

Counter Fraud

# COUNTER FRAUD

## Report to Audit Committee: 2024/25 Quarter 1

30<sup>th</sup> June 2024



HILLINGDON  
LONDON

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### The Role of the Counter Fraud Team

- 1.1 The Counter Fraud Team (CFT) supports the Council in meeting its statutory responsibility under section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972 for the prevention and detection of fraud and corruption. The work of the CFT underpins the Council's commitment to a zero-tolerance approach to fraud, bribery, corruption, and other irregularities, including any money laundering activity.
- 1.2 As well as counter fraud activity, there is also a range of preventative work that the team is responsible for carrying out. This includes fraud awareness training and ensuring the Council have up-to-date and appropriate investigation policies and procedures.

### The Purpose of the Counter Fraud Progress Report

- 1.3 The Counter Fraud Progress Report provides the Council's Corporate Management Team (CMT) and Audit Committee with summary information on all counter fraud work carried out during the Quarter 1(Q1) period (1<sup>st</sup> April to 30<sup>th</sup> June 2024). In addition, it provides an opportunity for the Head of Counter Fraud (HCF) to highlight any significant issues arising from the counter fraud work in Q1.
- 1.4 The progress report also highlights to CMT, the Audit Committee and other key stakeholders, the performance of the CFT in meeting its strategic and operational objectives (as set out in the Counter Fraud Strategy 2022 to 2025), which provides an opportunity for the HCF to be held to account in this respect.

## 2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 2.1 In 2022/23 and 2023/24 the team achieved cumulative savings of c£23.5m. With this in mind, the main focus for 2024/25 is for the CFT to continue and sustain these levels of savings in an economic environment where fraud continues to thrive. In Q1 the CFT has deployed resources into areas of high risk to maximise its opportunities in loss prevention. **In total the CFT have achieved financial savings of c£3.3m in Q1.**
- 2.2 The majority of the CFT's work in Q1 has been undertaken in the area of Housing in particular reactive investigative work due to tenancy fraud. Currently the team are investigating 131 cases of Housing fraud which is consistent with previous quarters. In addition to these ongoing cases a large number of investigations have concluded in Q1, **leading to the team recovering 30 properties at a notional saving of c£2.1m.** The high number of properties recovered in the first quarter not only provides much needed Housing stock to those in need but demonstrates the CFT are on track to deliver a significant amount of property recovery in line with previous years.
- 2.3 During Q1 the CFT has continued its proactive project to **visit emergency accommodation** provided by the Council to residents who have approached as homeless. During visits, **the CFT uncovered 8 clients were not occupying their emergency accommodation, which led to accommodation closures on all 8 cases saving c£153k.** This work is vital to ensure the Council has enough accommodation to support those in need during a time when demand is increasing.
- 2.4 As in previous financial years the team will continue to prioritise its work in identifying Businesses for rates that are unknown to the Council. This work involves in house proactive activity alongside data from our external suppliers. **In Q1 the CFT have identified 3 businesses that were undeclared for rates, billings have now been sent out totalling c£783k.**

- 2.5 As part of the CFT’s preventative approach a variety of verification processes are in place across service areas whereby residents can access some form of funding, support or accommodation. These processes are in place to ensure applicants meet the eligibility criteria of each scheme before services are rendered. In Q1 the financial assessment verification process has highlighted numerous applicants that have failed to declare funds or assets which if undetected would have meant the Councils financial contribution towards there care would have been significantly higher. **In total 8 cases were highlighted with savings of c£73k identified.**
- 2.6 During Q1 the CFT have been working closely with Internal Audit team to align the fraud risk register with the new corporate approach to risk management. All fraud risks have been reviewed by the team and entered onto the new risk management software JCAD. In total 99 separate fraud risks have been entered. In Q2 the CFT will work closely with services to embedded fraud risk management into operational activity.
- 2.7 The CFT uses methodology outlined in the CF strategy to calculate financial savings. These calculations give an accurate but prudent savings figure to demonstrate the financial impact fraud is having on the Council. At the last Audit Committee, the HCF reported a savings target for 2024/25 had been agreed of c£6.6m. Following further up to date figures being received from services that relate to CF financial calculations, the target has been reviewed as some areas of Housing have seen an increase in costs. **This has led to the CFT having an updated target of £8m for 2024/25.**

