

Who's Calling?

Levels of cold calls and
scams of older people in
Northern Ireland

December 2016

scamwiseNI
PARTNERSHIP

C O P N I

Commissioner for **Older People**
for Northern Ireland

If you can spot a scam, you can stop a scam

Stay 4 steps ahead of a
scam by using this **scam test**

Seems too good to be true

Contacted out of the blue

Asks for personal details

Money is requested

Commissioner's foreword

I am saddened to report that many older people in Northern Ireland are falling victim to a wide range of scams, perpetrated by criminals who are targeting and exploiting them by telephone, email and postal methods.

In order to better understand the scale of the issue of scams among older people, my office undertook a Northern Ireland wide survey and the findings outlined in this report are stark.

Scams not only result in financial hardship for the victim. They can cause relationships to deteriorate, have serious impact on the mental health and wellbeing of older people and negatively effect their sense of trust, security and independence.

This report provides an indication of the number of older people who have fallen victim to a scam. We also know that many older victims of scams don't report their experience due to feelings of shame and embarrassment so it is likely that the actual figure could be even higher than that presented in this report.

Worryingly, scams are becoming more sophisticated and those who do fall victim are more likely to be targeted again. It also appears that people who are targeted by cold callers are statistically more at risk of being the victim of burglary so this further highlights the seriousness of this problem.

The good news is that the response to this issue is already underway. I am delighted that my office is one of the partners in the regional Scamwise NI initiative which seeks to raise awareness of the scams that are out there and provide advice on how people can better protect themselves.

I look forward to working with our partners on this growing problem so that we can better protect older people and reduce the numbers who fall victim to these terrible crimes.



Eddie Lynch, Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland

Scams and older people

Older people in Northern Ireland have become increasingly vulnerable to scams. Telephone, post and email provide a range of opportunities for older people to fall victim to cold callers, junk mail criminals and scammers.

In the past older people were targeted via the landline phone and post but more and more new opportunities are available to criminals through commonly used technology. Nuisance calls are coming through to mobile phones, and figures for 2014/2015 show that 82% of older people now own a mobile, an increase of nearly 75% in the last 15 years.

Internet use by older people is also increasing. Among those aged 60-69, 69% had access to the internet in 2014-2015, an increase of 18% in four years. 40% of those aged 70 or over had access to the internet, an increase of 10% in one year. With higher rates of internet access across all generations, these numbers are certain to increase in the years ahead, leaving more older people under potential threat from scams.¹

All of the evidence available is indicating that the number of older people affected by scams will increase in the future. According to NISRA population projections, the numbers of older people in Northern Ireland will increase from 396,000 in 2016 to 507,000 by 2026, and 642,000 people by 2046.² This increase, combined with the increased sophistication and complexity of the scams makes this an issue in need of urgent attention.

¹ <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/ofmdfm/a-profile-of-older-people-in-ni-annual-update-2015.pdf>

² <http://www.nisra.gov.uk/demography/default.asp20.htm>

A scam for every person

There are many different ways that an older person's trust, privacy, emotional well-being and finances can be breached. Scams can range from investment, courier, software service, advance fee, romance and fake charitable scams.³ The potential for scams aimed particularly at older people is also increasing due to legislative changes. One example is the increased freedom older people have to access their pension pots from the age of 50 which has opened up a whole new range of investment based scams.⁴

Nuisance calls have also been made easier as a result of technological advances such as:

- **The increasing amount of personal data that is held, bought and sold;**
- **The reduction in the cost of making calls and the ability to make large numbers of calls at once;**
- **Technology that enables cold callers and scammers to find a way around calling line identification technology;**
- **The build-up of global communications networks, meaning calls can be routed through several countries before arriving here, making them more difficult to trace;⁵**
- **'Phishing' scams also cause concern, particularly the 'no hang up' scam where fraudsters tell individuals that their account is at immediate risk and then ask them for personal data.⁶**

The internet and clever developments in communications makes it easier for those outside Northern Ireland to scam people here. Research has also shown that older users of the internet, particularly those with high net wealth, are vulnerable to internet fraud. Personal data and identification theft through spear phishing emails, which is an email that appears to be from an individual or business that you know, and Trojan software attacks, a type of computer virus⁷, are also potential threats to older users of the internet.

