
**REVENUES AND BENEFITS ANNUAL COUNTER FRAUD ACTIVITY REPORT
2015/16**

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. To inform members of the work of Revenues and Benefits in respect of counter fraud activity for the financial year 2015/16.

Summary

2. This report highlights counter fraud activities undertaken by Revenues and Benefits staff in relation to Housing Benefit and Local Taxation reliefs awarded by the Council.

Recommendation

3. It is recommended that the Revenues and Benefits Counter Fraud Activity Report for 2015/16 be noted.

Reasons

4. To inform members of counter fraud activity work within Revenues and Benefits.

**Paul Wildsmith
Director of Neighbourhood Services and Resources**

Background Papers

None

Anthony Sandys: Extension 6926

S17 Crime and Disorder	Other than the special investigation work there is no crime and disorder impact.
Health and Well Being	There is no specific health and well being impact.
Carbon Impact	There is no specific carbon impact.
Diversity	There is no specific diversity impact.
Wards Affected	All wards are affected equally.
Groups Affected	All groups are affected equally.
Budget and Policy Framework	This report does not affect the budget or policy framework.
Key Decision	This is not a key decision.
Urgent Decision	This is not an urgent decision.
One Darlington: Perfectly Placed	There is no specific relevance to the strategy beyond a reflection on the Council's governance arrangements.
Efficiency	There is no specific efficiency impact.

MAIN REPORT

Information and Analysis

Background

5. Whilst the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has overall responsibility for the scope and structure of the Housing Benefit scheme, Darlington Borough Council has the day-to-day responsibility for its administration. This remit includes the prevention of potential Housing Benefit fraud, although the investigation of alleged fraud is now the responsibility of the DWP. In addition, the Council is responsible for Council Tax Support, Council Tax and Business Rates discount and exemption counter fraud activities.

Housing Benefit

6. All new Revenues and Benefits staff and Customer Services staff who answer telephone queries about Housing Benefit receive training to identify potential frauds, and how to notify any suspicions they may have. Staff who also see customers who call in to the Council, receive training in verifying original documents and how to identify forged or counterfeit documents.
7. Since the transfer of fraud investigation responsibilities to the DWP in October 2015, the Council has in place a service level agreement with the DWP. This agreement sets out the arrangements for:

- (a) Referring allegations of Housing Benefit fraud to DWP investigators

- (b) The exchange of information to support Housing Benefit fraud investigations
- (c) DWP requests for Housing Benefit decision making and overpayment calculations, where an investigation has been concluded
- (d) DWP requests for documentary evidence to support prosecutions
- (e) The notification of the outcome of DWP investigations, following a referral from the Council.

Council Tax Single Occupancy Discount Review

8. People who are liable to pay Council Tax, where there is only one person aged 18 or over in the household, are entitled to a 25% single occupancy discount. This discount is by far the largest in terms of overall expenditure for the Council, with over 17,500 recipients in Darlington at an annual cost in 2015/16 of £5.1 million.
9. The Council has a statutory duty to ensure that all Council Tax and Business Rates reliefs are properly claimed. However, an annual review of all 17,500 single occupancy discounts would be unfeasible. Therefore, the Council has a contract with Northgate plc to undertake this annual review on its behalf.
10. The Council uses Northgate as they are the Council's contracted IT suppliers for Revenues and Benefits software, and therefore have access to the data required for this review.
11. Northgate have an agreement with Experian plc which allows them to match all of the Council's single occupancy discount data with credit reference agency data, at no cost to the Council. The results of this data matching exercise informs Northgate of which Council tax accounts to undertake a review, where the results of the data matching indicates the potential presence of another person aged 18 or over in the property. Typically this will usually be where a person (other than the Council Tax liable person) has applied for credit using that address.
12. In 2015/16, 4,405 review forms were issued to Council Tax payers in Darlington receiving the single occupancy discount. As a result of this exercise, 352 single occupancy discounts were removed. Under the contract with Northgate, the Council only pays them a fee for the discounts that have been cancelled, and therefore the cost of the exercise in 2015/16 was £10,000. However, the annual saving in single occupancy discounts was over £97,000 and this is a recurring saving, assuming that the discounts would have continued without Northgate's intervention.
13. Undertaking the annual review of single occupancy discounts in this way is the most cost effective for the Council.

Council Tax and Business Rates Inspections

14. The Council currently employs 3.5 x FTE Revenues and Benefits Inspection Officers, whose main role is to maximise additional income for the Council through property inspection work. Specifically this relates to:
- (a) Bringing new domestic and commercial properties into the Taxbase as early as possible, and
 - (b) Reviewing entitlement to Council Tax Support, Council Tax discounts and exemptions, and Business Rates reliefs.
15. Tables 1 and 2 below set out the outcome of these reviews during 2015/16 in terms of the numbers of successful cases and the annual saving to the Council.

Table 1: The number of successful Revenues and Benefits reviews 2015/16

	Council Tax	Business Rates	Total
Council Tax Support	445		445
Discounts	93	29	122
Exemptions	161	33	194
Total	699	62	761

Table 2: The annual saving as a result of successful Revenues and Benefits reviews 2015/16

	Council Tax	Business Rates	Total
Council Tax Support	£88,089		£88,089
Discounts	£31,531	£61,521	£93,052
Exemptions	£198,403	£72,718	£271,121
Total	£318,023	£134,239	£452,262

16. In addition, the council can use civil remedies for any Council Tax incorrectness it discovers, using the provisions in Regulations 11, 12 and 13 of Council Tax Reduction Schemes (Detection of Fraud and Enforcement) (England) Regulations 2013.

Conclusion

17. The Revenues and Benefits service continues to maintain its commitment to its counter fraud activity across a range of benefits, discounts and exemptions. This is illustrated by the continued level of successful inspections and reviews undertaken in 2015/16.