**3. COUNTER FRAUD ACTIVITY IN QUARTER 1**

**3.1 Housing Fraud**

- 3.1.1 The CFT has had an impressive start to the new financial year, continuing to combat fraud risks within Housing. **This dedicated effort has led to the highest number of properties recovered in a quarter, with the CFT returning 30 properties to Housing** with a notional saving of c£2.1m. Q1 has seen a large part of the CFT’s resources deployed in Housing with the team working across multiple fraud risks and continuing with investigations of cases consisting of non-occupation, sub-let, wrongful succession and deceased.
- 3.1.2 The Key Performance Indicator (KPI) 4 (refer to **Table 5** in **Appendix A**) requires the CFT to recover 30% of properties associated with tenancy fraud referrals. This quarter **the CFT has achieved an exceptional 67% of tenancy fraud referrals resulting in property recovery.** As per **Table 1** below, the case type of property recovery shows that non-occupation is still the highest area of tenancy fraud risk.

**Table 1 ~ Housing Tenancy Fraud Cases**

Case Type	Q1*	£k/value**
Abandonment	0	£0
Deceased	10	£700k
NFI Fraud Hub	9	£630k
Non-Occupation	9	£630k
Other	0	£0
Sub-Let	0	£0
Wrongful Succession	2	£140k
<b>Total Properties Recovered</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>£2,100k</b>

\* As at end of Q1 (30<sup>th</sup> June 2024).

\*\* Tenancy Fraud Forum valuation.

- 3.1.3 Tenancy fraud is still the highest fraud risk faced by the Council, with the CFT currently investigating **131 cases relating to tenancy fraud.** The team have been granted 17 possession orders following legal proceedings, which are awaiting enforcement action, and a further **17 criminal and civil cases are currently with our legal team.**

- 3.1.4 In Q1 the team have also continued with proactively identifying cases of unknown deceased tenants with the assistance of the **NFI Fraud Hub**. The details of this work can be found in subsection 3.6 of this report. This work, though not classed as fraud, has continued to contribute to the number of properties recovered.
- 3.1.5 The ongoing pressures in the current economic climate continue to cause an increase in demand for housing and the need for **Bed and Breakfast (B&B) emergency accommodation**. Therefore, for 2024/25, the CFT will continue its rolling proactive project conducting residency checks to all emergency accommodation placements, to highlight any instances of non-occupation or subletting. In Q1 the CFT has **closed 8 emergency accommodation units due to non-occupation, resulting in savings of c£153k**. A further **10 cases have been opened** highlighting concerns of suspected non-occupation.
- 3.1.6 The CFT carries out verification checks on all Right to Buy (RTB) applications submitted to the Council, to provide assurance that those who apply are eligible for the significant discount and that the funds used for the purchase abide by money laundering regulations. In Q1 the CFT have **10 cases under investigation for suspicion of sub-letting and non-occupation**, with 2 cases referred to our Legal department to instigate criminal proceedings based on fraud offences. The CFT has also closed one RTB application at verification stage due to the failure to provide financial information.
- 3.1.7 In Q1 the CFT completed **281** verification checks on applicants who have registered for social housing. Outlined in **Table 2** below, the team successfully **closed 4 housing register applications** due to reasons including non-occupation, or they have been found to already be adequately housed. Without the CFT's enhanced verification checks, these applicants may have been successful in obtaining a council property that they were not entitled to.

**Table 2 ~ Housing Tenancy Verification Cases**

Housing Tenancy Verification Cases	Q1
Total number of cases reviewed	281
% Identified by CFT for rejection	25%
Total number of applications closed	4

\* As at end of Q1 (30th June 2024).

- 3.1.8 KPI 2a (refer to **Table 5** in **Appendix A**) targets an outcome of **95%** of housing allocation verifications to be completed within the target date set by the Housing department. In Q1 the team has successfully achieved **100% of verifications** being completed within their target date.

