

'Scam Mail is Blackmail' – shocking Think Jessica poster campaign to be launched

The Vale of Glamorgan Trading Standards is backing a poster campaign raising awareness of the scourge of scam letters tricking victims into sending millions of pounds to fraudsters. The campaign is being launched on 1 October at St Pancras International Station in London.

The hard-hitting '**Scam Mail is Blackmail**' posters*, produced as part of the Think Jessica campaign, will be on 1,000 billboards across the country courtesy of Titan Outdoor, warning of criminals who are brainwashing people in the UK into sending them some £3.5 billion a year.

According to research by the Office of Fair Trading **£350 million** is lost by UK consumers every year to prize draw, foreign lottery and clairvoyant scams alone.

The posters include a new free advice line 0800 848 88 55, sponsored by British Gas, with a message recorded by Money Saving Expert Martin Lewis.

Mr Lewis said: "It is time we yelled the message out that people asking for money for dodgy contests or goods that the consumer never asked for in the first place are nasty criminals that should be avoided."

World-renowned scams expert Paul Wilson, who has been raising awareness of numerous cons on the Real Hustle, is also behind the initiative. He said: "Throughout my career I have come across a lot of scams and trickery.

"The scale of this scam and the way it can completely take over the lives of often the most vulnerable, isolating them even further, is really worrying.

"There isn't enough awareness about scam mail and sucker lists, which really are incredibly sinister.

"Marilyn Baldwin is doing a fantastic job with her campaign Think Jessica in trying to stop more people falling victim to this con. We can all help by spreading the message and by watching out for anyone we know who might be receiving an unusual amount of post."

These scams take a number of forms, but the most typical involve clairvoyants asking for money to keep loved ones safe or promises of a lottery win or a big cash prize for a 'small fee'.

Replying to just one of these letters will result in the victim being placed on a “suckers list” which in turn will see the number of scam post rapidly multiply to dozens of letters per day.

Campaigner Marilyn Baldwin’s mother Jessica fell victim to postal criminals – she received more than 30 scam letters a day, sending out most of her pension every week to criminals.

Marilyn says the situation quickly spiralled out of control to a point where she became distrustful of her own family, while remaining convinced she would soon win a large sum of money. When her money started running out she became anxious and her health started deteriorating.

Jessica Looke died on 24 October 2007. Her daughter Marilyn is certain that the torment from the scam mail, by this time filling parts of her house, was partly to blame.

She said: “Straight after my mother died I knew I had to do something. I had tried to get help for five years, without success, and had had to just watch my mum getting increasingly gripped and destroyed by these criminals.

“I set up Think Jessica to raise awareness about this awful fraud whose many victims are suffering in silence, and to hopefully bring about change so that they can be reached and helped.”

Earlier this year The Serious Organised Crime Agency intercepted in one day £500,000 cash in letters sent by 22,000 UK residents to a single scam.

Marilyn said: “Without the raid we would have never known about these 22,000 people who were probably also sending money to countless other scams. Most victims don’t tell anyone they are responding to these letters. Most people who contact me for more information are family members, not the victims themselves.

“It is the silent victims we have to worry about – the statistics about the people who do come forward are only a tip of the iceberg.”

Graeme Preston, TSI’s scams lead officer, said: “Marilyn’s campaign is ground-breaking in raising the awareness of the scourge of postal scams.

“These crimes are perpetrated in the person’s own home and are especially reprehensible in that the scammers befriend the person by letter and telephone, often over a long time.

“The cost to repeated victims can run into tens of thousands of pounds each, but the emotional effect on them and their loved ones can be immeasurable.

“Trading Standards has a vital role in working with partner agencies towards tackling those responsible for these crimes.”

Editors’ notes:

Organisations in support of the Think Jessica campaign are: Trading Standards Institute, British Gas, the MSE Charity, Serious Organised Crime Agency, Titan Outdoor, Search Engine Serious and F Bros.

Think Jessica

The campaign is run by Marilyn Baldwin, is campaigning for:

- 'Jessica's syndrome' to be recognised as a condition and counsellors trained to help victims and support families and carers.
- Royal Mail to assist in the early recognition of victims – a simple 'scam alert' form for postal workers to hand to their managers so that Think Jessica trained counsellors could become involved.
- 'Think Jessica' warning posters be displayed in all banks and building societies and in other public places. This gives the number for the 'Think Jessica' helpline – 0871 200 3796.
- In the long term, a law to stop criminals hiding behind PO box addresses.

For more information visit www.thinkjessica.com