

RYEDALE
DISTRICT
COUNCIL



COUNTER FRAUD POLICY

1 Introduction

- 1.1 All organisations are at increasing risk of fraud and corruption. Some commentators estimate that annual fraud losses to local government in the UK could be £7.3 billion. It is therefore a risk that the council cannot and should not ignore.
- 1.2 Any fraud committed against the council effectively constitutes a theft of taxpayer's money. It is unlawful and deprives the council of resources which should be available to provide services to the public. By putting in place effective measures to counter the risk of fraud and corruption the council can reduce losses which impact on service delivery as a contribution to the achievement of overall council priorities.
- 1.3 This document sets out the council's policy in relation to fraud and corruption perpetrated against it, and its overall arrangements for preventing and detecting fraud. It includes the fraud and corruption prosecution policy contained in Appendix A. It forms part of the council's overall policy framework for combating fraud and corruption and should be read in conjunction with the counter fraud strategy, constitution, the financial regulations, contract procedure rules, the whistleblowing policy, anti-money laundering policy and disciplinary procedures.

2 Definitions and Scope

- 2.1 For the purpose of this policy, the term fraud is used broadly to encompass:
- acts which would fall under the definition in the Fraud Act (2006)
 - anything which may be deemed fraudulent in accordance with the generally held view of fraud as causing loss or making a gain at the expense of someone by deception and dishonest means
 - any offences which fall under the Social Security Administration Act (1992) and the Council Tax Reduction Schemes Regulations (2013)
 - any act of bribery or corruption including specific offences covered by the Bribery Act (2010)
 - acts of theft
 - any other irregularity which is to the detriment of the council whether financially or otherwise, or by which someone gains benefit they are not entitled to.
- 2.2 This policy does not cover fraud or corruption against third parties, except where there may be an impact on the service provided by the council. In addition, it does not cover other acts – for example offences involving violence - which may affect the council, and which should in most cases be reported directly to the police.

3 Principles

- 3.1 The council will not tolerate fraud or corruption in the administration of its responsibilities, whether perpetrated by members, officers, customers of its services, third party organisations contracting with it to provide goods and/or services, or other agencies with which it has any business dealings. There is a basic expectation that members, employees, and contractors' staff will act with integrity and with due regard to matters of probity and propriety, the requirement to act lawfully and comply with all rules, procedures and practices set out in legislation, the constitution, the council's policy framework, and all relevant professional and other codes of practice.
- 3.2 The council will seek to assess its exposure to risks of fraud and corruption. It will prioritise resources available to prevent and deter fraud in order to minimise this risk.
- 3.3 The council will consider any allegation or suspicion of fraud seriously, from whatever source, and if appropriate will undertake an investigation to confirm whether fraud has occurred and determine the appropriate outcome. Any investigation will be proportionate. The council may refer any incident of suspected fraud to the police or other agencies for investigation, if appropriate.
- 3.4 To act as a deterrent, the council will take action in all cases where fraud (or an attempt to commit fraud) is proved, in proportion to the act committed. This may include prosecution, application of internal disciplinary procedures, or any other action deemed appropriate to the offence (for example referral to a professional body). Prosecution decisions will be made in accordance with the fraud and corruption prosecution policy (Appendix A).
- 3.5 As a further deterrent, and to minimise losses, the council will attempt to recover any losses incurred through civil or legal action. In addition, the council will seek to apply any appropriate fines or penalties, and recover any costs incurred in investigating and prosecuting cases.

4 Responsibilities

- 4.1 Overall responsibility for this policy rests with the council's Finance Manager (section 151 officer) on behalf of the council in accordance with the council's constitution.
- 4.2 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee has a responsibility to provide advice to the council on issues arising out of fraud investigations and to report any remedial or preventative action that has or which ought to be taken by the council

in relation to such matters. It also monitors the application of council policies on whistle-blowing and counter fraud & corruption and can consider any matter referred to it in accordance with the council's whistle-blowing policy and procedures.

