Protecting Older People in Wales from Crime and Scams

Older people in Wales should continue to be vigilant to protect themselves from crime and scams during the Covid-19 pandemic as they can be a particular target for criminals.

That’s the message from an action group¹ of organisations working together to ensure that older people are safeguarded and protected during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Criminals are exploiting the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown measures to steal from and defraud older people throughout Wales, using sophisticated techniques to get individuals to part with money, share personal information or buy goods or services that do not exist.

Covid-19 related scams that have been identified include:

- Online shopping scams where people have ordered face masks, hand sanitiser, testing kits and other products that have never arrived.

- Victims receiving a call with an automated message purporting to be from the government, which states that all individuals now need to wear a face mask when they leave their home. The message tells the victim to press 1 in order to purchase a mask.

- Text messages purporting to be from HMRC advising individuals they can get a tax refund of up to £400. The message includes a link to a fake website where people believe they can check their eligibility for a refund.

¹ Action Group comprising Wales Coordinating Assembly, Age Cymru, Age Concern, Age UK and Age UK Scotland
Other Covid-19 scams include requests for donations from individuals and fake charities, phishing scams offering grant money from the World Health Organisation, and fake bills being emailed to customers demanding payment.

But with a few simple steps, we can all protect ourselves from these kinds of crimes. These include taking a moment to think before parting with any money, and rejecting, refusing or ignoring any unexpected communications or requests for payments – only criminals will try and rush or panic you, and if you have any concerns you can confirm requests are genuine by using a known phone number or email address to contact organisations directly.

The group has published a new information pack on protecting and safeguarding older people, which includes a wide range of information and advice on how older people can protect themselves from crime, fraud and scams, the kinds of help and support available, and useful contacts.

The group is also urging people who have been victims of these kinds of crimes to report what has happened, which is crucial to ensure that criminals can be identified, investigated and prosecuted. It is estimated that only 5% of crimes of this kind are reported, often due to feelings of shame or embarrassment, which means the true scale and impact is not fully known.

Older People’s Commissioner for Wales, Heléna Herklots CBE, said:

“We know that criminals are finding new ways to defraud older people during the Covid-19 pandemic and that older people are often specifically targeted due to their perceived vulnerability.

“These criminals are experts at impersonating people and organisations, even the police, and often use sophisticated techniques to defraud people and get them to part with their money.

“It’s therefore crucial we do all we can to protect ourselves from these criminals and that crimes of this kind are reported so that the perpetrators can be identified, investigated and brought to justice.”

A spokesperson for Gwent Police said:

“We are committed to recognising the signs of criminality and working with our communities to protect the vulnerable.

“All our officers receive training to best respond in a fair and proportionate manner. We will investigate effectively across all areas and respond needs of vulnerable people.

“It is a sad fact that individuals take advantage of people in difficult circumstances. We can only help if people come forward and report when they think they may have been a victim of crime.
“If you think that you or someone you know, has been the victim of crime then contact us on 101. You can also contact us through social media. In an emergency, always dial 999.

“It is not something to be ashamed about; suffering in silence is never the answer.”

In addition to the information pack, people who want to find out more about the ways they can protect themselves, and others, from fraud and scams can access a wide range of information and resources – including an online learning hub – from Friends Against Scams, an initiative being delivered by National Trading Standards.

Friends Against Scams aims to protect and prevent people from becoming victims of scams by increasing knowledge and awareness, and empowering people to take a stand against scams. It’s designed to inspire action, highlight the scale of the problem, change the perceptions of why people fall for scams and make scams a community, regional and national topic, part of everyday conversation.

Louise Baxter, Head of the National Trading Standards Scams Team, said:

“As people stay indoors to prevent the spread of COVID-19, criminals are preying on people in vulnerable situations who are isolated and living alone. There’s never been a more important time for neighbours to look out for each other – particularly as we self-isolate – which is why we’re encouraging communities to prevent scams in their local area by using the free Friends Against Scams resources.

“Our online courses will help you spot a potential scam, identify people at risk and help you protect local residents from falling victims to scams. We’re urging communities to protect each other from scams and encourage people to share the latest advice with families, friends and neighbours.”

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For all media enquiries, contact Richard Jones on 029 2044 5040 / 07515 288271 or email richard.jones@olderpeoplewales.com

For more information about the work of the Older People’s Commissioner for Wales, visit www.olderpeoplewales.com

Notes to Editors:

1 – The action group comprises members from the following organisations:

Age Cymru
Wales Violence Prevention Unit
Dewis Choice
Dyfed Powys Police
Get Safe Online
Gwent Police
Hourglass Cymru (Formerly Action on Elder Abuse Cymru)
National Independent Safeguarding Board
National Trading Standards Scams Team
Neighbourhood Watch
NHS Safeguarding Network
North Wales Police
Older People’s Commissioner for Wales
Public Health Wales
Royal College of Nursing
Shared Regulatory Services
South Wales Police
Trading Standards (Wales representative)
WCVA
Welsh Government
Welsh Women’s Aid

2 – The information pack is available to download here:

3 – More information about Friends Against Scams is available here:
https://www.friendsagainstscams.org.uk/