

Police warn public to beware of 'Romance Fraud'



A woman whose life was torn apart when a fraudster stole over £60,000 from her family is backing a Police Scotland campaign to raise awareness of romance fraud. Michelle Szombara, 40, met Alan Clarkson on a dating website and within weeks he was stealing money from her.

Over four years, Clarkson manipulated and controlled his victim, who lost her home and had to declare herself bankrupt.

This type of fraud is known as a romance scam and Police Scotland is highlighting it as part of a national acquisitive crime campaign, which launches today (Monday 25 March) and will run for four weeks.

It will include social media posts and digital adverts to raise awareness and give advice on how to spot a fraudster.

Michelle, from Fife, said: "My relationship with him started off with messages on a dating site.

"He was like any other normal person; funny and polite. We started texting back and forward and within a few weeks we met up. He turned up at my house with some spare clothes and stayed for the next four years."

Clarkson, of West Lothian, started to claim he couldn't access his bank account and was in debt.

He sent Michelle emails he had allegedly received from financial institutions and produced fake paperwork to show he had money in another account to pay her back at some point.

The fraud also affected Michelle's parents, who handed over money to Clarkson. "He took over the rent for my house," said Michelle.

"I ended up over £7,000 in rent arrears and my council tax wasn't getting paid.

"It got to the stage we were living off of nothing. I was so stressed. I did every hour going at my work to be left with nothing. I had a lovely house and I lost everything.

"I was embarrassed and ashamed that I got my mum and dad involved. They worked all their days, only had a couple of years left on their mortgage and we're now living in a council house because of him."

Michelle said she realised something was wrong but she stayed with Clarkson to try and gain some of the money back for her parents.

In February 2019, Clarkson was sentenced to 42 months in prison after being convicted of stealing £60,000 from Michelle and her parents between 2010 and 2014.

She said: "We had a few people saying to us things weren't right over the years. We had doubt in the back of our mind but we didn't want to believe it.

"My mum died before he was sentenced for this so she didn't get to see him being sent to prison. It nearly ripped our family apart. I hate what he's done to my family.

"My advice would be to be really cautious with everybody.

Check email addresses are related to the company. Throughout the four years we were together I never met his family so always check someone's background." Romance scams are often reported as a fraud and many victims don't come forward due to embarrassment, lack of evidence or a feeling it might have been their fault. Police Scotland management figures from April to December 2018 show the number of reported fraud incidents, including romance scams, increased by 21 per cent, from 6,106 the previous year to 7,398.

Detective Superintendent Nicola Shepherd said: "Romance fraud is largely unreported and we want more victims to come forward.

"It can have a shattering effect on people who may be embarrassed that they've fallen victim to a scam and don't want to speak about their experience.

"Criminals can be extremely convincing and they prey on people who are emotionally vulnerable, particularly online.

"It can be easy to get caught up with the attention you receive but it's important to stop and think if a stranger's actions are genuine.

"There are warning signs for these scams and one of them is a request for money. Don't send money to someone you've never met, or even recently met, regardless of the story they tell you.

"We need to raise awareness of this type of crime and encourage people to speak to us so we can gather evidence and target offenders."

Advice

- Never share or exchange personal information. Fraudsters can use this to obtain credit in your name.
- Never share or exchange explicit photographs. Fraudsters can

use this to exploit individuals.

- Remain on the website you met them on and do not be tempted to communicate off-line. This is where scam artists operate more effectively.

- If someone threatens you to share money with them – don't make any payments. Stop all communication and keep all evidence of the communications you have had. This information is needed urgently to help the police tackle it.

- Never send money or your bank details to someone you've met online, no matter how convincing the reason they give for needing it, nor how long you've been speaking to them.

- If someone asks you for money, report it immediately to the dating platform you are using.

- If you suspect you have been a victim of fraud, please report this to the police. We will deal with your case professionally and sensitively