## 3.2 Revenues Fraud & Inspections

- 3.2.1 In the area of Revenues, the CFT has continued to maintain a high level of performance and again exceeded their KPI target (refer to **Table 5** at **Appendix A**). In Q1, as detailed in **Table 3** below, the CFT has **conducted 1,807 inspections, with 1,802 (99%) visited within the 10-day KPI target**.

**Table 3 ~ Revenues Inspections Performance 2023/24**

Revenues Inspections	Q1*
Total number of inspections completed	1,807
Percentage within 10 day target	99%

\*As at end of Q1 (30<sup>th</sup> June 2024).

- 3.2.2 During Q1 the CFT has identified a further **23 previously unlisted properties** made up of 'Beds in Sheds'. As a result, an additional **c£31k of loss prevention savings** has been identified following the issue of revised Council Tax bills to the liable parties. Throughout the financial year the CFT will continue to work with other Council departments to identify beds in sheds and take appropriate action.
- 3.2.3 During Q1 the CFT have continued the programme of internal Revenues Maximisation and carried out a day of action focusing resources on a high-risk area of the borough to identify unlisted buildings and changes to the use of land. This has **identified two previously unlisted business premises**. These properties are being submitted to the VOA for a decision and will be reported later in the year.
- 3.2.4 In addition to the internal work being carried out, the CFT requested and received Cabinet Member approval to continue its work with suppliers to maximise revenue. A contract is now in place for external Revenues Maximisation work to continue with **additional billing in Q1 issued to businesses to the value of c£780k**.

### 3.3 Social Care

- 3.3.1 With preventive controls and reactive processes in place across fraud risks within Social Care, Q1 marks a successful quarter for the team with **c£79k in loss prevention savings identified**. These positive outcomes have predominantly stemmed from the verification process in Financial Assessments, with other savings identified in the Homes for Ukraine support scheme.
- 3.3.2 In line with the CFT's risk-based loss prevention work within Financial Assessments has continued throughout Q1, with the team conducting **163 financial assessment verifications, 14 of which are undergoing further checks**. The verification process is designed to identify anomalies, such as hidden capital or assets prior to financial support being administered and to provide assurance that only eligible applicants are provided support.
- 3.3.3 Due to the sizeable financial cost to the Council in providing financial assistance in meeting service users care costs, the CFT is strategically placed to utilise the teams' analytical capabilities to identify fraud, loss and error within the financial assessment verification process. During the course of Q1 the team concluded **8 cases where service users had failed to supply full details of their savings and capital as part of their financial assessment leading to savings of c£73k**.
- 3.3.4 Following referrals from the service area savings of **£1.7k were identified in two cases in the Homes for Ukraine scheme** where it was identified that hosts had continued to claim support grants after their Ukrainian guests had left their households, these overpayments are now being recovered by the council.
- 3.3.5 Section 17 of the Children's Act 1989 places a duty on the Council to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in need. Section 17 support offers a range of services that includes providing accommodation and/or financial assistance to eligible applicants. The CFT undertake verification checks for all Section 17 applicants who approach Social Care. **Table 4** over the page, illustrates the outcomes derived from the preventive measures in place that ensure services provided are only accessed by those who meet the eligibility criteria.

**Table 4 ~ Section 17 Verification Cases 2024/25**

Section 17 Cases	Q1
Total number of cases reviewed	3
Total number verified as accurate	1
Total number of cases closed	2
Total number of cases under further checks	1
<b>Loss Prevention Savings</b>	0

\* As at end of Q1 (30th June 2024).

### 3.4 Blue Badge

3.4.1 Q1 saw the CFT ramp up efforts to combat Blue Badge misuse across the borough with the team conducting **2 proactive Blue Badge operations in addition to taking part in this year's National Blue Badge Day of action**. With over 142 Councils taking part, the CFT played a significant role in reinforcing the Council's zero tolerance approach to holding those to account who are looking to abuse the Blue Badge scheme on both a local and national scale. Over the course of all 3 operations, CF officers **inspected 129 badges, seized 6 expired badges and removed 12 badges from circulation due to suspected misuse**. A further 3 cases are under investigation.

