

Clampdown on the conmen

Police have launched a crackdown on rogue traders and distraction burglars.

"They won't risk the chance they have been spotted and this is why it is such a difficult crime to detect" - Det Insp Nick Gray

Motorists on the A6 and A45 near Irthlingborough would have noticed a particularly high police presence on the roads yesterday. And if you were driving a van or truck, you could well have been pulled over and subjected to a thorough traffic check.

But this was no ordinary traffic operation. Police were looking for rogue traders, the bogus workmen who call at your house and say you need some work doing to your roof or your guttering.

They offer to do it on the spot and charge you an obscene price for work that probably didn't need doing in the first place.

They will take cash, they'll take a cheque and immediately pay it into an account so it clears quickly, or they'll even drive the victim to a cash point to withdraw money.

A man is currently under investigation for charging a resident in the north of the county £1,850 for some guttering work worth just £50.

There's a strong link between these rogue traders and distraction burglars and the aim of yesterday's police operation was to make it as difficult as possible for these offenders to commit crime in Northamptonshire.

"It is about disrupting them, building intelligence and letting offenders know we are out there," said Insp Andy Hall, of Northamptonshire Police.

Over the past three years there were almost 500 distraction or attempted distraction burglaries committed in Northamptonshire.

The distraction can be anything from a lost cat, an official from the gas board or someone who wants to test your water pressure.

More recently there have been reports of people posing as police officers. They say they have just caught someone trying to get in the resident's back door and trick their way into the house, before stealing money and sometimes jewellery.

These offences are not random crimes committed on a whim. The offenders will often have travelled hundreds of miles in a day to commit one or two crimes.

They don't stay long in order to avoid being spotted, but they can make a lot of money from just one hit.

They prey largely on elderly people who tend to keep money in the house, often stealing thousands of pounds in a day.

They belong to organised crime groups, sharing intelligence and vehicles to commit crimes. Often they will buy a builder's van at an auction and leave the company's markings on the bodywork to create a cover story.

Det Insp Nick Gray, of Northamptonshire Police, said: "They will commit a couple of offences in one area and then move on somewhere else.

"They won't risk the chance they have been spotted and this is why it is such a difficult crime to detect."

March and April tends to see a peak in this type of crime and Det Insp Gray is heading up a team of officers focusing on catching distraction burglars and rogue traders.

He said: "We want to make Northamptonshire an uncomfortable place for these criminals to come. This despicable crime picks on the most vulnerable people in our community.

"The people committing these offences will appear very confident. They don't consider the elderly victims to be any risk to them.

"As we approach the peak time of year it is important for people to be looking out for their neighbours, relatives and friends. These people are preying on vulnerable, defenceless victims who are parents, grandparents and have contributed to the community.

"It can affect the victim's confidence in living alone and we have had instances where elderly victims have decided to go into care homes because they don't feel confident staying in their own home.

"People feel embarrassed to have been subjected to this type of crime but we don't want them to feel embarrassed, we want them to come forward and report it."

He added: "Although it goes against the grain, our advice is don't trust anyone you are not expecting who comes to the door.

"No genuine work person will mind waiting at your door for five minutes while you check they are who they say they are. Tell them you are calling a friend or neighbour and quite often that will scare them off."

If you are concerned about someone who calls at your door, phone the Doorstep crime Action Network hotline on 0345 230 7702 and your call will be answered as a priority.