

## **The Oasis Centre - Cornwall**

Registered Charity Number 1139355, founded to serve the communities in the parishes of St Columb Major, St Mawgan-in-Pydar, St Eval and St Ervan



### **Looking Out for ..... Solicitors**

Number 33 in a series of notes on important issues.

For most people, the biggest transaction in which their personal finances are involved will be the purchase or sale of a home. Property prices guarantee that the sum involved will be a very large one and the unfamiliarity and complexity of the issues involved are a natural inducement to engage the services of a professional. Often that professional is a solicitor and it is well known that solicitors are obliged to carry insurance to protect their clients from mistakes and there is a further safety net in the form of the profession's indemnity scheme.

Criminals know about and use solicitors too and not just for their defence to charges and their 'plea in mitigation' after the court has convicted them. With all the big sums of money entrusted to solicitors by careful house buyers, criminals devote a lot of time and effort into finding ways to get their hands on a bit of that money. The price of one house can be the size of a big win on the Lottery and, with skill and the manipulation of conventional arrangements, it may be easier to get. All they have to do is to find the ways.

Bogus firms of solicitors are not unheard of. Criminals can clone genuine law firms by mirroring their websites with subtle changes to addresses, telephone numbers and e-mail addresses. They can copy their letter headings and make similar changes and they can pretend to be a branch office. Alternatively, the criminals can create an entirely imaginary new firm. All of this involves no significant investment so long as communications with their victims can be restricted to telephone calls and e-mails. It will be handsomely rewarded if it gains the price of one house.

An alternative is to intercept the communications between a genuine firm of solicitors and its clients – not too difficult if e-mails are being used. Most large sums of money are moved by bank transfer. If criminals can convince the client to send the money to their account instead of the client account of the genuine firm of solicitors, the objective has been achieved. The same applies if the genuine firm can be induced to send money they are holding to a new account created by the criminals in place of the client's bank account. By the time someone discovers, the money will be long gone.

These scams are immensely plausible, the criminals are very clever and persuasive. The only protection available to house buyers and sellers is constant vigilance. The Solicitors Regulation Authority has masses of guidance on its website - <https://www.sra.org.uk/consumers/scam-alerts/scams-round-up.page>. You can phone them on 0370 606 2555 or you can contact Action Fraud on 0300 123 2040.

Jeremy Simmonds, Chair, The Oasis Centre – Cornwall