3.4.2 The team's commitment to ensuring that Blue Badge holders can continue to access the parking facilities on offer across the borough was further demonstrated in Q1 with the successful **prosecution of 6 Blue Badge cases**. These positive deterrents make **Q1 the teams most successful quarter for Blue Badge prosecutions to date**. All 6 cases were a direct result of the teams Blue Badge projects held during November's International Fraud Awareness week in 2023. The evidence of these criminal cases was heard at Ealing Magistrates Court in June with **a total of £1,800 in prosecution costs awarded to the Council and over c£700 in fines issued to offenders**. A further 4 cases are due to be heard in court, with outcomes expected to be reported in Q2.

### 3.5 Onsite Immigration Official

3.5.1 Q1 marked the teams **most successful quarter ever** in the area of immigration with **c£108,000 in loss prevention savings identified**. These savings can be contributed to the team's proactive approach within in Social Care by highlighting a change in **8 service users immigration status** and the collaborative steps taken by CFT and the Childrens Resources Finance Team to support each service user to access public funds. These changes in immigration status relieves the Council from financially supporting each service user and encourages independence.

### 3.6 London Counter Fraud Hub

3.6.1 The CFT is recognised as a leading member of the London Counter Fraud Hub. The hub is designed to bring London Boroughs together, sharing data to identify fraud, loss or error. This innovative approach will also use the power of data to uncover cross borough frauds.

3.6.2 The unique capabilities of the LCFH are now embedded in the CFT and this is producing referrals automatically every two weeks identifying cases where the Council may not be aware of tenants passing away. This has maximised loss prevention by ensuring that cases are identified at an early stage. A total of **nine council properties** have been recovered and returned to use as a result of information provided by the LCFH during Q1.

3.6.3 During Q1 the results from a London Counter Fraud Hub pilot matching exercise have been received examining polygamous working where employees are working at multiple authorities at the same time. Results from this pilot are being reviewed with results expected in Q2.

### 3.7 National Fraud Initiative

3.7.1 The National Fraud Initiative (NFI) is a data matching exercise co-ordinated by the Cabinet Office and conducted every 2 years. The NFI matches data from over 1,300 organisations, including councils, the Police, hospitals and almost 100 private companies to identify potential fraud and error.

3.7.2 Data for the 2024/25 National Fraud Initiative exercise is due to be extracted at the end of Q2 and subsequent referrals received in Q4.

3.7.3 Ongoing investigations generated from the previous NFI exercise have led to **one council property** being recovered during Q1 where the tenant was found to own and be residing in property outside the borough.

3.7.4 In addition to the main NFI exercise there is an annual data match investigating instances of Single Person Discount (SPD) fraud and the data was received for this during Q1. The CFT have allocated significant resource to reviewing and investigating these matches, which has generated savings of **£19,823.02 in additional billing** during Q1 with further results from this match expected throughout the year.

### 3.8 Other Counter Fraud Activities

3.8.1 As part of the CFT's strategic objectives, the team has been embedding and promoting a counter fraud culture throughout the Council, by regularly undertaking fraud awareness sessions to service areas. These sessions give teams the tools to identify, and report suspected fraud or loss. During Q1 the CFT conducted **fraud awareness sessions** within Children's Social Care and provided tailored adhoc fraud training to Housing staff.

3.8.2 In addition to the fraud awareness training provided to staff the CFT also provided a **fraud awareness session for residents** at Oak Farm Library providing information about the Council's counter fraud response and general fraud prevention advice.

3.8.3 The CFT has experienced increased national recognition following the success of the CFT winning the Grand Prix award at the Public Finance awards and have been approached by several other local authority fraud teams for best practice advice.

## 4. COUNTER FRAUD PERFORMANCE IN Q1

4.1 Attached at **Appendix A** is **Table 5** which sets out the Q1 performance by the CFT against the nine KPIs. Also attached at **Appendix B** is **Table 6** which provides an overview of the financial performance of the team in Q1 within each of the main areas of counter fraud activity. The CFT's financial performance should be considered against a target of £8m for 2024/25.

4.2 The CFT has achieved a consistent level of performance across KPI's throughout the quarter. The details of this are that **9 out of 9 KPI's are above targeted performance**. The management team are pleased that all KPI's have been met and will be working closely with the team to ensure this level of performance is sustained.



