

Consumer Alert – April 2020

Price Increases for Goods

The Service is receiving a number of complaints about shops excessively increasing the prices of goods, particularly food stuffs and sanitisation products that are in high demand. Whilst suppliers are free to set their own prices, Trading Standards work closely with the Competition and Markets Authority and will consider any evidence that companies may have broken competition or consumer protection law.

Reports have also been received regarding misleading claims being made about the efficacy of protective equipment and sanitisation products. Please report such practices to Trading Standards via the Citizens Advice Consumer Helpline on 0808 2231133.

Bogus Coronavirus Testing Kits

Lancashire Police have received reports of door to door sales people offering "home Coronavirus testing kits". Please be aware, such items are fake, no such testing facility is currently available to the public in the UK.

The Police have also received reports of cold callers selling hand sanitiser, masks and rubber gloves and whilst this may not be a scam, this Service would urge you against purchasing these items from anyone other than recognised retailers.

There are reports of some potentially harmful hand sanitiser being sold containing glutaral (or glutaraldehyde), which was banned for human use in 2014.

Beware Property Repair Cold Callers

Trading Standards have received reports of householders being cold called by property repairers and are concerned that rogue traders may take advantage of the current situation, targeting older or vulnerable residents who are self-isolating or shielding.

In South Ribble recently, an elderly gentleman, after being cold called, agreed to have his drive and patio jet washed, the price of initially £7000 was reduced to £3500, but when Trading Standards intervened, the traders alleged a misunderstanding, the price being £350. In Fleetwood a householder agreed to groundworks and fencing but was concerned that the monies, over £12,000 were excessive. Reports have also been received regarding cold callers currently offering roofing services in the Burnley area.

In the Garstang area a lady in her 80's received a flyer offering gardening services. The traders arrived at her house within 10 minutes of her contacting them, giving her no time to think, and after just over an hours work charged her £750 for cutting back a conifer. The lady felt bullied into paying this excessive amount for poor quality work.

Trading Standards advice is to say no to cold callers, always get a written quote before agreeing to any work and remember for most contracts agreed at your home you should be given a 14 day cooling off period in writing.

Bogus Gas Man

A vulnerable lady in Thornton Cleveleys received a knock on her door from a man

claiming to work for the gas board stating it had shown up on their computer that she had a leak. Coincidentally she had recently had a legitimate gas repairman out to her property. The bogus caller looked at the meter but then called his 'boss' on the telephone who told her she would have to pay to have a tree outside her house, trimmed down. The lady argued that the tree was not her responsibility and got the individual to leave. It is suspected the callers may be linked to a bogus roofing job she had previously had done.

Be suspicious of utility providers turning up unannounced at your door. Always ask for identification but check independently with the utility company. In most cases you will have received a letter in advance letting you know work will take place.

Trading Standards advice is to always say no to cold callers. The Safetrader scheme can help you find a trader in your area, contact 0303 333 1111 or go to www.safetrader.org.uk

Scammers Shopping for Elderly

A number of genuine community groups across the County are setting up, offering to help the elderly and vulnerable with tasks such as shopping. Although we are unaware of problems in the county so far, there is the potential for scammers to take advantage of the situation, taking payment up front, and not returning. Reports of such incidents have already been received in the Rochdale area where the scammers pretended to be from the council.

It is understood in some cases criminals have claimed to represent charities to help them appear reputable

Be particularly wary of those going door to door, offering these services with no paperwork and contact details. Anyone claiming to be from a charity should have

ID. Genuine schemes should be properly organised, with clear paperwork and should give you the option of responding or not.

Telesales Calls - White Goods Insurance

Please be wary of telephone calls offering warranties for white goods. Often the callers can be persistent, repeatedly calling the householder and once you have agreed to a warranty, you can be targeted by other similar calls. In one case a man, suffering with dementia, had given his bank card details to several of these companies, paying around £90 each time. In another case a customer had paid £1800.

Please be wary of contracting with companies via a telesales call. Trading Standards advice is to shop around and use local, known service providers. Remember, you will have cancellation rights of 14 days for most contracts agreed over the telephone.

To reduce telesales calls join the Telephone Preference Service on 03450 700707

Telephone Scams - Bit Coin Scam

As more people self-isolate at home there is an increasing risk that telephone scams will also rise, including criminals claiming to be your bank, mortgage lender or utility company

In a recent telephone scam, a Lancashire resident who had paid out £18,000 for a Bit Coin investment over 3 years ago received a telephone call from a scam company claiming they had been ordered by the bank to refund her the investment money. They needed her bank account details and would also need a payment from her of £2000 which luckily the resident didn't pay.

COVID-19 Email Tax Scam

Beware emails alleging to be from HM Revenue and Customs offering a precautionary tax measure due to the coronavirus outbreak 'in co-operation with National Insurance and National Health Services'. The scam email asks you to click on a link for a refund of £128.34.

HMRC will never contact you in this way, be suspicious of emails alleging to be from government services and never click on any link or give your personal or financial details.

Scam emails from WHO

Hackers are sending emails pretending to be from the World Health Organisation (WHO). The email claims that the attached document details how recipients can prevent the spread of the disease. Clicking on the attachment gives the hackers the opportunity to infect the computer with malicious software. If you would like to read information given out by the WHO, go directly to their official website.

Donation Scam Emails

Beware receiving any email claiming to be from researchers asking for donations. One such email claimed to be from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, downloading to a fake Microsoft login page requesting email and password. Another scam claims to be collecting donations for a Covid-19 vaccine.

Bogus online suppliers

The National Fraud Intelligence Bureau has identified reports where victims have attempted to purchase protective face masks from fraudulent online sellers, payment is taken but the goods never arrive. Reports have also been received of social feeds offering for sale anti-virus kits and telesales calls selling health supplements that supposedly prevent COVID-19. Always use known, reputable online suppliers. Best advice for any transactions

over £100 is to pay by credit card for extra protection.

Beware of Fake Online Resources

Such as false Coronavirus Maps – that deliver malware such as AZORult Trojan, an information stealing program which can infiltrate a variety of sensitive data. A prominent example that has deployed malware is '*corona-virus-map[dot]com*'.

Holiday Refund Scams

Beware of companies offering fake holiday refunds for individuals who have been forced to cancel their trips. People seeking refunds should also be wary of fake websites set up to claim holiday refunds.

Illegal Money Lenders

Illegal money lenders are expected to prey on people's financial hardship, lending money before charging extortionate interest rates and fees through possible threats and violence.

Ask your local Citizens Advice Bureau for advice if you have debt problems.

For advice and to report scams, contact the Trading Standards Service via the Citizens Advice Consumer Helpline on 0808 223 1133