³ Citizens Advice, 'Scams Awareness Month', Presentation, July 2016.

⁴ Mark Sands, 'Over £9m Stolen in Pension Liberation Scams Since April, Money Marketing, 12th October 2015, <https://www.moneymarketing.co.uk/over-9m-stolen-in-pension-liberation-scams-since-april/>

⁵ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/299140/Action_Plan.pdf

⁶ Financial Ombudsman Service, 'Calling Time On Telephone Fraud: A Review of Complaints about "Vishing" Scams'.

⁷ Nigel Martin and John Rice, 'Spearing High Net Wealth Individuals: The Case of Online Fraud and Mature Age Internet Users', International Journal of Information Security and Privacy, Vol. 7(1), p.1.

Everyone needs to be vigilant

In 2015, Trading Standards NI revealed that there were more than 1,000 people in Northern Ireland on the so-called 'suckers list', a list of potential targets used by international fraudsters. Inclusion on this list means that the person has previously given over money in a scam and that their details have then been "sold-on" to other scammers who will then target that person by whatever means they can including telephone calls, post or email.⁸

A person's attitude and experience influences whether they are able to avoid or ignore scams, cold calling and junk mail. A recent report by the Home Office identified higher risk groups, including the 'digitally vulnerable', 'excessively trusting', 'unsuspecting', 'unconcerned' and 'unaware'. On the other hand, the report refers to the 'already protected' and 'relatively savvy' who are less likely to be victims.⁹

In certain circumstances older people can be particularly vulnerable to the techniques that scammers use. Communications referring to an official notice, or having the appearance of being official, may be more likely to increase the perception of authority for older people, making them more likely to trust the information.¹⁰

Case study

"I would consider myself to be quite savvy, and my nephew even works in a bank and has spoken to me about the dangers of scams. Despite this, I fell victim to a scam. The letters that were supposedly from my phone provider looked so authentic. They used the same layout and style of writing."

Research further suggests that older people may also be more 'trusting' when information is repeated during calls.¹¹ The Office of Fair Trading believes there may be a cohort of 'chronic scam victims' among older people, who are more likely to repeatedly respond to scam communications.¹² These victims may often not recognise that they have been a victim of a scam, even when confronted with overwhelming evidence. Research confirms that older consumers are more likely to be (a) targeted by a scam, and (b) lose a higher 'mean' amount per scam.¹³

⁸ Kevin Magee, 'Suckers List: Scammers Target Over 1,000 People in NI', <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-32705024>

⁹ Office of Fair Trading, 'Research on Impact of Mass Marketed Scams: A Summary of Research Into the Impact of Scams on UK Consumers', (2006), <http://www.icfs.org.uk/-icfs.org.uk/images/pdfs/60.pdf>

¹⁰ Home Office, 'Serious and Organised Crime Protection: Public Interventions Model', https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/502960/Gov.uk_Serious_Organised_Crime_deck_vF.pdf

¹¹ Carolyn Yoon et al., 'Cognition, Persuasion and Decision Making in Older Consumers', in *Marketing Letters*, Vol. 16(3), p. 435.

^{12,13} Office of Fair Trading, 'Research on Impact of Mass Marketed Scams: A Summary of Research Into the Impact of Scams on UK Consumers', (2006), <http://www.icfs.org.uk/-icfs.org.uk/images/pdfs/60.pdf>

Internet scams

Older internet users are more vulnerable than younger people when it comes to internet scams. Older people receive as many scam emails as younger users despite lower online activity, yet research tells us that they are also more likely to make purchases. This may be due to the fact that older people might be less likely to detect typical scam attributes¹⁴, often as a result of:

- Having less experience of using the internet;
- Being more likely to be living with cognitive impairments e.g. dementia or loss of sight, that may reduce their ability to identify deeply elaborate scam messages.