- 4.3 The Senior Management Team (SMT) has a responsibility for ensuring that the council has effective fraud and corruption procedures embedded across the organisation that comply with best practice and good governance standards and requirements.
- 4.4 Veritau (who provide internal audit and counter fraud services to the council) is responsible for reviewing the council's counter fraud and corruption policies on a regular basis and for recommending any required changes to those policies. In addition, Veritau leads on fraud prevention and detection issues for the council and is responsible for investigating suspected cases of fraud or corruption. The internal audit team carries out audit work to ensure that systems of control are operating effectively, which contributes to the reduction in opportunities for committing fraud. The Head of Internal Audit is required to report his/her professional opinion on the council's control environment to members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on an annual basis in accordance with proper practice.
- 4.5 The council's Finance Manager as chief financial officer is required to ensure the council has appropriate systems of control in place to prevent and detect fraud. All senior managers have a responsibility for preventing and detecting fraud within their service areas. This includes maintenance of effective systems of internal control and ensuring that any weaknesses identified through the work of internal audit or by other means are addressed promptly.
- 4.6 The council's Finance Manager (section 151 officer) is the council's nominated officer for the purposes of the Money Laundering Regulations (2007), and has a statutory responsibility for reporting any issues referred in this capacity.
- 4.7 All staff have a general responsibility to be aware of the possibility of fraud and corruption, and to report any suspicions that they may have to Veritau. Where appropriate, staff may use the whistleblowing policy to raise concerns anonymously.
- 4.8 Officers within human resources have a responsibility to support service departments in undertaking any necessary disciplinary process after consultation and initial investigation, where appropriate, by Veritau.

5 Overall Counter Fraud Arrangements

Introduction

- 5.1 The purpose of this section is to set out the council's overall framework for countering the risk of fraud and corruption. While the council aims to follow best practice in relation to counter fraud activity¹, it recognises that new and emerging fraud risks will require a dynamic approach to fraud prevention and detection.

Measurement

- 5.2 The council will assess the potential risks and losses due to fraud and corruption, and will use these to prioritise counter fraud activity, and review the resources available to counter those risks. The review will include an assessment of actual levels of fraud² and the effectiveness of counter fraud activity in reducing losses. The outcome of this review will be reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on an annual basis as part of the audit and fraud planning cycle.

Culture

- 5.3 The council will promote a culture whereby all staff, members, service users, and contractors are aware that fraud or corruption in any form is unacceptable. To do this, it will:
- ensure that there are clear arrangements in place for reporting suspicions about potential fraud or corruption, whether that be by staff, council members, partners, stakeholders, contractors or members of the public;
 - investigate reported suspicions and where evidence of fraud or corruption is found will prosecute where appropriate and take any other action necessary in accordance with the financial regulations, contract procedure rules, fraud and corruption prosecution policy, disciplinary procedures, members code of conduct, or any relevant legislation or guidance;
 - ensure that the consequences of committing fraud and/or partaking in corrupt practices are widely publicised.

¹ For example the CIPFA Code of Practice on Managing the Risk of Fraud and Corruption.

² All suspected fraud should be reported to Veritau. A record of all such information will be maintained on a confidential basis.

Prevention and Detection

Controls

- 5.4 As part of its ongoing operating procedures, the council seeks to ensure that proper systems of internal control are in place. This includes controls to directly prevent and detect fraud, such as separation of duties and management review, along with other procedures such as vetting as part of recruitment processes and systems for declaration of interests and gifts and hospitality. The effectiveness of systems of control are monitored and a formal report is made as part of the process for preparing the annual governance statement. The council maintains a system of internal audit to provide independent review of control systems on an ongoing basis, in accordance with a risk assessment.
- 5.5 Services will be encouraged to consider the risk of fraud as part of the council's risk management process. Any information on risks identified will be used to inform the annual review of counter fraud activity.

Proactive Work

- 5.6 The council will carry out targeted project work (for example data matching exercises) to identify fraud and corruption in known high risk areas. This work will be carried out by Veritau as part of its annual workplan. Work will be prioritised based on a risk assessment as part of the annual review of counter fraud activity. Work may include joint exercises with other agencies, including other local councils.
- 5.7 The council will take part in projects led by other agencies such as the Cabinet Office and the DWP to identify potential fraud e.g. the National Fraud Initiative and HBMS Data Matching Service. Resources will be allocated to follow up all data matches as part of audit and fraud workplans. Veritau will work with service departments to ensure that they are aware of the need to include notices to service users stating that any data held may be subject to use for data matching purposes.

