



Real estate scam attempt thwarted

Consumer Protection and WA Police have urged agents to be on high alert against real estate fraud after a recent attempt to sell a Perth home was thwarted.

Earlier this month, an overseas organised criminal network began the process of selling the home by emailing the Property Manager at North Beach real estate agency, Peard and Associates.

Initially the fraudsters sent an email to the agent requesting a document related to an Edgewater property using a fake email address in the real owner's name. The criminals also phoned the agency on several occasions requesting the property be sold. The agency followed the suggested guidelines related to combating identity fraud by sending a confirmation of the change of contact details to the original address on file.

It was then that the real owners in South Africa were alerted and informed the agency that the sale request was bogus, indicating it was the start of a scam attempt. The real owners confirmed that a property condition report sent to them earlier had not been received and it is assumed it was intercepted by the criminals.

WA Police (Major Fraud Squad) detectives are investigating the scam attempt and have confirmed the fraud originated in Nigeria.

"In the past two years, major fraud squad detectives have presented numerous fraud awareness presentations to the WA property industry to provide useful background to these types of crimes. The sessions also educate agents about how to detect and prevent these fraud attempts from being successful," said Detective Senior Sergeant Pete Davies.

"Our presentations and the new identity verification guidelines have successfully stopped several recent attempts to illegally sell WA homes."

Similar training has also been offered by the Department of Commerce as part of the mandatory Compulsory Professional Development program.

Commissioner for Consumer Protection Anne Driscoll said this recent attempt is further reason for all real estate and settlement agents in WA to be meticulous in following the new procedures aimed at preventing real estate fraud.

"This incident proves that scam attempts can be detected and foiled from the start if real estate and settlement agents follow the client identity verification requirements and real estate fraud identification guidance notes introduced last year. This was done in cooperation with REIWA and the Australian Institute of Conveyancers," Ms Driscoll said.

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All agents must be particularly vigilant to confirm the identity of owners wishing to sell their properties and it is essential to verify any change of contact and banking details with original addresses on file. This is crucial to detecting scam attempts at an early stage.

“During any transaction involving absentee owners, agents should also thoroughly check signatures with originals on file and have any doubtful documents verified by the issuing authority. Requests for urgent sales should come under greater scrutiny.

“All homeowners, particularly absentee owners, should ensure that their Property Managers have suitable protocols in place to prevent the possibility of their homes being sold without their knowledge or permission. Owners could also consider placing a caveat on their property which was part of a range of anti-fraud measures introduced by Landgate, which also includes overseas owners having to personally present at consulates for identity verification.”

The Codes of Conduct for real estate and settlement agents in WA were strengthened following the fraudulent sale of a Karrinyup home in 2010 and a Ballajura home in 2011.

Scam attempts should be reported to Consumer Protection on **1300 30 40 54** or consumer@commerce.wa.gov.au or WA Police on **131444**.