

Minutes

Corporate Services and Partnerships Policy Overview Committee

Thursday 5 February 2015

Meeting held at Committee Room 5 - Civic Centre,
High Street, Uxbridge UB8 1UW



HILLINGDON
LONDON

	<p>Members Present: Councillors Richard Lewis (Chairman), Richard Mills (Vice-Chairman), Wayne Bridges, Tony Burles, Nick Denys, Narinder Garg, Raymond Graham, Carol Melvin, and Robin Sansarpuri.</p> <p>Officers: Garry Coote (Corporate Fraud Investigation Manager), Niamh Hall (Investigator - Corporate Fraud Team), Debbie Leather (Investigator - Corporate Fraud Team) and Khalid Ahmed (Democratic Services Manager).</p>
39.	<p>MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 8 JANUARY 2015</p> <p>Agreed as an accurate record.</p>
40.	<p>EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC</p> <p>It was agreed that all items of business would be considered in public.</p>
41.	<p>BUDGET PROPOSALS 2015/16 - COMMENTS FROM POLICY OVERVIEW COMMITTEES</p> <p>The Committee considered the comments from this Committee and the Council's other Policy Overview Committees on Cabinet's budget proposals for 2015/16.</p> <p>RESOLVED –</p> <p>1. That the full set of Policy Overview Committee comments on the budget proposals be submitted to the Cabinet meeting on 12 February 2015.</p>
42.	<p>SECOND MAJOR REVIEW - SOCIAL HOUSING FRAUD</p> <p>The Council's Corporate Fraud Investigation Manager, together with two Investigators from the Corporate Fraud Team, attended the meeting and provided Members with details of the work which was carried out by the Team in relation to the detection of social housing fraud.</p> <p>Investigations</p> <p>The Committee was informed that the Team received referrals</p> <p>Action By:</p>

<p>from the Fraud hotline and from a variety of sources both within the Council, and outside the Council such as from Council contractors. For example contractors who were working on behalf of the Council made the Team aware if there had been suspicions regarding the occupants of a property.</p> <p>Records were checked against the electoral register, Council Tax and Housing Benefit records. Members were informed that intensive and varied visits took place to check occupants of social housing and these visits took place at anytime during the day, evening and at weekends. The Team worked flexible hours to enable visits to be made to homes when occupants were likely to be at home, which proved the commitment of the Team.</p> <p>The Committee was provided with examples of the meticulous detail which the Investigators went to in terms of their investigations and Members were informed that in the majority of cases the actions of officers would be enough to either close cases because no further action was required.</p> <p>The Committee was informed that after three visits, investigations would be stepped up. There would be more IT checks and tenants could possibly be invited into the Council offices for an informal meeting. Members were informed that at this meeting, a tenant would be informed that housing fraud was a criminal offence and that a breach of tenancy was a civil offence.</p> <p>If tenants were adamant that they did live at the property, they would be asked to provide evidence in the form of bank statements, utility usage statements etc. Tenants would be advised to seek independent legal advice and the Council would write a Data Protection Act request to other agencies or local authorities.</p> <p>The Committee was informed that throughout an investigation officers within Housing, Council Tax and Housing Benefits were kept informed of anything that could impact on the person concerned claim or increased rent arrears.</p> <p>Members were informed that once a strong case had been built by the Council, it was hoped that the tenant would hand back the keys to the social housing property.</p> <p>Reference was made to weekly meetings which took place within the Corporate Fraud Team where advice was provided by a solicitor from Legal Services on the course of action to be taken based on the evidence which the Council had. This legal advice was vital in terms of making decisions on whether to progress further with investigations.</p>	<p>Action By:</p>
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Members were informed that if a case did go to court and trial, Investigating Officers attended court to provide evidence. If the court case was successful and a bailiff's warrant was obtained, Investigation Officers would attend the eviction to ensure that the property was ready to hand over to lettings to enable the property to re-house another family.

Sub-Letting

Discussion took place on those social housing properties which had been found to be sub-let and Members were informed that there were cases where the tenant had been unaware that they had been renting a social housing property.

The Committee was given assurance that these victims were given professional support and advice from the Council's Housing Options Team to enable them to find suitable accommodation.

Members were provided with case study examples of investigations which had taken place and the detail and work which was carried out by officers to investigate.

Discussion took place on possible measures which could be introduced by the Council to make unsuspecting sub-letters aware of social housing properties.

Officers were asked to look into means of subtly branding social housing to enable unsuspecting sub-letters to know that the property was Council owned.

Officers were also asked to look into whether a list of Council property could be provided for public inspection.

In addition, Members asked about the Council applying for Compensation Orders for sub-letters during court prosecutions.

Use of Social Media and information from other agencies

The Committee was informed that Investigators also used tools such as Facebook and other Social Media, Google searches, 192.com and Gum Tree to investigate potential fraudsters.

Liaisons took place with many outside agencies, Citizen Advice Bureaus within prisons, other fraud teams within other local authorities, housing associations, charities etc.

Reference was made to internal liaison which took place within the Council and examples were given of the work which took place with the Education Team, Social Services, Mental Health Team, Anti Social Behaviour Team, Housing Teams and Democratic Services Registrars.

The Committee noted the various sources of information and data which the Investigators used in their work and praise was given to the innovative approach of this Council's work in this area.

Other Initiatives

Members were also informed of some of the work which had been carried out in some of the Council's tower blocks and bungalows. The work on these schemes provided good publicity for the work being done and would also act as a preventative measure for any would be fraudsters.

Great emphasis was placed on working closely with residents on the schemes as this collaborative approach often provided Investigators with important information on suspected fraud.

Members made reference to possible work which could take place with hospitals, colleges, universities and officers would look at these areas.

Promotion and publicity

Members were informed that the Social Housing Fraud project was promoted widely, with "Blow the whistle on Housing Cheats" posters appearing in every issue of Hillingdon People, which helped to generate calls to the Council's fraud hotline.

Examples of combating social housing fraud were also publicised in Hillingdon People. These articles often described the improved quality of life for Hillingdon residents who had been allocated the tenancy of a recovered property. This generated positive feedback from residents and encouraged reporting of suspected social housing fraud.

Reference was made to the Team promoting the social housing fraud work which was taking place at resident's association meetings from April 2015 as part of the forward work programme.

For the next meeting Members asked for a representative from Legal Services to attend to provide the legal context to the work which takes place in relation to social housing fraud.

In addition officers were asked to investigate the issues raised and detailed above and report back to the next meeting of the Committee.

RESOLVED –

- 1. That the information provided be noted and officers**

	be asked to report back to the next meeting on the actions requested.	Khalid Ahmed / Garry Coote
43.	<p>CABINET FORWARD PLAN</p> <p>Reference was made to the item on Oracle HR & Payroll "Phase 2" Planning which was to be considered at Cabinet on 19 March 2015 and Members asked that further information be provided to the Committee next Municipal Year on this project</p> <p>Noted.</p>	Mike Talbot
44.	<p>WORK PROGRAMME</p> <p>Noted.</p>	
	<p>Meeting commenced at 7.30pm and closed at 9.30pm</p> <p>Next meeting: 19 March 2015 at 7.30pm</p>	

These are the minutes of the above meeting. For more information on any of the resolutions please contact Khalid Ahmed on 01895 250833. These minutes are circulated to Councillors, Officers, the Press and Members of the Public.