Relationships

- 5.8 The council has established relationships with a number of other agencies. It will continue to develop these relationships and develop new ones to further the prevention and detection of fraud. Organisations which the council will work with include:
- the police
 - the courts
 - the Cabinet Office

- the Department for Communities and Local Government
- the Department for Works and Pensions
- other councils
- community groups

5.9 Veritau will work with council departments to ensure that systems for reporting and investigating suspected fraud and corruption are robust.

Fraud Awareness Training

5.10 As part of its annual workplan, Veritau will provide targeted fraud awareness training to specific groups of staff, based on its annual risk assessment.

Investigation

5.11 All suspected cases of fraud, corruption, theft or other irregularity will be investigated. The nature of each investigation will depend on the circumstances of each case. Veritau will act as a first port of call for any suspected fraud and will provide advice on whether other agencies should be notified (eg the police). Veritau will determine the extent of the investigation to be carried out in consultation with the Finance Manager (s151), service departments and human resources. Where necessary, Veritau may refer cases to other agencies (for example the police) at the discretion of the Head of Internal Audit.

5.12 All staff involved in the investigation of fraud will be appropriately trained. They will be required to comply with any relevant legislation and codes of practice. For example the Police and Criminal Evidence Act (PACE), Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (RIPA), the Data Protection Act, and the Criminal Procedures Investigations Act (CPIA). Investigators will take into account the individual circumstances of anyone involved in an investigation and adjustments to procedure will be made where necessary to ensure that all parties are treated equitably (where it is appropriate and reasonable to do so).

5.13 As part of the outcome of every investigation, a review of any weaknesses in control will be made and if necessary recommendations will be made to address any issues identified. These will be set out in a formal report to the managers of the service concerned, and will be followed up to ensure the issues are addressed.

5.14 The Head of Internal Audit will ensure that systems for investigating fraud are reviewed on an ongoing basis, to ensure that they remain up to date and comply with good practice.

Publicity

- 5.15 The council will publicise all successful prosecutions undertaken either by itself or by partner organisations, to act as a deterrent against future fraud.
- 5.16 In addition, where appropriate, targeted publicity will be used to raise the awareness of fraud to staff, members, the public, and other agencies. This will consist of both internal and external publicity and will aim to:
- raise awareness about potential fraud and ensure all stakeholders are alert to the possibilities of fraud;
 - inform all stakeholders of the procedures to be followed if they have suspicions of fraud;
 - ensure that all stakeholders are aware that the council will not tolerate fraud and the consequences of committing fraud against it.

Recovery of Monies

- 5.17 Where any loss has been incurred by the council or additional costs have been incurred as a result of fraud or corruption, the council will seek to recover these from the individual or organisation concerned. This will help to ensure that the financial impact of fraud on the council is minimised and act as a deterrent. As a further deterrent, the council will seek to levy any appropriate fines or penalties where it is possible and desirable to do so.
- 5.18 Methods of recovery may include (but are not limited to):
- recovery from assets held by the organisation or individual (using the Proceeds of Crime Act or any other relevant legislation);
 - bankruptcy where appropriate;
 - recovery from future salary payments if an individual remains an employee of the council;
 - recovery of pension contributions from employees or members who are members of the North Yorkshire Pension Fund.

6 Monitoring & Review Arrangements

- 6.1 The arrangements set out in this policy document will be reviewed on an annual basis as part of the audit and fraud planning cycle and will include the fraud and corruption prosecution policy (Appendix A) and other related guidance. Veritau will work with other departments to ensure that other related guidance and policy (such as the whistleblowing policy) are reviewed on a regular basis and any amendments or necessary changes are reported to members for approval.

LAST REVIEWED AND UPDATED: 28 July 2016

Appendix A

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FRAUD AND CORRUPTION PROSECUTION POLICY

1 Scope and Purpose

- 1.1 The fraud and corruption prosecution policy forms part of the council's overall counter-fraud and corruption strategy. The policy covers all acts, and/or attempted acts, of fraud or corruption committed by officers or members of the council, or committed by members of the public, or other organisations or their employees, against the council.
- 1.2 The policy sets out the circumstances in which the council will take legal action against the perpetrators of fraud or corruption. It also sets out the circumstances when it is appropriate to consider alternative courses of action such as offering a caution. The policy does not cover internal disciplinary procedures which are the subject of the council's separate disciplinary policy and procedures.
- 1.3 This policy should be read in conjunction with the council's constitution, financial regulations, contract procedure rules, the counter fraud and corruption policy and the strategy, the whistleblowing policy and the council's disciplinary policy and procedures.
- 1.4 The policy contains specific guidelines for determining the most appropriate course of action when fraud has been identified. Offences other than fraud and corruption (for example those relevant to the enforcement of regulations) are dealt with by the appropriate service departments under other policies and relying on specific legal powers.

