

REPORT TO: Health and Wellbeing Board

DATE: 4th November 2015

REPORTING OFFICER: Director of Public Health

PORTFOLIO: Community Safety

SUBJECT: Scam Victims Project – prevention and impact report

WARDS: Borough wide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 In September 2014 the Trading Standards Team began work on a Scam Victims Project following the receipt of a list of 190 likely victims of mail mass marketing fraud in Halton. The purpose of the report is to advise the Senior Management Team of the impacts of this work to date.
- 1.2 Potential funding sources are being explored to extend this project.

2.0 RECOMMENDED: That

- 1) the report be noted; and**
- 2) options be considered for the future of the project.**

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

3.1 Who is the project helping?

The victims we are working with are largely regarded as vulnerable adults: 60% of the people on our list are either currently involved with Adult Social Care in Halton or have been in the past. Since the project started we have picked up a further 16 people who are scam victims, some through complaints and some through referrals from Adult Social Care.

- 3.1.1** The victims and those being targeted in Halton are often elderly and living alone and a number of them believe that they started to be targeted shortly after being bereaved (we have provided the Registrars with awareness-raising materials which are now included in information packs given to those registering a death). Our officers have noticed that some victims are able to spot certain types of scams whilst being vulnerable to others.
- 3.1.2** Victims are often reluctant to acknowledge or accept that they have been scammed and even when they do they often indicate an

intention to continue to respond to certain types of scams such as particular lotteries or clairvoyants. The team have undergone training to develop techniques to both communicate effectively with vulnerable people and to coach them towards behaviour change. Working with victims is a lengthy process as first the officers have to gain the trust of the victims and then slowly work with them to explore why they respond and to look at substituting some other activity to fulfil whatever need responding to scams satisfies for them.

3.2 Why is it important?

Once a scam victim has responded their name will usually be added to a 'suckers list' which will be sold to both marketing companies and scammers and so very quickly they become inundated with phone calls and letters. Victims are often left with damaged self-esteem and self-worth, and they may become estranged from their family and friends, making them isolated from society. Others suffer from stress, anxiety and depression. Some victims lose their entire life savings and their homes – and may have to declare bankruptcy. We have three victims in Halton who between them have lost £182k.

3.2.1 Halton has framed the scams work in a Public Health context which appears to be a unique approach. The University of Chester are undertaking research into the impact of our interventions with victims. The research is not near completion but interim findings are that in addition to the financial consequences, scams impact on the following aspects of health; falls, accidents, distress, and anxiety. Some unexpected findings have emerged including the levels of distress caused by nuisance calls, the fear of falling when getting to the phone and the fear that in the future the individual will lose capacity and become more susceptible to scams. A common theme amongst victims has been loneliness and isolation.

3.2.2 We provide information about local interest groups and activities to the people that we visit. We have just started 'breakfast' groups for some of the people that we are working with in the hope that this will get them out and about, reduce their social isolation and provide an opportunity for peer support.

3.3 What success have we had?

From the information that victims have given us we have calculated that the loss to Halton residents and to Halton's economy **per year** is **£377,866**. The project is on track to deliver **£51,752** savings to the victims and the public purse. This estimate is conservative as it relates only to those victims that we are already working with who have indicated that they have responded to scams. The savings are likely to be far greater than those stated because some people we are working with currently say that they throw this kind of mail in the bin but we have evidence that this is not always the case – in some

instances we have returned cheques to them that have been seized from the scammers. Also, the figure does not include a monetary value for improved mental health, resilience or continued independent living.

- 3.3.1** Attached as Appendix 1, is a report of the impacts of the project in the first ten months along with a range of case studies which give a real picture of the size and nature of the problem in Halton.
- 3.3.2** The University of Chester has spoken recently about our work and their research at a conference in Prague. They have been approached by a publisher to write a book on the subject. In August they wrote an article for The Guardian which included praise for Halton's project (<http://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/sep/08/scams-on-older-people-affect-mental-health>). The University is also organising a national scams conference for January 2016 which PHE CEO Duncan Selbie and PHE Regional director for the North Professor Paul Johnstone have asked to speak at.
- 3.3.3** As part of the preventative part of the project the Trading Standards team have developed various materials to educate the public on their risk of being scammed: an interactive scams quiz, a flyer, newspaper reports, ican alerts and a telephone and mail prompt card. These have been adopted by other Trading Standards Services and have been recommended as good practice by the National Trading Standards Scams Team.
- 3.3.4** Currently the service costs £45,000 in total. Due to cuts in the Public Health budget this funding will not be available in April 2016. The following options are possible:
- Cease running the project.
 - Identify joint funding with partners.
 - Reduce the number of older people we work with so we only target the most vulnerable and cease providing the wider prevention element.
 - Focus on wider prevention element and cease the help and education element for people at risk.

4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Employment Learning and /skills

From the very conservative figures we have produced we believe that almost £100k is being lost to Halton's economy each year. Please see the detail in Appendix 1.

4.2 A Healthy Halton

Victims are often left with damaged self-esteem and self-worth, and they may become estranged from their family and friends, making them isolated from society. Others suffer from stress, anxiety and depression. A lot of victims are struggling with loneliness and isolation which brings its own health problems. Also awareness-raising with the general public to prevent non-victims from becoming victims is a key part of the project.

5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

If funding is not secured beyond 31st December 2015 the project will end which is likely to represent annual costs in the region of £100k to Halton's economy and £52k to Halton's residents and the public purse.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

6.1 Employment, Learning and Skills in Halton

From the very conservative figures we have produced we believe that almost £100k is being lost to Halton's economy each year. Please see the detail in Appendix 1.

6.2 A Healthy Halton

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6.3 A Safer Halton

Interventions with scam victims can help them to retain their financial, emotional and physical independence ensuring that they continue to enjoy living in their own homes for as long as possible.

7.0 RISK ANALYSIS

If funding cannot be secured beyond 2015 we will endeavour to continue to work with the most vulnerable victims by using our core Trading Standards staff but the contact will be less frequent and inevitably of poorer quality than that which can be delivered by the specialist officers. The core team will not have the capacity to continue to work with victims who do not meet the most vulnerable criteria. The loss of the dedicated officers will represent a risk of

serious financial abuse being suffered by the majority of the people we are currently working with.

- 7.1** Awareness-raising amongst the general population will continue via iCAN messages and press releases but the core team will not have the capacity to undertake talks to community groups and those living in sheltered accommodation etc.

8.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

This project is in line with all equality and diversity issues in Halton. The loss of the project will impact mainly on the most vulnerable people who are largely elderly people living alone in the case of mass marketing mail fraud.

9.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

None under the meaning of the Act.