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# Dodging the scammers

The Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) exists to protect investors – raising standards among authorised financial institutions and protecting investors from nasty scams that can wipe out their savings.

One of its most valuable tools is its register of authorised firms – this helps savers identify legitimate firms that are meeting the high standards set by the regulator.

But recently the FCA was itself a victim of fraudsters. In June, a fake FCA register appeared online with a similar address to the original. If you were to check this register for information about whether a particular company was FCA-approved, you could have been misled. In July, the entire website was cloned. The site, “thefca.net”, since taken down, used similar colouring and layout to the official pages, identical wording and links to register for online invoicing.

Clone companies have been an issue for us at JH&P in the past, too. In 2018, scammers cloned our website, using an online website address similar to ours. They copied our logo, colour scheme and registration number and then wrote to potential investors across the country, advertising a dodgy bond scheme that included the fake address. We reported the scam as soon as we discovered it.

## Spotting the scam

It is essential for us all to be competent in spotting fraud. Now more than ever, when scammers are exploiting

financial uncertainty and health concerns during the covid-19 pandemic, we need to be vigilant.

Here are some recent scams:

- **Track-and-trace.** Through phone call, text, or email, someone may contact you claiming to work for the NHS. They



will request payment for a covid-19 test as their records show you have been in contact with someone who has tested positive. Coronavirus tests are free in the UK – ignore any communication requesting a fee.

- **Bereavement debt.** If you have recently lost a loved one, be wary of fraudsters asking for repayment of debt on behalf of the deceased. You are not responsible for the personal debt of your partner or family member unless you took out a joint loan.

- **Holiday refunds.** Lockdown travel restrictions have left thousands sorting out refunds from travel firms, airlines and holiday accommodation. Watch out for emails advising how to claim refunds with links to fake websites used to steal personal and financial

information or infect your phone or computer with malware.

- **TV licence fee.** A recent scam targets over-75s who have been told to expect contact from the BBC containing information on paying for their TV licence, which is no longer free.

Some have reported receiving official-looking letters and emails and have paid the ‘fee’ without question. The advice from the BBC is to ignore payment requests for now.

- **Pension release offers.** It is highly unlikely that you can access your pension before the age of 55 without facing punitive tax ramifications. Scams may offer early pension release or advertise schemes into which they persuade you to transfer your pension. Beware! You risk losing your pension savings.

These are all variants of traditional phishing (email) and vishing (telephone call) scams. The fraudsters claim to represent a legitimate organisation, such as a bank or insurance company. They ask for personal details, like your PIN and banking passwords, or payment for an unexpected bill. Never

give these details. Call your bank or building society on the number on your debit or credit card (not the number the scammers give you) and do not follow their weblinks, which may lead to a cloned site designed to give you fake reassurance. As soon as you are asked to make a payment or give personal details your guard should be up.

Always remember that if something looks too good to be true, it probably is. And never be hurried. If you are pressured into parting with money or details in haste, expect to regret the decision at leisure.

## What to do if you suspect a scam

Despite the recent FCA drama, it is still worth checking its newly updated register for the list of authorised firms and its ‘warning list’. Just ensure you go to the official website, [www.fca.org.uk](http://www.fca.org.uk). The FCA’s ScamSmart website offers lots of advice.

Alert the FCA if you suspect the operation of a clone firm. Report suspected scams to Action Fraud by calling 0300 123 2040. The newsroom on its website has lots of stories on most recent scams.

Always consult your financial adviser before handing over money or personal details. Just make sure you are speaking to your actual adviser!

Online fraud costs Britons billions every year. It causes impoverishment and heartbreak. Do not let scammers catch you out.

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