2 Principles

- 2.1 The council is committed to an effective anti-fraud and corruption strategy. The strategy is designed to encourage the prevention and detection of fraud and corruption. As part of the strategy the council is also committed to taking appropriate action against anyone believed to have attempted and/or committed a fraudulent or corrupt act against it. The council considers that those guilty of fraud or corruption must take responsibility for their actions before the courts.
- 2.2 The policy is designed to ensure that the council acts fairly and consistently when determining what action to take against the perpetrators of fraud or corruption.
- 2.3 Staff and members who are found to have committed fraud or corruption may be prosecuted in addition to such other action(s) that the council may decide to take, including disciplinary proceedings in the case of staff and referral to the relevant officer or body in the case of members. Any decision not to prosecute a member of staff for fraud and corruption does not preclude remedial action being taken by the relevant director(s)

in accordance with the council's disciplinary procedures or other policies.

- 2.4 This Policy is also designed to be consistent with council policies on equalities. The council will be sensitive to the circumstances of each case and the nature of the crime when considering whether to prosecute or not.
- 2.5 The consistent application of the policy will provide a means for ensuring that those who have perpetrated fraud and corruption are appropriately penalised. It will also act as a meaningful deterrent to those who are contemplating committing fraud or corruption. The council recognises the deterrent value of good publicity and therefore information regarding successful prosecutions and sanctions will be made public.
- 2.6 Any decision taken by an authorised officer to prosecute an individual or to offer a formal sanction will be recorded in writing. The reason for the decision being taken will also be recorded.
- 2.7 Irrespective of the action taken to prosecute the perpetrators of fraud and corruption, the council will take whatever steps necessary to recover any losses incurred, including taking action in the civil courts.

3 Prosecution

- 3.1 The policy is intended to ensure the successful prosecution of offenders in court. However, not every contravention of the law should be considered for prosecution. The council will weigh the seriousness of the offence (taking into account the harm done or the potential for harm arising from the offence) with other relevant factors, including the financial circumstances of the defendant, mitigating circumstances and other public interest criteria. All cases will be looked at individually and be considered on their own merit.
- 3.2 To consider a case for prosecution the council must be satisfied that two tests have been passed. Firstly, there must be sufficient evidence of guilt to ensure conviction. This is called the **evidential test**. Secondly, it must be in the public interest to proceed – the **public interest test**.
- 3.3 To pass the evidential test, authorised officers must be satisfied that there is a realistic prospect of conviction based on the available evidence (that is, there must be sufficient admissible, substantial and reliable evidence to secure a conviction).
- 3.4 To pass the public interest test, the authorised officer will balance, carefully and fairly, the public interest criteria against the seriousness of

the offence. The public interest criteria include;

- the likely sentence (if convicted);
- any previous convictions and the conduct of the defendant;
- whether there are grounds for believing the offence is likely to be repeated;
- the prevalence of the offence in the area;
- whether the offence was committed as a result of a genuine mistake or misunderstanding;
- any undue delay between the offence taking place and/or being detected and the date of the trial;
- the likely effect that a prosecution will have on the defendant;
- whether the defendant has put right the loss or harm caused.

3.5 It will generally be in the public interest to prosecute if one or more of the following factors applies, subject to any mitigating circumstances;

- the actual or potential loss to the council was substantial;
- the fraud has continued over a long period of time;
- the fraud was calculated and deliberate;
- the person has previously committed fraud against the council (even if prosecution did not result) and/or there has been a history of fraudulent activity;
- the person was in a position of trust (for example, a member of staff);
- there has been an abuse of position or privilege;
- the person has declined the offer of a caution or financial penalty;
- the case has involved the use of false identities and/or false or forged documents;

4 Mitigating Factors

4.1 The following mitigating factors will be taken into account when determining whether to prosecute;

Voluntary Disclosure

4.2 A voluntary disclosure occurs when an offender voluntarily reveals fraud about which the council is otherwise unaware. If this happens, then the

fraud will be investigated but the offender will not be prosecuted unless in exceptional circumstances. However, any person colluding in the crime will still be prosecuted. A disclosure is not voluntary if the:-

- admission is not a complete disclosure of the fraud;
- admission of the fraud is made only because discovery of the fraud is likely, (for example, the offender knows the council is already undertaking an investigation in this area and/or other counter fraud activity);
- offender only admits the facts when challenged or questioned;
- offender supplies the correct facts when making a claim to Legal Aid.

