This is of key interest as ongoing contamination can lead to antibiotic resistant "superbugs".
- An increase in the level of compliance in inland feed hygiene premises has increased from 57% to **61%**

CHAPTER 5: ASSESSING EMERGING THREATS

NTS also plays an important role in collating intelligence to assess emerging threats to consumers and businesses. This activity is delivered by the NTS Intelligence Team and a network of Regional Intelligence Analysts across the country, who provide technical expertise to help identify and analyse threats across the consumer protection landscape.

The following predictions are based on intelligence gathering from across all NTS work areas, including investigating teams and intelligence analysts.

Continued growth of social media as a selling platform

Social media sites will continue to be a prolific selling platform, as criminals can set up multiple accounts to sell fake products from almost anywhere in the world, concealing their real identity and contact details. This includes criminals who disguise themselves as well-known brands on sites such as Facebook, luring users with low prices before sending counterfeit goods.

Mike Andrews, National Coordinator of the NTS eCrime Team, says:

"We are seeing increasing numbers of criminal traders from around the world using prominent social media platforms to sell their goods. It is becoming increasingly difficult for consumers to distinguish between legitimate, trustworthy traders and fraudsters who are selling dangerous and rip-off goods.

"I'd always encourage consumers to use reputable retailers when purchasing items via social media. Online shoppers should pay particular attention to any adverts that might appear in their social media feeds – these adverts and promotions can be set up by anyone and have been used by fraudsters to dupe consumers with a similar look-and-feel to genuine brands, luring users to their websites with flash sales for items that turn out to be fakes. People should abide by the timeless rule – if it looks too good to be true, then it probably is."

Expansion of micro-importers

As consumers continue to buy and sell products on the internet there will continue to be product safety concerns around cheap, dangerous and counterfeit goods being sent to UK consumers. Electrical goods, e-Cigarettes, DVDs, clothing such as cheap fancy-dress outfits and unofficial toys coinciding with major films – such as the forthcoming "Rogue One" – will likely be destined for the UK supply chain. This will also see a continuing growth in the role of Fulfilment Houses that store and distribute ordered items.

James Greenaway, based at the postal hub in Warwickshire for the NTS Safety at Ports and Borders Teams, says:

"When you buy goods over the internet to sell online, you are in fact acting assuming the legal responsibilities of an importer business. As a 'micro-importer', you will therefore be required by law to ensure the items you buy and sell comply with product safety and intellectual property legislation. Any micro-importer who is unsure of their responsibilities should visit <https://www.gov.uk/starting-to-import>."

Targeting vulnerable communities on the doorstep

We're seeing more and more criminals committing doorstep crime offences by impersonating authorities, such as the police or council officers. By targeting people in vulnerable situations – such as older people living alone – this makes the criminals appear more authentic, deceiving unsuspecting victims.

Andrew Bertie from the NTS Scambuster Team in Wales said:

"Doorstep criminals continue to prey on some of our most vulnerable citizens – some aggressively pressurise victims into agreeing to work on their doorstep whilst others deceive victims by falsely claiming to represent the authorities. We strongly recommend that people never hand over money on the doorstep – no matter who people say they are – and report suspected criminals to Citizens Advice."

Portal juggling

The practice of 'portal juggling' – where estate agents manipulate property websites to make relisted properties appear 'new on the market' – will continue to be a major issue for the property industry next year. The NTS Estate Agency Team has worked with partners to provide guidance to estate agents and plans to take enforcement action if agents refuse to comply.

James Munro, Team Leader of the National Trading Standards Estate Agency Team, said:

"The practice of 'portal juggling' has seen some estate agents deliberately mislead potential homebuyers by removing and relisting properties to make them appear new on the market or using the practice to manipulate sales figures. The practice misleads prospective homebuyers and harms honest estate agents who conduct their business in a fair and professional manner. If you suspect an estate agent of portal juggling or spot anything suspicious on a major online portal, we urge you to report it to Citizens Advice on 03454 040506."

Second hand cars

The number of issues related to second hand cars continues to rise. These issues often involve the cars having safety problems or being misleadingly described when sold. A further common issue is complaints of car clocking – where a car's recorded mileage is reduced, helping it appear fresher and more attractive to prospective buyers.

Colin Rumford, from the Yorkshire & Humber Scambuster Team, said:

"Buying second hand cars can be a risky business. If you buy of online websites such as eBay or pay in cash then you can often find yourself lacking purchase protection that you would get if you bought from a registered dealer. Carrying out a check of the vehicle's service history may help check the accuracy of the recorded mileage but a better option would be to invest in the services of a professional checking service such as those provided by HPI, the RAC or AA."

Mass Marketing Scams

Mass Marketing Scams continue to be a threat to consumers and businesses. This includes scams where businesses are enticed to place scam advertisements in local medical centres, publications for good causes or to place online adverts - money is then taken from their businesses for adverts that are rejected or never placed. Consumer scams continue in the form of subscription traps scams (including vitamins, slimming pills and health products), investment scams (including wine, ISA, bonds, diamonds, timeshare and carbon credit), telephone preference services, call blocker scams, debt consolidation and debt collection scams, copycat website scams, courier scams and computer virus frauds. The NTS Scams Team continues to do work on Mass Marketing Scams with local trading standards services and other partner agencies to help deal with these problems.

Louise Baxter, Team Manager at the National Trading Standards Scams Team, said:

"Scams continue to do huge damage to both businesses and consumers. We are increasingly seeing criminals coming up with more complex and innovative scams, as well as more traditional scams such as mail lottery scams. To combat criminal scammers we recently launched the Friends Against Scams to help improve awareness and understanding of scams. Anyone who is worried they may be being scammed or who is concerned about someone who they fear may be a victim should report it to the Citizens Advice consumer helpline on 03454 04 05 06."