Case study

A retired gentleman received a phone call from someone who claimed that he had a virus in his computer. He was asked to pay a sum of money via his debit card, which he did. He then pressed a series of buttons on his keyboard, which allowed the scammers to take control of his computer. The scammer claimed that the computer had been fixed. A few days later, his computer appeared to crash and he received a further phone call. The caller stated that the previous caller was a scam and this person offered to take control of his computer and sort out the problem. They stated that they could only accept payment for their services via an online banking account. The gentleman advised that he didn't do online banking and the scammer offered to assist with the process of registering for online banking. The scammer got the man to log onto the bank's website and they talked him through the registration process. After the phone call was terminated, the scammers went into his online account and transferred several thousand pounds out of his account.

¹⁴ Office of Fair Trading/University of Exeter School of Psychology, 'The Psychology of Scams: Provoking and Committing Errors of Judgement', (2009), p. Twenty Two.

Telephone scams

Research has identified that a higher levels of telephone activity is directly related to levels of loneliness amongst older people. This therefore increases vulnerability to victimisation. Research also shows that older people are particularly susceptible to telephone scams because they can be:

- More available to take calls, as they tend to spend more time at home, a particular problem for the 'older old' and those with mobility issues;
- Lucrative targets as they may have money to invest;
- Very trusting, or believe most people directly contacting them to be honest;
- More likely to want to be courteous on the phone, therefore likely to take unknown calls, engage in conversation and not hang up;¹⁵
- Less vigilant of the dangers, such as giving out personal information, to unsolicited but interested callers.¹⁶



Case study

A retired company director received a phone call which he believed to be from his bank. Unfortunately, this was a scam and after giving his bank card details over the phone to the scammer, they took thousands of pounds from his bank account.

¹⁵ Linda M.Alves and Steve Wilson, 'The Effects of Loneliness on Telemarketing Fraud Vulnerability Among Older Adults', Journal of Elder Abuse and Neglect, Vol. 20(1), p. 65.

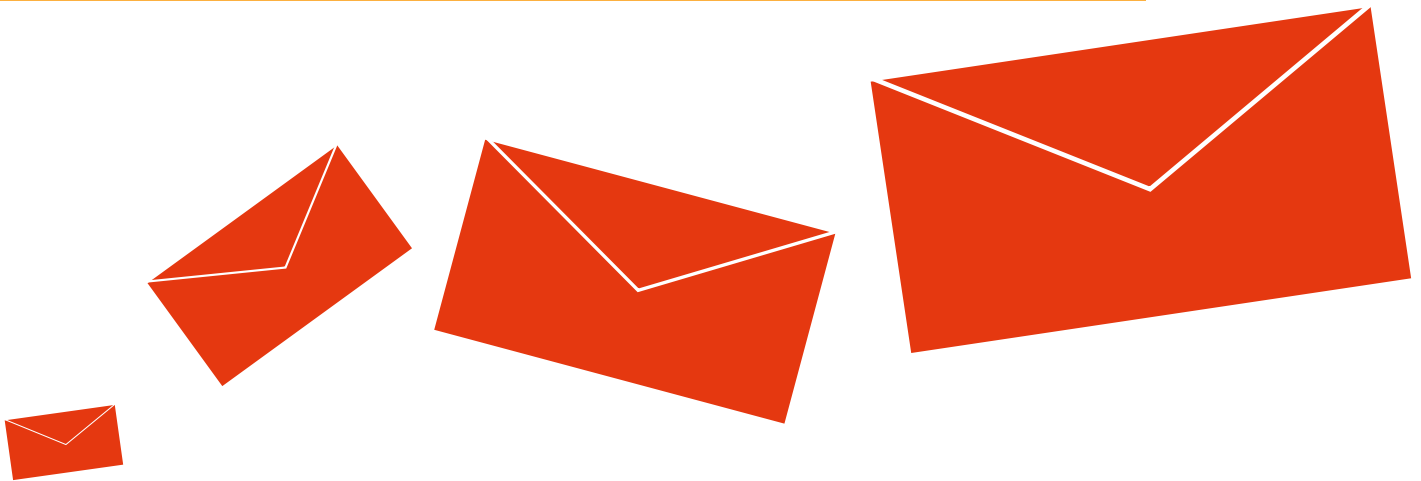
¹⁶ Nathalie Martin, 'Consumer Scams and the Elderly: Preserving Independence Through Shifting Default Rules', The Elder Law Journal, (2009).