## 5. FORWARD LOOK

- 5.1 In Q2 the CFT will support service areas in embedding fraud risk management into their operational activity. The support will include the CFT and IA running risk workshops with directorates and talking through key risk management principles.
- 5.2 With a significant amount of Housing cases ongoing the majority of resources in Q2 will be deployed into investigations and bringing these cases to a conclusion. This work is a priority to support Housing with the return of much needed accommodation. The HCF expects further success in property recovery during Q2.
- 5.3 The HCF has now put together a dashboard which demonstrates all Fraud activity and KPI data of the CFT in a statistical format. This is very much in draft and requires further support from the Council's Business Intelligence team. Once agreed the HCF will move to dashboard reporting to CMT and the Audit Committee reducing the volume of narrative in papers and instead illustrate performance, outcomes and key data in user friendly way.
- 5.4 The CFT would like to take this opportunity to formally record its thanks for the co-operation and support it has received from the management and staff of the Council during this quarter. There are no other counter fraud matters that the HCF needs to bring to the attention of CMT or the Audit Committee at this time.

**Alex Brown** APCIP  
Head of Counter Fraud  
30<sup>th</sup> June 2024

**APPENDIX A: Table 5 - CFT KPIs and Actual Performance**

CFT KPIs	Target	Q1*	24/25*	23/24
1. Percentage of fraud referrals risk assessed within 3 working days	95%	100%	100%	99%
2. Verification work timescales for completion:				
a. Housing Allocations completion within the target date set by Housing	95%	100%	100%	99%
b. Right to Buy case completion within 28 working days	95%	100%	100%	100%
c. Financial Assessments completion within 7 working days	95%	100%	100%	100%
d. Section 17 reviews completion within 7 working days	95%	100%	100%	100%
3. Investigation plan completion within 5 working days of case allocation	95%	100%	100%	98%
4. Tenancy fraud referrals received resulting in property recovery	30%	67%	67%	46%
5. Investigations resulting in loss prevention/financial saving outcome	40%	51%	51%	48%
6. Revenue inspections completed within 10 working days of referral date	95%	99%	99%	99%

\* As at end of Q1 (30<sup>th</sup> June 2024).

**APPENDIX B: Table 6 - CFT Quarter 1 2024/25 Financial Performance**

Work Area	Description	Quarter 1*	Quarter 2	Quarter 3	Quarter 4	2024/25*
<b>Housing</b>	Right to Buy discounts	£0	£0	£0	£0	£0
	Property Recovery (notional savings)	£2,100,000	£0	£0	£0	£2,100,000
	Other savings/loss prevention	£172,171	£0	£0	£0	£172,171
<b>Social Care</b>	Section 17 and UASC**	£0	£0	£0	£0	£0
	Financial Assessments	£72,585	£0	£0	£0	£72,585
	SGO	£0	£0	£0	£0	£0
	Direct Payments	£0	£0	£0	£0	£0
	Other	£7,290	£0	£0	£0	£7,290
<b>Revenues</b>	Single Person Discount	£22,527	£0	£0	£0	£22,527
	Council Tax Reduction & arrears	£4,551	£0	£0	£0	£4,551
	Unlisted Buildings	£31,758	£0	£0	£0	£31,758
	Housing Benefit Overpayments	£12,750	£0	£0	£0	£12,750
	NNDR	£784,844	£0	£0	£0	£784,844
<b>Blue Badge</b>	Simple Caution & Financial Penalty	£2,512	£0	£0	£0	£2,512
<b>Immigration Officer</b>	Housing Homelessness Applications**	£0	£0	£0	£0	£0
	Social Care Savings	£108,480	£0	£0	£0	£108,480
<b>Totals</b>	Loss Prevention Savings	£360,196	£0	£0	£0	£360,196
	Notional Savings	£2,779,867	£0	£0	£0	£2,779,867
	Cashable Savings	£176,892	£0	£0	£0	£176,892
	Costs awarded and penalties	£2,512	£0	£0	£0	£2,512
	<b>Total</b>	<b>£3,319,467</b>	<b>£0</b>	<b>£0</b>	<b>£0</b>	<b>£0</b>

\* As at end of Q1 (30<sup>th</sup> June 2024).

\*\* Average weekly cost against average length of support. This figure fluctuates but has been provided by the Council's Business Performance Team.

