

Agenda Item No. 3(c)

DERBYSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

MEETING OF CABINET MEMBER – HEALTH AND COMMUNITIES

21 February 2017

Report of the Strategic Director – Economy, Transport and Communities

**USE OF CALL BLOCKERS TO PREVENT FRAUDULENT UNSOLICITED  
TELEPHONE CALLS**

(1) **Purpose of Report** To update the Cabinet Member on the deployment of telephone Call Blockers to prevent fraudulent and nuisance phone calls to vulnerable local residents.

(2) **Information and Analysis** As has previously been reported, local intelligence suggests that older people, living on their own in their own home, are more susceptible to being taken advantage of by rogue traders. The most insidious rogue trader is the one that calls, unannounced, on the doorstep; purportedly to offer helpful services, but in reality looking for any opportunity to take advantage. Not all doorstep traders are rogues, but many local people have fallen victim to the unscrupulous trader who provides no or false paperwork and thus is difficult to trace. Often the starting point to gain access to potential victims is an unsolicited phone call. In addition, many householders are bombarded with unwanted telephone calls offering a bewildering range of ‘opportunities’.

Call Blockers are designed to filter out unwanted calls but enabling the householder to maintain contact with family, friends and local services.

Different levels of call blocking technology exist. Most networks now offer call management solutions. However, these usually have very limited powers, whereby they only block a very limited range of specific numbers. Some services also stop calls from people who have withheld their number, not calls with international or unavailable numbers

Increasing numbers of home phones now come with some call blocking technology. Typically these are more powerful than the network options and there is no monthly fee. These call blocking phones will often only block specific numbers, whilst some will, in addition, let you block numbers from a specific range (for example all calls beginning 08). More advanced phones may also block calls from withheld or international numbers.

Another option is a separate call blocker that plugs into your existing phone. These usually work in the same way as the call blockers built into phones in that they have a list of numbers, or number types that you do not want to receive. In addition some blockers are based around a 'trusted list' of numbers that you do want to speak to – any other calls are screened, giving you the option to reject and even block forever those you do not wish to accept.

The Trading Standards Division sought Cabinet Member approval in July 2013 to provide Call Blockers to local vulnerable people. The technology is provided by a company called Truecall Ltd and has the capability to monitor all calls and identify the source. The devices work on the basis of an aforementioned 'trusted number list'. These are seen to provide the highest level of protection, for the most vulnerable of phone users (such as dementia sufferers). Officers work with users to programme the trusted numbers (which they want to receive calls from) meaning all other calls are screened out to a voice message prompting entry of a security pin code.

Many of the nuisance and/or fraudulent calls emanate from abroad and can be linked to known scams. Working in partnership with Adult Care, Police, Community Safety and Derbyshire Scam Watch colleagues, the Division currently has 45 Call Blockers installed throughout the County. Collectively, the Call Blockers have prevented in excess of 28,000 scam telephone calls over a period of up to 3 years. The following data has been provided by True Call who provides the call blocker technology:

- Since first installation, the Call Blockers have monitored some 59,691 incoming telephone calls of which 28,091, or 47%, were assessed as 'nuisance calls'.
- 22% of the nuisance calls were international calls; in 11% the caller information was unavailable, and 14% of the calls the caller information was withheld.
- Five householders were receiving 39 nuisance calls per month, over five times the national average.
- For one particular individual, 4,000 unwanted calls have been blocked since installation.
- Some units block over 100 nuisance calls per month.
- After an adult care referral, a call blocker device was fitted for a young man with learning difficulty and mental health problems. It has been blocking between 85 and 219 calls from known nuisance numbers per month.
- The types of fraudulent nuisance calls prevented were seeking to sell: funeral insurance, care fee will scams, debt dissolve, energy cold calls, life Insurance, 'investments' opportunities and expensive loans.

One of the advantages of the TrueCall technology is that it identifies the call numbers used by the scammers. This enables some analysis of the numbers

being used and is how the technology is able to block known or suspect telephone numbers such as international calls. Of course, if the resident has friends or relatives who live abroad, a pin code can be entered into the Call Blocker to allow the call to go through.