Postal scams

The Mailing Preference Service does not have the same level of legal powers as the Telephone Preference Service in terms of preventing persistent direct approaches.¹⁷ This means many older people remain vulnerable to receiving high levels of junk mail, especially if their name appears on a 'suckers list'.

Case study

A retired Northern Ireland farmer who lived alone responded to a range of scam letters, sending cash, cheques and postal orders. The scams included foreign lotteries and clairvoyants who claimed to offer protection as well as catalogues which claimed a large sum of money had been won but which required an order to be placed in order to claim the prize. It is estimated that this man has sent at least £175,000 to scams over the last few years.



¹⁷ <http://www.mpsonline.org.uk/mpsr/>

Impact of scams on older people

The impact of scams on older people can be very serious. Not only do scams have a direct impact on older people's finances, but they can also impact upon the older person's emotional well-being, relationships and sense of security. Older victims of scams may be more vulnerable as a result of social isolation. Victims can be left with feelings of shame, withdraw from friends and family members, have damaged self-esteem and a reduced sense of self-worth, and be more prone to stress, anxiety and depression.¹⁸ Older victims of scams may also become overcautious in their interactions with others, further increasing social isolation.

Case study

On a daily basis one older person was responding to scam mail, often sending up to £70 per day to various lottery scams. The impact on this older person was more than just financial, resulting in a marriage break up and re-possession of the family home.

¹⁸ Office of Fair Trading, 'Research on Impact of Mass Marketed Scams: A Summary of Research Into the Impact of Scams on UK Consumers', (2006), <http://www.icfs.org.uk/-icfs.org.uk/images/pdfs/60.pdf>

Scams and older people: The research

Research process

In 2015 the office of the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland decided that research was needed to understand better the scale and scope of financial abuse of older people in Northern Ireland.

COPNI commissioned Perceptive Insight to conduct an in-depth survey of people over 60 years of age from across all parts of Northern Ireland. In order to be statistically sound, the survey used a sample representative of Northern Ireland's older population in terms of age group, region, gender and quintile of deprivation. The survey involved 1,025 older people and asked respondents questions about financial abuse. 29 questions were asked on indicators of the prevalence of financial abuse of older people. This survey also included 26 questions which were either warm up or "classification" questions, including nine questions about scams including silent calls, unsolicited calls, and junk mail. The remainder of this report focuses on the responses to the specific questions on scams from that Northern Ireland wide survey of older people.

The Commissioner's findings

Unsolicited calls

The figures for unsolicited calls were extremely high, with 80% of respondents receiving unwanted telephone calls to their home. Many older people are subjected to a relentless stream of calls, which interrupts their daily domestic lives. Older people who experience social isolation and spend most of their time at home are the most likely to be disrupted by these nuisance calls.

Respondents were asked:

In the last month

How often, if at all, do you receive telephone calls to your home which, when you answer, no one speaks?

67% of respondents confirmed that they received phone calls to their house where they answer and no one speaks, with this happening to 38% at least once a week.

Frequency of calls	% Respondents
Usually at least once a day	16
At least once a week	22
At least once a month	12
Less often	17
Never	30
Not sure	3

How often, if at all, do you receive telephone calls to your home which are unsolicited - that is a call you were not expecting?

80% of respondents said they had received unsolicited calls to their home, with 47% receiving them at least once a week.

Frequency of calls	% Respondents
Usually at least once a day	15
At least once a week	32
At least once a month	16
Less often	17
Never	19
Not sure	1

55% of respondents had received one to five unsolicited calls in the week prior to the survey.