Ill Health or Disability

- 4.3 Where the perpetrator (and/or their partner) is suffering from prolonged ill health or has a serious disability or other incapacity then the offender will not normally be prosecuted. Evidence from a GP or other doctor will be requested if the condition is claimed to exist, unless it is obvious to the investigator. It is also necessary to prove that the person understood the rules governing the type of fraud committed and was aware that their action is wrong. This may not be possible where, for instance, the offender has serious learning difficulties. However, simple ignorance of the law will not prevent prosecution.

Social Factors

- 4.4 A wide range of social factors may make a prosecution undesirable. The test is whether the court will consider the prosecution undesirable, and go on to reflect that in the sentence.

Exceptional Circumstances

- 4.5 In certain exceptional circumstances the council may decide not to prosecute an offender. Such circumstances include;
- the inability to complete the investigation within a reasonable period of time;
 - the prosecution would not be in the interests of the council;
 - circumstances beyond the control of the council make a prosecution unattainable.

5 Alternatives to Prosecution

5.1 If some cases are considered strong enough for prosecution but there are mitigating circumstances which cast a doubt as to whether a prosecution is appropriate then the council may consider the offer of a sanction instead. The two sanctions available are;

- a caution, or;
- financial penalty.

Simple Cautions

5.2 A simple caution is a warning given in certain circumstances as an alternative to prosecution, to a person who has committed an offence. All cautions are recorded internally and kept for a period of six years. Where a person offends again in the future then any previous cautions will influence the decision on whether to prosecute or not.

5.3 For less serious offences a simple caution will normally be considered where all of the following apply;

- there is sufficient evidence to justify instituting criminal proceedings;
- the person has admitted the offence;
- there is no significant public requirement to prosecute;
- it was a first offence, and;
- a financial penalty is not considered to be appropriate.

Only in very exceptional circumstances will a further caution be offered for a second or subsequent offence of the same nature.

5.4 Cautions will be administered by the Head of Internal Audit (or deputy), Counter Fraud Manager, or a senior fraud investigator. If a caution is offered but not accepted then the council will usually consider the case for prosecution. In such cases the court will be informed that the defendant was offered a penalty but declined to accept it.

Financial Penalties

5.5 The Council Tax Reduction Schemes (Detection of Fraud and Enforcement) (England) Regulations 2013, permit a financial penalty to be offered to claimants as an alternative to prosecution. The penalty is set at 50% of the amount of the excess reduction, subject to a minimum

of £100 and a maximum of £1000. Once a penalty is accepted, the claimant has 14 days to change their mind.

5.6 Subject to the thresholds set out in the guidelines below, a financial penalty will normally be offered by the council in the following circumstances;

- the council believes that there is sufficient evidence to prosecute;
- it was a first offence or a previous offence was dealt with by way of a caution, and;
- in the opinion of the council, the circumstances of the case mean it is not overwhelmingly suitable for prosecution, and;
- the claimant has the means to repay both the overpayment and the penalty, and;
- there is a strong likelihood that both the excess reduction and the penalty will be repaid.

5.7 It is important to note that the claimant does not need to have admitted the offence for a financial penalty to be offered. Financial penalties will be administered by the Head of Internal Audit (or deputy), Counter Fraud Manager or a senior investigation officer. If a financial penalty is not accepted or is withdrawn then the council will usually consider the case for prosecution. In such cases the court will be informed that the defendant was offered a penalty but declined to accept it.

6 Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 (POCA)

6.1 In addition to the actions set out in this policy, the council reserves the right to refer all suitable cases for financial investigation with a view to applying to the courts for restraint and/or confiscation of identified assets. A restraint order will prevent a person from dealing with specific assets. A confiscation order enables the council to recover its losses from assets which are found to be the proceeds of crime.

7 Implementation Date

7.1 This revised policy is effective from 8 July 2016 and covers all decisions relating to prosecutions and sanctions after this date.

POLICY LAST REVIEWED AND UPDATED 28 July 2016