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| Report to: | Audit & Corporate Governance | 12 October 2023 |
| Lead Cabinet Member: | Councillor John Williams Lead Cabinet Member for Resources | |
| Lead Officer: | Peter Maddock, Head of Finance | |

Key Amnesty Project

Executive Summary

1. This report provides a review of the Key Amnesty project led by the Corporate Fraud Team and supported by colleagues in Housing Services and the Communications team. The project had a number of key aims related to Social Housing Tenancy Fraud and was carried out during February 2023. It is generally accepted that a period of time following the amnesty should be allowed before assessing the outcome.

Key Decision

2. This is not a key decision as there are no resource implications directly arising from the report.

Recommendations

3. **That Audit and Corporate Governance Committee note the review and success of the Key Amnesty project.**

Reasons for Recommendations

4. To note the report.

Details

5. In the current economic climate, there is an increased focus being placed on local government to protect public funds. The authority is an attractive target for fraudsters and is vulnerable to acts of fraud, corruption or irregularity. The current Cost-of-Living Crisis, compounded by financial recovery as the legacy of the Covid 19 Crisis, has broadened the scope and demand for anti-fraud services. Ongoing delivery of Central Government support packages and financial pressures have heightened incentive and risk of abuse.
6. The Key Amnesty project was aimed at tackling the significant issues relating to Social Housing Tenancy Fraud. It has been estimated that more than 100,000 social homes in the UK are subject to some form of tenancy fraud. [Figure based on Protecting the Public Purse report 2012]. Whilst this figure is a little out of date it is highly likely that this figure is now higher.

7. South Cambridgeshire District Council currently manages over five thousand tenancies within the district. Social housing tenancy fraud is the second-largest cause of Local Government fraud losses. When housing supply is reduced by fraudulent tenancies local councils carry the financial burden of providing accommodation for the homeless.
8. The project has a number of aspects to it and whilst one aspect is to encourage tenants who are occupying or sub-letting Council property contrary to their tenancy agreement to return their keys without facing criminal action, other aspects include the following:-
 - a) Raising awareness and vigilance, this is promoted through provision of easily accessed resources to support the identification of fraud and to confidentially report suspicions of fraud on internal and external platforms.
 - b) Support intolerance towards fraud within South Cambridgeshire communities through publicity and education to highlight the cost of fraud to the community.
 - c) Provide accessible fraud awareness resources which empower the community to assist in identification and prevention.
 - d) Assure South Cambridgeshire communities that fraud is taken seriously by the Council and that both proactive and responsive approaches are adopted to prevent and detect fraud and ensure finite assets are not misdirected.
9. All of these aspects support the counter Fraud and Error Strategy that was considered by this committee in July 2021 and adopted at cabinet in September 2021.
10. The media campaign commenced on 17th January 2023 and between then and the end of February reached over 42,000 people. Communities accessed information about housing fraud via Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. There was also media coverage by the Royston Crow, Cambs News, Cambridge Network, Cambridge Independent and TV West Anglia.
11. The amnesty itself started on 1st February 2023 and the Corporate Fraud team, in partnership with Housing services, ran the Campaign to raise awareness around social housing fraud and to provide an opportunity for those misusing social housing to return their keys. The campaign used the tag line #Dotherightthing.
12. As part of the education aspect tenants were written to directly in the interest of raising awareness of social housing fraud and explaining what social housing fraud might look like in a relatable way. Following the unprecedented circumstances of the Covid Pandemic, affecting the living arrangements of many, tenants were provided with an opportunity to return housing where it was not being used in accordance with tenancy agreements.
13. The campaign ended on 28th February but it was recognised that there would need to be a period of time afterwards to assess the impact of the project fully.
14. Between the period of 19 January 2022 to 31 March 2022, one (1) housing related referral was received compared to the period of 19 January 2023 to 31 March 2023

when sixteen (16) housing related referrals were received. These referrals only relate to housing fraud reports and exclude referrals relating to other fraud categories.

15. Housing reported 71 tenancy terminations in total in January and February 2023. In the same two months of the previous year there were 50. Housing report fluctuations each month between 20-40 individual terminations and the increase cannot be attributed specifically to the amnesty. Notice was provided in writing for each termination of tenancy as prescribed in the standard tenancy agreement. The reasons for each termination described mirror typical trends.
16. Following the success of the project it is proposed to carry out further fraud prevention work including a more general campaign around awareness and how residents can report their suspicions and help in the fight to combat fraud.

Implications

17. In the writing of this report, taking into account the financial, legal, staffing, risk management, equality and diversity, climate change, community safety and any other key issues, the following implications have been considered:

Legal

18. The work of the Corporate Fraud function supports the Chief Finance Officer and Council responsibilities to safeguard council assets under section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972.

Policy

19. The Fraud and Error Strategy adopted by Cabinet in September 2021 governs the Councils approach to fraud and error and the policies and practices adopted to robustly prevent and detect fraud against the Council in all its forms.

Finance

20. The additional cost was minimal and met from existing budgets. There would also be monetary savings from preventing acts of fraud but of course this cannot be quantified.

Risk/Opportunities

21. The Council is vulnerable to fraud in its many and varied forms and the Corporate fraud team are there to help mitigate this risk with prevention measures, detection and where appropriate prosecution of offenders. There is also a council wide fraud risk assessment which looks at the many risks across the council and the mitigation in place for each risk.

Climate Change

22. There are no direct environmental implications arising from the report.

Consultation Responses

23. Consultations have been undertaken with the Lead Cabinet Member for Resources and officers in Finance, Housing and Communications as appropriate.

Alignment with Council Priority Areas

24. The project supports all council priorities as robust fraud prevention and detection measures help mitigate the loss of funds through fraudulent activity. Those funds can then be used to fund services in all areas of the Council.

Background Papers

Where the Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Meetings and Access to Information) (England) Regulations 2012 require documents to be open to inspection by members of the public, they must be available for inspection:

- (a) at all reasonable hours at the offices of South Cambridgeshire District Council;
- (b) on the Council's website; and
- (c) in the case of documents to be available for inspection pursuant to regulation 15, on payment of a reasonable fee required by the Council by the person seeking to inspect the documents at the offices of South Cambridgeshire District Council.

The following documents are relevant to this report:

- Fraud and Error Strategy – Report to Audit and Governance Committee: 29 July 2021
- Fraud and Error Strategy – Report to Cabinet: 6 September 2021
- Internal Audit and Counter Fraud update – Quarterly report to Audit and Governance Committee.
- Fraud Risk Assessment.

Appendices

None

Links to Media articles

[Key Amnesty' to tackle misused South Cambs council properties | Royston Crow \(royston-crow.co.uk\)](https://www.royston-crow.co.uk)

[South Cambridgeshire amnesty for housing fraudsters - CambsNews](#)

[Key Amnesty campaign to tackle misused Council properties in South Cambridgeshire | Cambridge Network](#)

['Hand in your keys - no questions asked' - month-long amnesty will tackle misused council properties in South Cambridgeshire \(cambridgeindependent.co.uk\)](#)

That's TV West Anglia on Twitter: ""if you're in the situation, then you put your keys in an envelope with the address on it" Cllr John Batchelor from @SouthCambs told That's TV

about their #dotherightthing campaign, which is aiming to try and recover some of their Council houses. <https://t.co/UD4BciYET0>" / Twitter

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