How many unsolicited calls have you received in the last week?

Frequency of calls	% Respondents
None	35
One	22
Two	15
Three	10
Four	4
Five	4
Six to ten	5
Eleven to twenty	2
Twenty+	0
Not Sure	3



80% RESPONDENTS CONFIRMED THAT THEY HAD RECEIVED
UNSOLICITED CALLS TO THEIR HOME



67% RESPONDENTS CONFIRMED THAT THEY HAD RECEIVED
PHONE CALLS
TO THEIR HOUSE WHERE THEY
ANSWER & NO ONE SPEAKS

The Commissioner's findings

Direct experience of respondents

As part of the survey process, the interviewers had conversations with respondents about the emotions they felt when they received nuisance calls. Some of the quotes from respondents illustrate the real levels of stress and annoyance that are caused by silent and unsolicited calls. It was striking the number of emotions that these calls triggered. These kind of calls are difficult for older people to ignore. Respondents described feeling “nervous” “fed up” “suspicious” “very cross” “annoyed” and “very angry”:

“I get nervous, I have got to recognise some numbers and don't answer them. I got a telephone number barred yesterday.”

“Fed up, don't want them, they ask stupid questions which makes you suspicious.”

“Very cross when they insist that I have asked for the call and refuse to fully identify themselves.”

“Annoyed, I'm trying to stop them. I get very angry, I don't understand how they get this number.”

Respondents also reflect a sense that they have to be constantly alert and resolute in rejecting some of these calls, where they have to be “sceptical” and “suspicious” of the calls:

“They get no change out of me, I'm sceptical about these calls and put the phone down.”

“I say not interested and put the phone down.”

The Commissioner's findings

Junk mail

42% of older people who participated in the survey said they normally receive one to five items of junk mail each week. 29% of respondents received six to ten items and 18% received eleven to twenty items per week. **In total, 91% of respondents received between one to thirty items of junk mail per week.**

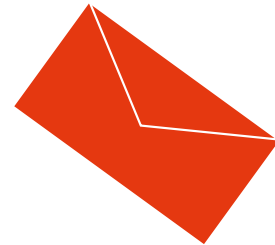
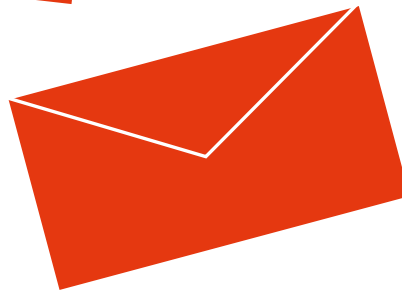
Number of items of junk mail received through the post each week	% Respondents
None	6
One to five	42
Six to ten	29
Eleven to twenty	18
Twenty one to thirty	2
Not sure	2

Over a third of respondents disclosed that they received junk mail that was misleading and a further 10% had other concerns about unsolicited telephone calls or junk mail that they had received.

In the past twelve months have you....	% Respondents
Received any junk mail which you felt was misleading?	35
Have you had any other concerns about unsolicited telephone calls or junk mail that you have received?	10

Levels of cold calls and scams of older people in Northern Ireland

There was a direct correlation between how much junk mail the respondent received, and the likelihood of them feeling that it was misleading. 59% of those respondents who received more than ten items of junk mail agreed that they felt some of it was misleading, compared to 31% of those who received less than ten items a week. Those who received more than ten items a week (17%) were also more likely to have other concerns about unsolicited calls or junk mail.



The Commissioner's findings

Coercion to sign and fraudulent use of signatures

- 2% of respondents reported that they **signed documents without understanding what they were signing** (while a further 2% suspected that that they had done this.)
- 1% confirmed that **their signature has been used fraudulently** (a further 1% suspected this to be the case). It is worth noting that this figure increased to 3% for those aged 80 and over.
- When asked whether they had been **pressured into co-signing a loan**, although 0% of respondents reported that this had happened, 1% suspected that this had occurred.

