Agenda Item No.

Report Title: Annual Report - Investigation & Enforcement Support Team

Introduction and Background

1. This report provides an update on the work of the Investigation and Enforcement Support Team within the Finance & IT Service for the annual year 1st April 2020 to 31st March 2021.

2. The Corporate Investigations Team was established 10 years ago following a centralisation of fraud for Revenues and Benefits. The team now works across the authority to support Services in areas that could attract fraud and develop processes for detection. The team have been successful in this over the years, working with Housing to ensure Right to Buy and Homelessness applicants are entitled and Environmental Services on fly tip investigations.

3. The Investigation Team has 6 full time equivalent staff consisting of; 1 Manager, 1 Senior Investigator, 1 Investigator and 1 Trainee Investigator, 1 Intelligence Officer, and 1 Intelligence Officer Apprentice.

Current Position

4. The costs of the investigation team is as follows:

	£
Direct costs (i.e. wages)	285,204.61
External grants and contributions	121.567.00
Indirect costs (i.e. payroll/legal)	48,390.73
Total cost	**212,028,34**

5. During 2020/21 the team, alongside relevant Services conducted approx. 268 investigations and a number of specific campaigns to identify financial abuse, irregularity and fraud. The overall financial value identified was almost **£616,000** of public funds. This equated to almost **£220,000** of Ashford Borough Council funds.

   Although a reduction on previous years, it should be noted that the COVID19 pandemic did delay some planned work as the team were redeployed to assist with the Pandemic, working with those shielding and allocation of the Business Grant Scheme.

Project Areas and Savings

6. Even though work was paused responding to the pandemic once back to the 'day jobs' the Investigations Team worked in partnership with the **Revenues and Benefits** Team, to identify various financial savings following active investigations;

   Removal of Single Persons Council Tax Discount £15,825

Amended Council Tax Liability	£47,349
Council Tax Fines	£210
Overpayment of Rent Allowance & Rebates	£2,642
Removal of Business Rate Grants	£43,859

Small Business Rate Relief continued to be highlighted as an area of high financial risk and further reviews and investigations have taken place. This has attributed savings as follows;

Small Business Rate Relief Review	£174,404*

*It must be noted that the above saving will be achieved year on year.

Business Rates is another high risk area for us. We identify Businesses' that have not registered, as well as properties that have undeclared holiday lets and are therefore not on the rating list. Additional income attributed is as follows;

Undeclared Business Rates	£242,180*

*It can again be noted that this additional income will be year on year.

7. The team is working in partnership with our **Housing Team**, to safeguard our properties to ensure that only those with genuine entitlement are allocated Housing.

The Council protects its 'Right to Buy Scheme', ensuring that only those entitled receive discounts. Successful 'Right to Buy' applications have been reduced annually by 30% since the team have been verifying the application process and one 'Right to Buy' application was refused. (This year's reduction is higher due to the Pandemic)

Discount Refused	£65,000

The team has also identified 3 cases of false application for housing, resulting in a saving of;

Housing Duty Discharged	£21,600

The Team, alongside Housing also identified 4 properties that were unlicensed Houses of Multiple Occupation resulting in a saving of;

HMO Licenses	£2,255

8. A new partnership area of the team was working with Building Control and we identified an extra fee of £569.

Commercialisation – Extensive work took place to look at commercialising our Investigation Service within Kent. The team were awarded a one year contract with East Kent Housing (EKH) to investigate Social Housing Fraud on their behalf. The contract attracted an income of £38,000. An Apprentice intelligence Officer role was added to the Investigations Team to ensure there was capacity to deliver the contract. This recruitment has been successful

and although EKH was disbanded during the year, officers are delighted to report that three of the four Authorities within EKH are looking to extended the contract for another year.

Conclusion

9. This has been another successful year for the team even with the pressures of the pandemic on the team.

Future

10. The team are continuing with the commercial approach and are looking to undertake further commercial partnerships with Housing Associations within the Kent Housing Group; to provide a proven investigation service for further return on investment for Ashford Borough Council. We are about to commence a pilot exercise for Optivo Housing Association.

11. The Team are also looking to meet Services to discuss areas fraud could take place and work with Services to detect fraud and investigate where required.

12. Develop a communication campaign to highlight where fraud happens and how successful the Council is at detecting it, with the aim of deterring fraud within the Borough.

13. Support the data matching project and ultimately the implementation of the Golden Record System. Due to Ashford Port Health live date being moved into 2022, the Administration team will be redeployed to assist on the valuable data matching and cleansing project. This project will revolutionise the way we communicate with our customers and they communicate with us.

Portfolio Holder's Views

14. It is pleasing to see the work the Team have done this year, even with the Pandemic pressures. The Team are a valuable asset, not only have they helped to protect public funds of over £600,000 they are also working with other organisations to increase the Council's commercial income.

15. I am keen to support the communication campaign as I believe by shouting about our achievements it will deter others from committing fraud.

Contact and Email

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