A recent examination of the top 40 blocked numbers revealed that a surprising proportion of the numbers listed appeared to be local (Chesterfield) numbers. If the calls had not been blocked then, providing the recipient to the call had a Calling Line Identification (CLI) feature on their phone, they would have been misled into thinking that the caller was local and thus more likely to have answered a scam call. Research suggests that there is a burgeoning industry of telephone companies, or communication providers, using technology that can be bought by both legitimate and fraudulent businesses to imply that the business or person making the call was local to the recipient, regardless of where the call-maker is situated in the world. The resident is more likely to answer a call and be receptive if they believe the business or individual they are dealing with is local.

Ofcom is the telephone regulator and this problem has been identified. A recent Ofcom report states that; *'Calling line identification – which allows someone receiving a call to see the caller's number – has proved to be increasingly useful tool for consumers to combat the problems of nuisance calls. As such, we believe it is appropriate to maintain the current regulation requiring the provision of calling line identification facilities and to extend regulation to improve the accuracy of the provision and display of the calling party's telephone number to end-users. We propose to do this by including a new obligation on communications providers to ensure that where calling line identification data is provided, it is valid, diallable and uniquely identifies the caller'*.

The rules are technically complicated but Ofcom recognise that; *'the importance of ensuring accurate provision of CLI data has grown in recent years, most notably in connection with the detection and prevention of nuisance calls. The communications providers must not levy an additional or separate fee for access to or use of those facilities. Given the minimal cost involved in providing these facilities to end-users and the benefits to consumers that result, we believe that the costs of provision ought to be already covered by CPs' standard line rental or network access charges'*.

*'Ofcom proposes adding a new provision requiring Communication Providers to take reasonable steps to identify calls on which invalid or non-diallable CLI data is provided and to block those calls, where technically feasible. Ofcom estimates that UK consumers receive around 5 billion nuisance calls per year. Some of the people behind these calls manipulate the CLI presented with their calls in order to hinder their identification by consumers, law enforcement agencies, and regulators. Some ways in which they may do so include*

*rendering the CLI Data invalid or non-diallable. Indeed, information available to Ofcom from the largest CPs in the UK indicates that there are millions of calls presented with invalid or non-diallable CLIs that traverse their networks each day. If CPs blocked these calls at the network level, they would be prevented from reaching consumers, yielding significant benefits to consumers in the form of reduced nuisance and annoyance.'*

A random selection of the top 40 most blocked numbers were dialled to see if any information could be ascertained about the persons/organisations making the calls that had been blocked. In many instances, when the caller rings the number identified, they receive an automated tone informing them that the number is not listed. Thus, if the call had not been blocked and a Derbyshire resident had received the call and had, for example, agreed to purchase goods and then wanted to ring the caller back, they would not have been able to do so. The table below provides details of what was found when 10 blocked numbers revealed by the Call Blocker technology.

**Table Providing details of blocked call telephone numbers**

Ranking	Finding	Information
1	Non existent	
4	Non existent	
6	Non existent	
10	An Energy company 'Helpline'	Part of a large call centre operation which passes data between businesses.
11	Non existent	
15	Non existent	
19	An Energy company 'Helpline'	
25	An Energy company 'Helpline'	Public reports say they are offering a "free" boiler.
30	Answered with "hello" only	This is another number provided by a telephone network provider.
33	A Tax and Trust Services company, in Doncaster	The businesses tells pensioners that they can avoid paying council fees by paying around £2,000 for a worthless trust system and are known to the local trading standards service

Officers have also ensured that all users have registered with the Telephone Preference Service (TPS). Businesses are required to abide by a person's wish not to receive marketing calls (via TPS registration). Trading Standards is now also working to provide information on a regular basis to the Information Commissioner, the primary enforcer of rules relating to unwanted and

nuisance calls, detailing those numbers that are generating the highest volumes of such calls to our call blocker users.

Examples of local people who have had a Call Blocker installed are provided in the Appendix to this report. The technology appears to be effective and feedback from recipients, their family and friends remains very positive. The Division retains a small stock of Call Blockers and will continue to support both Derbyshire Scam Watch and the Trusted Trader Scheme, both of which are designed to prevent local people from becoming victim of rogue traders.

