

Scottish Business Crime Centre advice on bogus callers

Older people in Edinburgh are being warned to be on their guard against bogus callers and rogue traders set on a springtime spree of duping homeowners out of money. Vulnerable householders, in particular those over 60, are increasingly becoming the favoured targets of criminals who use the change of the seasons into spring to execute doorstep scams.

The criminals turn up to offer homeowners the attractive prospect of having discounted repairs and improvement work carried out on their properties to spruce them up as the weather starts to improve. But the work is either shoddy or grossly overpriced – and in some cases the callers gain entry to the properties to steal cash and valuables.

The warning comes from the Scottish Business Crime Centre (SBCC), as part of a new campaign it is fronting to raise awareness of various issues that can place older people at risk of financial harm.

As victims are often embarrassed to report the crimes, authoritative statistics are hard to establish but a recent study by Citizens Advice Scotland found that their Consumer Helpline dealt with 421 cases between April and November 2012 of people reporting a cold caller looking to carry out work on their homes. Nearly 400 of these cases involved home maintenance/improvement, double glazing and insulation with 40% of them involving complaints of substandard services totaling around £700,000 in charges to householders.

One homeowner from Edinburgh contacted the Citizens Advice Consumer Helpline after a salesman visited her home with the offer of installing new windows. The woman thought that the

finance agreement was for a total sum of £6995 and believing she was getting a great deal, signed up. She is now being asked for payment of £16,995, with no cancellation rights.

Gary Ritchie, Assistant Director of SBCC, said: "We know that adults at risk are often targeted by criminals who see them as an easy option and use a variety of methods to obtain large sums of cash. While we have long been plagued by bogus callers trying to get entry into houses, many criminals are now using the change of seasons from winter to spring as a ploy for their scams.

"Older people in particular are easily influenced by suggestions that their property has been damaged by winter weather; or simply fall for smooth-talking scammers who sell them the concept of sprucing up their house in spring by having unnecessary repairs or refurbishment work carried out.

"Sadly these people are frequently conned out of huge sums of money for shoddy or sub-standard work. Older people who try to complain or refuse to pay are threatened with violence or treated with abuse. In some cases, they have been made to walk to cash machines to make withdrawals. Crimes against people who perhaps don't have the same capabilities or support to protect themselves as others is appalling and has no place in Scotland. We are working with a number of partner agencies to raise awareness and we want older people and their families to be on alert at all times to know what to do when they receive an unsolicited call at their home."

While the changing weather makes older people prone to approaches from rogue traders at the start of spring, homeowners should always be on their guard against bogus callers who try to gain access to homes by imitating council officials, utilities representatives such as gas, electricity or water companies while others may even claim to be police officers.

The SBCC, which aims to work in partnership with various bodies to create a safer Scotland, recently held a conference to establish a blueprint for Scotland's private and public sectors and voluntary organisations to collaborate consistently and effectively to protect those who may be subjected to financial abuse by others.

The SBCC is currently forming a strategic multi agency steering group to provide further advice, guidance and protection around those who are seen as vulnerable in this way through information exchange and early intervention including the development of a Scotland against Scams initiative. The group will also consider how to tackle e-related scams and postal scams as part of their ongoing work.

This steering group will consist of representatives from the Scottish Government, Social Work Department, Trading Standards, police, banks, energy and utility companies as well as a variety of other interested organisations.

More information about the Scottish Business Crime Centre and how to become a member can be found at www.sbcc.org.uk.