Changes to legal and financial documents and investments

- 1% of respondents confirmed their **legal and/or financial documents had been changed frequently.**
- 1% reported that they had been **talked into making investments that were not in their best interest.**
- 1% revealed that they were **forced into making financial decisions that they would not normally make.**

Buying/selling goods

- A total of 4% disclosed that they **felt tricked or pressured into buying something that they later regretted**, with 1% suspecting this had happened.
- 3% reported that they **felt cheated after someone had sold them something**, with 1% suspecting this had happened.
- Meanwhile, 1% suspected that they had been tricked or pressured into selling a valuable possession for less than it is worth.
- 1% confirmed that a **caregiver overcharged them** for their services.

1%
is the
equivalent to
3,580
older people in
Northern Ireland

4%
is the
equivalent to
14,320
older people in
Northern Ireland

Rogue traders

Case study 1

A 90 year old who was quoted £200 for power washing her patio, but was charged £2,000 after the work was completed. The rogue trader even drove the victim to the bank to withdraw the money.

Case study 2

A 75 year old, who was quoted £500 for power washing his roof. He was then informed that his roof was leaking and told that a special solution would have to be sprayed on it. He was charged a further £10,000 for this work.

The Commissioner's findings

Key findings

The Northern Ireland wide survey of older people enables us to make accurate projections about the amount of older people in Northern Ireland who are experiencing scams and other associated crimes. The figures show that significant numbers of older people are the victims of scams, with technological developments making older people vulnerable. Underreporting of the true level of scams is also likely because of the sense of 'shame' involved.

The Survey highlights that:

- 239,860 older people are experiencing phone calls to their house where they answer and no one speaks, with this happening to 136,040 at least once a week.
- 286,400 older people are experiencing unsolicited calls to their home, with 168,260 receiving these calls once a week.
- 125,300 older people are receiving junk mail that they think is misleading.
- 10,740 older people experience coercion to sign documents, and fraudulent use of signatures.
- 10,740 older people experience changes to legal and financial documents and investments.
- 21,481 older people experience financial abuse in the buying and selling of goods.

Key points to note

The number of scams is rising and Trading Standards NI have publically warned people to be vigilant. The Department for the Economy estimates that Northern Ireland consumers are losing £100 million a year to international fraudsters.

While people of all age groups in Northern Ireland are targeted by scammers, older people seem to be disproportionately susceptible. In addition, there is believed to be underreporting by victims of scams due to feelings of shame and embarrassment, so it is likely that the actual figures could be higher.

The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) have also stated that they suspect there is a link between scamming and burglary, particularly in relation to older people, where victims who have been initially scammed by 'cold callers' are then at a significantly higher risk of being burgled at a later date.

With many scams originating outside the country where the victims live, they can be difficult to prevent, detect and prosecute. It is essential that awareness is raised so that older people can recognise a scam. As the issue of scams falls under the remit of many different organisations, it must be tackled using a multi-agency approach. By pooling expertise and resources, there is an opportunity to create more effective interventions that will positively impact on the lives of older people in Northern Ireland. As vulnerability to scams is often the result of loneliness and isolation, this underlying cause must also be tackled through a joined-up approach.

Scamwise NI has been established as a multi-agency partnership which aims to "scam-proof" the public including older people, their families and carers. Partner organisations include COPNI, the Department of Justice, the PSNI, the Northern Ireland Policing Board, Trading Standards NI, Consumer Council NI and Age Sector Platform. All agencies involved in Scamwise NI believe that the most effective way of interrupting and preventing scams is to raise awareness amongst those at most risk of them. A region wide media campaign was launched in November 2016 highlighting how to recognise a scam, how to protect yourself from becoming a victim and what to do if you do become a victim of a scam.

For more information visit <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/campaigns/scamwiseni>.

Thanks to the Northern Ireland Trading Standards Service for providing a range of case study examples to help demonstrate the impact of scams and cold calling on older people.

This report is available in other languages and formats on request.

Also available for download at www.copni.org

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