## APPENDIX C - Glossary of Terms

**Beds in Sheds:** 'Beds in Sheds' is the term used to describe habitable outbuildings, or annexes to private properties being utilised without the awareness of the Council or the Valuation Office Agency (VOA).

**Blue Badge:** A Blue Badge provides parking concessions and helps people with **non-visible and visible disabilities or health conditions** park closer to their destination. The Blue Badge enables holders to park in designated disabled person's parking bays either on the public highway or privately owned car parks. In addition, badge holders can park on single or double yellow lines for up to 3 hours.

**Direct Payments:** The Council are responsible for administering direct payments to service users who have been assessed as needing care and support services. The payments are made to allow applicants to access care to meet their social care needs, such as support with living tasks and social activities.

**Disabled Facility Grants:** The council offers a range of financial support schemes for people with disabilities, such as the Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG). The DFG is a means tested scheme that allows eligible applicants to receive financial support to make adaptations to their home, if they, or someone living at the property is disabled.

**Financial Assessments:** The Council is under a financial and legal obligation to carry out this means tested assessment for each service user. The Financial Assessment (FA) identifies whether the applicant(s) is eligible to receive funding towards their care costs.

**Fraud Hub:** Utilising the existing Cabinet Office infrastructure and systems, most London based local authorities have agreed to upload internally held data sets for proactive data matching exercises. These regularly agreed upon exercises will lead to the identification of possible fraud, loss or error.

**National Fraud Initiative:** The National Fraud Initiative (NFI) is a data matching exercise co-ordinated by the Government Cabinet Office and conducted every 2 years. There is also an annual review of claimants in receipt of Single Persons discount data that is matched against the Electoral Roll data. The NFI matches data from over 1,200 organisations, including councils, the police, hospitals and almost 100 private companies to identify potential fraud and error.

**New Homes Bonus:** The New Homes Bonus (NHB) is a grant that is paid by central government to incentivise local housing growth.

**Onsite Immigration Enforcement Official:** The Onsite Immigration Enforcement Official (OSIO) provides enhanced access to Home Office data for the purpose of assessing cases involving immigration issues and for assisting in a range of counter fraud work.

**Right to Buy:** The Right to Buy (RTB) process is a statutory scheme whereby a tenant(s) can apply to purchase their property at a significant discount from its market value. There are strict conditions that must be met by the applicant(s) if they are to qualify for the discount.

**Revenue Maximisation:** The use of internally held data and the utilisation of external data partners to identify previously unlisted commercial and domestic properties, along with identifying commercial properties that have undertaken modifications or improvements that would result in the revaluation of its Rateable Value (RV). Commercial entities are under no obligation to inform Council Tax as to when they have started trading or if their RV needs to be recalculated. The Council will only retain 15% of the identified rates.

**Section 17:** The CFT provides assurance and mitigate the risk of fraud within Children's Social Care, in particular the allocation of emergency accommodation provided under Section 17 of the Children's Act 1989. The verification process seeks to validate a family's reason for approach as well as their financial circumstances, as applicants claim to be destitute and requiring accommodation and or financial support. The CFT conducts verification checks on all applicants approaching the Council.

**Small business Rates Relief:** The Small Business Rates Relief (SBRR) scheme is designed to reduce the amount of business rates payable by small businesses. This reduction is available to ratepayers who occupy a property with a rateable value of no more than £15,000.

**Tenancy Fraud Forum Valuation:** As of the 2022/23 financial year, the CFT will be using the new Tenancy Fraud Forum valuation for property recovery. Working in conjunction with the London Boroughs' Fraud Investigators' Group (LBFIG) a new formula has been created to determine how much tenancy fraud costs. The formula considers the annual average temporary accommodation cost per family, the average duration for tenancy fraud, as well as the average investigation, legal and void costs. The agreed calculation for tenancy fraud within the borough is now valued at £56k per property (Previously £18k). The new calculation allows Hillingdon Council to accurately calculate financial savings by factoring in local figures.

**Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children:** Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) are children and young people who are seeking asylum in the UK but have been separated from their parents or carers. Whilst their asylum claim is processed, they are cared for by the Council and provided with accommodation and or financial support.