

Cracking down on fraudsters

People who claim housing and Council Tax benefit which they are not entitled to, cost taxpayers money.

The Fraud Investigation Team at Surrey Heath Borough Council work hard to promote an anti-fraud culture and are determined to crackdown on people cheating the system.

During the last financial year the team issued 14 formal cautions, two administration penalties and prosecuted two people.

The fraud hotline and the fraud reporting form on the Council's website make it even easier for people who suspect others of receiving benefits they are not entitled to, to report it anonymously.

Investigations Manager Julia Greenfield said: "Vigilant members of the public play a huge role in helping us uncover benefit cheats. We ask that people who suspect others of claiming benefits fraudulently provide us with as much information as possible to assist with our investigations."

Car registrations, descriptions of people which include distinctive characteristics

such as a tattoos or glasses, information about alleged places of work and times people come and go all help build a profile of a potential fraudster.

The Council considers issuing a formal caution or an administrative penalty where the total overpayment is less than £2,000 and prosecution where the total payment exceeds £2,000. A formal caution is a written warning which is stored on the Department of Work and Pensions and Council databases. An administrative penalty means the fraudster must pay a fine, which is set at 30 per cent of the overpayment, in addition to what they had fraudulently claimed.

Surrey Heath takes part in the National Fraud Initiative which is the Audit Commission's data matching exercise which tackles a range of fraud risks faced by the public sector. Information is compiled across the country to ensure people are not claiming benefits in more than one authority.

The fraud hotline number is 01276 707372 and the new fraud reporting form can be found on the Council's website by visiting www.surreyheath.gov.uk/onlineservices.

NEWS IN BRIEF

In March Craig Jackson, 37, was given a criminal record, fined £250 and ordered to pay prosecution costs of £992.50 after he fraudulently claimed housing benefit of £3,059 and £403.09 of council tax benefit. The father-of-one had claimed he was the single occupant of his former home in Ravenstone Road, Camberley. However it emerged his girlfriend was living with him, she was in employment and she was paying him £200 per month.

Mother-of-four Louise Riley, previously of The Avenue, Camberley, was prosecuted in August 2006 after she fraudulently claimed over £10,000 in housing benefit. She was sentenced in respect of five counts and for each count she was given a six month custodial sentence. These were suspended for 18-months, to run concurrently with a supervision order. Riley had stated she was a private tenant paying rent, when in fact she owned the property and was receiving rent from her mother and maintenance amounting to £1,900 a month.

Improvements to benefits service

2007 and 2008 looks set to be a busy year for the Council's Housing and Council Tax Benefits Service with the introduction of new performance standards and stretching targets.

Aims to improve the service involve processing new benefit claims on average in under 28 days and processing changes in circumstances within 9 days. The Council's Customer Contact Centre will help achieve these targets.

Recovering overpayments

The Council is also seeking to improve the recovery of overpaid Housing Benefit. Sometimes overpayments occur where customers forget to inform the Council of a change which affects the level of benefit they are entitled to.

The Benefits Service has updated its procedures and dedicated more staff resource to recovering benefit debts. It remains a continuing aim to ensure that Housing and Council Tax Benefit is paid quickly and correctly to people entitled to receive it.

Changes to Benefits

The service is also due to carry out a significant amount of preparation work ready for the introduction of the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) from April 2008.

LHA is an allowance based on the size of household and the area in which a person lives. It will apply to people making a new claim for Housing Benefit from April 2008, who live in private rented accommodation as opposed to Housing Association property. Payment will normally be made direct to the tenant, who will then pay the landlord.

Each local authority will be divided into different market rental areas with individual LHA rates allocated for each area. Prospective tenants will be able to shop around with their allowance, something they are currently unable to do within the existing scheme. If they find a property they like with a rent that exceeds their LHA,

they will need, as they do now, to make up the difference themselves. But if they find somewhere with a rent below their allowance, they will be able to keep the difference up to a capped amount.

For more information about claiming benefit or about the work of the Housing and Council Tax Benefits Service please call 01276 707121, email benefits@surreyheath.gov.uk or go to www.surreyheath.gov.uk/benefits.