(3) **Social Value Considerations** The Local Authority has a duty to enforce the Care Act 2014 which requires those agencies that have a role in protecting older and vulnerable people from harm should have effective engagement mechanisms. Action taken by the National Scams Team, in conjunction with the Royal Mail and City of London Police, has identified the scale of fraud aimed at older people throughout the UK. Providing Call Blocker technology is one part of the Adult Safe Guarding agenda.

In preparing this report the relevance of the following factors has been considered: financial, legal, prevention of crime and disorder, equality and diversity, human resources, environmental, health, property and transport considerations.

(4) **Key Decision** No.

(5) **Call-in** Is it required that call-in be waived for any decision on this report? No.

(6) **Background Papers** Held on file within the Economy, Transport and Communities Department. Officer contact details – Robert Taylour, extension 39830.

(7) **OFFICER'S RECOMMENDATION** That the Cabinet Member notes the report.

**Mike Ashworth**  
**Strategic Director – Economy, Transport and Communities**

## **Appendix – Call Blocker Case Studies**

### **Mr S, Brimington, Chesterfield**

Mr S is 82 and had lost £15,000 in a lottery win fee scam phone call before a Call Blocker device was fitted by officers from Derbyshire Trading Standards. Mr S had fallen as he was getting up to answer the phone and had been hospitalised. A Call Blocker unit was fitted in April 2015. Mr S call-monitoring history shows several of the 01246 84 numbers that are known to be call centres which route through the network with the sole purpose of tricking customers into believing these are local calls. The worst offender is a business that has made 78 calls to Mr S – all of which have been prevented by the blocker. The business is a 'lead generator' for an insurance broker. The call seems to be aimed at selling funeral insurance.

### **Mrs S, Chesterfield**

Before a Call Blocking device was installed, Mrs S was receiving an average of five sales calls per day. The Call Blocker has blocked 39 calls from the second most common blocked number (another '01246' number). When a Trading Standards Officer called the number there was an automated system saying that it was used by "Advice Direct" and did not accept incoming calls. The implication was that they would call again. Google shows that the company makes unsolicited phone calls claiming that someone in the household has noise induced hearing loss, for which they can make a claim. The business was fined £20,000 by the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) in April 2016 and several of the witnesses said that the callers became abusive. There were 20 calls in the last 18 months from a number shown as '01246', but this number is not available to call.

### **Mr P, Sandiacre**

A Call Blocking device was installed for Mr P following a request from his Adult Care worker. He has learning difficulties and appeared to be giving payment details to anyone over the phone who asked for them. He is the resident for which the Call Blocker stops the most calls, with 985 calls rejected and only 36 trusted callers connected in a 7 month period after fitting. The known nuisance calls stopped each month range between 85 and 219 per month.

### **Mrs B, Hulland Village, Ashbourne**

In March 2016, Derbyshire Scam Watch volunteers visited Mrs B. She told them that she receives scam mail and has responded in the past, but has only paid for the cost of the postage. She was advised about the potential harm from scams and the risk of monetary loss. She said she felt able to identify scams and take appropriate action to protect herself. It was assessed that a second visit was appropriate because Mrs B said that she was in her late 80s and receives letters telling her she had won a prize and 'clairvoyant' letters

used by the fraudsters to perpetuate the impression that their victims had 'won money on the lottery'.

During a follow-up visit, a Trading Standards Officer was advised by her husband that his wife has dementia and that she has been regularly responding to mail and calls. Mrs B claimed that it was minimal and was only approximately £30 per month, but her husband said it was more and that she had spent over £120 in December via various mail-order catalogues for things she did not need and could not afford. The Officer observed that the couple was receiving lots of mail as Mrs B was surrounded by it. The mail included an Australian lottery, and the usual catalogues of over-priced items with promises of prizes. Mrs B made it clear that she intended to continue responding. Her husband said she rushed to the letter box in a morning to collect the mail and it was obvious that it was something she looked forward to. Their son has tried to convince her not to respond, but she said she was happy doing what she was doing and would not be stopping.

In conversation with her son it has been recommended that:

- Mail is redirected to the son.
- A Call Blocker is fitted.
- That Trading Standards writes to the catalogue companies that she subscribes to and requests that they remove her from their mailing list.
- A County Council First Contact form is completed with a request for a safety equipment check and the fitting of a security chain.