

If you thought the taxman was slow, try ringing Action Fraud

Victims of crime need a speedy response. They aren't getting it

Ruth Emery

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Action Fraud's typical wait is more than 11 minutes GETTY IMAGES

The crime-reporting agency Action Fraud takes more than twice as long to answer phone calls than the much-maligned HM Revenue & Customs — and picks up only two-thirds of calls.

A freedom of information (FOI) request by Money has revealed that the government fraud centre typically takes 11 minutes and 8 seconds to answer the phone. By contrast, callers get through to the taxman in 4 minutes and 42 seconds, on average.

In addition, HMRC answers 86% of calls, according to its latest performance figures, while Action Fraud picks up only 68% during its core hours of 8am to 8pm, and just 62% at night.

Rather than contacting the police, victims of fraud and cyber-crime should log their incidents with Action Fraud online or by phone. The reporting centre then decides whether the police should investigate.

Callers may have been scammed out of money and be feeling distressed or vulnerable. Tim Loughton, a member of the Commons home affairs committee, said: "Fraud victims often receive a woeful response."

The Conservative MP added: "Fraud is now the single biggest form of crime. It is a complex crime and Action Fraud is our specialist unit to deal with it, but that unit does not seem to be taking its role seriously enough."

Baroness Altmann, a longtime campaigner for consumer rights, described the lengthy waits as "unacceptable". She said: "When someone wants to report a scam, they often take time to pluck up courage to make the call. If they then have to wait a long time for anyone to answer, or they cannot get through at all, they are likely to give up."

Action Fraud said it did not have a target time for answering calls but its average figure had improved over the past year. Last March, it typically took more than 20 minutes for callers to be connected to a helpline worker. HMRC, which in the past has been criticised for long waiting times, has a published target of answering calls within five minutes on average.

The fraud centre added that its percentage figures for calls answered include people who choose to hang up and report their case online instead.

James Daley, founder of the consumer group Fairer Finance, said it was vital for crime victims to be able to contact Action Fraud quickly, otherwise "there was little point in having the centre".

He said: "Often time is of the essence in recouping money taken by scammers, so it defeats the object to be left waiting on the phone, or left waiting weeks for a response by email."

Action Fraud said it was dealing with a backlog of cases, and this was affecting how quickly it reviewed fraud reports and updated victims on the progress of their cases. The website states: "[We] aim to send you an update in writing when your report has been assessed. Updates will only be given three months after your initial report. This is due to the high volume of reports we are currently receiving."

One reader lost £16,000 after buying home cinema equipment that was never delivered to him. He reported the scam to Action Fraud in January and did not receive an update until late May. The letter said the agency had “not identified sufficient leads” and the case had not been sent to the police.

About 19% of crime reports received by Action Fraud are referred to the police, according to the FOI request, and just over one in 10 of those result in a conviction.

Detective Chief Inspector Alex Hayman of the National Fraud Intelligence Bureau, which runs Action Fraud with City of London Police, said: “We appreciate we’re not perfect and we get things wrong, and we could do better. We could do with more staff [but] we have to be smarter at how we fight fraud too.” The agency has about 60 staff at its headquarters in London and 85 in a call centre in Glasgow.

Action Fraud is due to launch a new IT system in the coming weeks, which it said will help staff to categorise crime reports more quickly. Also, for the first time, fraud victims will be able to follow the progress of their cases online.

Comments(7)

Sherman

DCI Alex Hayman of the NFI Bureau, which runs Action Fraud said: “We appreciate we’re not perfect and we get things wrong, and we could do better. - Under statement of the Year. Three months for an update!! They should all be on zero contracts & paid ONLY on quick results.

AF

Inaction Fraud are a disgrace. I reported bank phishing fraud to them, with so many "sufficient leads" as to make anyone with a wish to find and punish fraudsters and the resources to pursue said leads salivate like a Pavlovian dog. They did precisely nothing. They communicated with my increasingly angry insistence as and when they felt like it. Their behind the scenes lot - the City of London Police - came out with excuse after excuse why nothing should be done. Their "best" one was "Well, the bank refunded your £2000, so no crime's been committed so you

can't report it, only the bank". Thanks to a persevering young copper in Portsmouth, 300 miles away, chance, my MP and finally James Brokenshire at ministerial level the phisher was caught, tried and imprisoned. My MP copied to me Mr Brokenshire's letter to him about Action Fraud. It said that he had given them an almighty rocket about their having chosen to ignore obvious clear-cut evidence, and reminding them that although an ordinary member of the public is a victim and not some headlining major organisation, they have a duty to investigate EVERY case, not cherry-pick. Sadly it seems not to have much impact. They're an idle, incompetent, excuse-seeking bunch of monobraincelled wastrels for whom even picking up a phone is too much hard work.

Elizabeth Jane Mott

Don't bother with Citizen's Advice Bureau [their advice - write a letter!], Trading Standards [not interested unless others had similar problems with a company], or a lawyer [we were told that though we had a *prima facie* case, we were unlikely to win, the cost would be prohibitive and it would be a waste of time]! There is zero support anywhere for victims of fraudulent practice. We solved our problems when, in desperation, we told our story on social media. That same evening, the managing director of the company involved was on the phone promising to rectify the situation, which he did.

Fig

Yes, twitting then out seems to be the only serious solution these days.

Nick Tilley

Action Fraud is yet another absurd construct unfit for purpose supposedly run by experts but reliant on call centres you cannot access and a bizarre web site reporting system that does not really allow details of the issue to be provided, unanswered calls, no investigation and an eventual letter offering victim support, gives the impression of a service deliberately designed to conceal the extent of fraud in the UK and protect the organisations permitting it.

Fig

Nearly 150 staff and they can't cope with the back log? Something seriously wrong going on there.

Sherman

Similar to any govt department.