

26th March 2020

SCAMMERS TRYING TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF CORNAVIRUS OUTBREAK

Pembrokeshire residents are being warned to be on their guard against a series of scams attempting to take advantage of the coronavirus outbreak.

Miracle cures, bogus testing kits and counterfeit hand sanitiser are just some of the coronavirus or Covid-19 themed scams being reported nationally.

Whilst no direct reports have been received yet, Pembrokeshire Trading Standards and Dyfed-Powys Police are warning everyone to be on their guard and to look out for vulnerable friends and family who may be targeted.

Scammers are exploiting the coronavirus situation, dressing up familiar old scams to make them appear credible.

Tactics are employed by phone, mail, on the doorstep and online. Some examples include -

Online

- Bogus World Health Organisation (WHO) emails seeking personal information and delivering malware to corrupt your data.
- Payment for a list of infected people in your area where you may be required to pay by bitcoin or asked to click on a link which delivers malware

Holiday Refunds

- Fake websites to claim holiday refunds

Counterfeit Goods

- Counterfeit or poor quality hand gel and face masks that will not provide the protection they claim

Donations

- Bogus charities seeking donations for victims of Covid-19
- Donations for a Covid-19 vaccine

Phone

- Calls to piper lifeline users that they owe money
- Criminals claiming to be your bank or utility company

Miracle Cures & Supplements

- Miracle cures or other health supplements that claim to treat or prevent the virus.

Doorstep

- Offers to shop and collect medicines, with thieves taking upfront cash payments and not being seen again.
- Handing over bank cards with pin numbers and personal details resulting in substantial money loss.

Loan Sharks

- Illegal money lenders prey on people's financial hardship, charging extortionate interest rates and fees and threats of violence. Report it to the Illegal Money Lending Unit tel. 0300 123 3311 or email imlu@cardiff.gov.uk

Businesses have also been targeted by bank mandate fraud –

- Emails seeking urgent payment due to cash flow problems,
- False claims of changes to bank account details in an attempt to pay the scammer instead
- Third parties claiming to act on behalf of employees incapacitated by the virus

Sandra McSparron, Lead Trading Standards Officer at Pembrokeshire County Council, said: “The list is endless – scammers have no limits, no morals, no scruples - they just want to profit”

“This is a difficult time for everyone, especially vulnerable people who are self-isolating or shielding”.

“Simple acts like keeping in touch by phone or online can make all the difference. Seek advice and support if you or someone you know is concerned about any suspicious contact.”

Cllr Cris Tomos, Cabinet Member for the Environment, Public Protection and Welsh language, added: “It is a very sad but unfortunate fact of life that scammers will try to take advantage of any situation they can to try to get their hands on people's money.

“We know there are such scams linked to coronavirus being circulated so please follow the advice of our Trading Standards Team and be very wary of unsolicited calls emails, etc and protect yourself and your family from these criminals who are preying on extra vulnerabilities at this time.”

Trading standards offer the following advice –

- If you are unable to go out and need help with essential matters such as shopping and collection of medicines, contact

the Council's Community Coordination Hub (details below). Be wary of anyone turning up on your doorstep without prior arrangement.

- Don't click on links or attachments in suspicious emails
- Never respond to unsolicited emails and phone calls asking for personal or financial details
- Make sure your anti-viral software is up-to-date
- Don't make on the spot decisions – take time and speak to someone you trust for their opinion
- If you can, carry out your own checks online for adverse reports about a business
- Register with the Telephone Preference Service to reduce unwanted telemarketing calls [tel: 0345 070 0707](tel:03450700707) or via their website tps@dma.org.uk
- Don't take someone's word who they claim to be – take steps to verify it yourself. Genuine callers will understand and not pressurise you.
- Consider obtaining a nuisance telephone call blocker to stop nuisance and scam calls. If you would like a free trial of one contact Pembrokeshire Trading Standards team on 01437 764551 or email tradingstandards@pembrokeshire.gov.uk
- If you need any repairs or home maintenance, ask family and friends for recommendation and if possible obtain a few quotes before you decide
- Above all, speak to someone if you do have a problem as scammers will often persist to contact you where you have previously made a payment or given personal information

Hiking Up Prices

In addition to scams some retailers have ramped up the price of goods in high demand such as hand gel, paracetamol and toilet roll, a process known as price gouging.

Examples include a standard box of paracetamol priced £59 online and a small bottle of hand sanitiser priced £30.

Competition watchdog the Consumer and Markets Authority, has set up a taskforce to crack down on businesses that cash in during the outbreak.

It states action will be taken against traders that do not heed the warning. eBay has already suspended hundreds of "bad seller" accounts. You can report inflated price concerns to the CMA via the www.gov.uk website.

Pembrokeshire County Council has set up a Community Coordination Hub Team to support vulnerable residents affected by the COVID-19 virus, providing voluntary services such as grocery shopping and medicine delivery.

For more information see <https://www.pembrokeshire.gov.uk/coronavirus-covid-19-community-information/community-hub> contact the team on 01437 776301 or email communitycovid19@pembrokeshire.gov.uk

You can report scams to Action Fraud on 0300 123 2040 or online at www.actionfraud.police.uk.

If you want consumer advice and support contact the Citizens Advice Consumer Service on 0808 223 1133 or 0808 223 1144 for a Welsh speaker - the details will be shared with Trading Standards who may also contact you by phone to offer support and advice.