

AGENDA ITEM

REPORT TO CABINET

20 MAY 2021

**REPORT OF CRIME
AND DISORDER
SELECT COMMITTEE**

CABINET DECISION

Lead Cabinet Member – Access, Communities and Community Safety – Cllr Steve Nelson

SCRUTINY REVIEW OF FRAUD AWARENESS (PERSONAL)

SUMMARY

The attached report presents the outcomes of the Crime and Disorder Select Committee's review of Fraud Awareness (Personal).

REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION(S) / DECISION(S)

A scrutiny topic originally submitted by the Victim Care and Advice Service (VCAS) as a review of Action Fraud (the national fraud recording centre), it was recognised early in the planning of this piece of work that the Committee could have very limited direct influence on a resource that is operated in London. As such, the agreed focus for the Committee became two-fold: firstly, to raise awareness of fraud against the person, and secondly, to ascertain the ways in which local victims of this crime are identified and supported. The review is now complete, and the recommendations have been endorsed by the Crime and Disorder Select Committee for submission to Cabinet.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee recommend that:

- 1) Representation is made to Action Fraud encouraging the sharing of relevant fraud information with the Local Authority (reflective of this review and in support of the National Trading Standards position).
- 2) Cleveland Police consider the existing resources it has in place to tackle fraud, with a view to facilitating the disruption and prevention of fraud being committed in the first place, in addition to the investigation and prosecution of such crime.
- 3) Cleveland Police maximise the Neighbourhood Policing model to aid in identifying and supporting vulnerable residents, providing regular updates on the latest fraud-related activity and how residents can protect themselves (e.g. utilising the new Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC) for Cleveland monthly e-newsletter).
- 4) All local partners continue sharing and disseminating key anti-fraud messages, emerging threats, reporting mechanisms and existing fraud-related resources via all available platforms (not just online).

- 5) Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council includes a regular fraud-related feature in Stockton News which details the latest scams, reinforces reporting routes, and, where possible, highlights the prevalence of fraud against particular age-groups, including those under 40 years-old.
- 6) Relevant data and key messages for young people around fraud crime be shared with the Council's Bright Minds Big Futures (BMBF) initiative to facilitate strengthened awareness-raising with that specific demographic.
- 7) The feasibility of supporting Age UK Teesside to extend its provision of digital projects (enabling older people to learn about devices / how to use the internet) in Middlesbrough / Redcar and Cleveland to Stockton-on-Tees is further explored.

DETAIL

1. A wrongful or criminal deception intended to result in financial or personal gain or loss, fraud covers a variety of misdemeanours including cyber crime, doorstep crime, and telephone and postal-enabled offences. However, unlike other crime types such as theft, burglary or assaults which are reported directly to Cleveland Police, fraud cases are instead reported to a National Recording Centre based in the City of London known as Action Fraud.
2. Action Fraud collate any received information and, where appropriate, send investigation packages to the Force where the offender resides, notifying the Force covering the area where the victim resides. The vast majority of fraud offences are perpetrated from outside of the Cleveland area (and often from outside of the UK) though, making investigation and detection extremely difficult.
3. The impact upon victims of fraud can be devastating, with people sometimes losing their life savings. The Victim Care and Advice Service (VCAS) (which offers free, independent and confidential support for individuals and their families throughout the Cleveland and Durham areas) receive between 150-170 such victims every month, though the current thinking is that about 5% of victims actually report an offence, meaning that the actual figure will be between 3,000 and 3,500 victims per month.
4. The emergence of COVID-19 in 2020 has led to numerous reports of increasing fraudulent activity, with the Association of Certified Fraud Examiners (ACFE) (badged as the world's largest anti-fraud organisation) stating that the pandemic is the perfect storm for fraud.
5. The aim of this review was principally two-fold: firstly to raise awareness of fraud against the person, and secondly to ascertain the ways in which local victims of this crime are identified and supported. In addition, the Committee sought to understand the process for reporting (personal) fraud offences, including the role of key stakeholders in the handling of cases, and establish how the public are made aware of the required reporting mechanisms (and how this is reinforced by local organisations, including work around reducing the risk of becoming a victim of fraud).

Mindful of the ongoing pandemic, the identification of any local COVID-19-related fraud concerns (and whether any targeted awareness-raising / support may be required) would also be an important factor in this work.

6. The Committee took evidence from a range of stakeholders including the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC) for Cleveland, Cleveland Police, Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council (Trading Standards and Adult Safeguarding), the Victim Care and Advice Service (VCAS), Stockton and District Advice and Information Service (SDAIS), and Age UK

Teesside. In addition, a variety of relevant information was sourced from the Action Fraud website.

COMMUNITY IMPACT IMPLICATIONS

7. A key message from this review (supported by data provided to the Committee) was that everyone is susceptible to fraud and that, contrary to some long-standing myths around this type of crime, people of all demographics can, and do, become victims of fraudulent activity. As documented in the Committee's final report, there is already a host of anti-fraud resources in existence, and it is the responsibility of the Council, its partners and indeed residents themselves to share information and continue to raise awareness of new and emerging scams across all available platforms in order to reduce risk to the local population. The recommendations within the final report also seek to disrupt and prevent fraud being committed in the first place, echoing another key message that fraud is hard to deal with once a crime has been committed but can often be easily prevented.

CORPORATE PARENTING IMPLICATIONS

8. There are no direct implications in the report.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

9. Future fraud awareness-raising campaigns may incur limited costs (depending on the medium used) and there may also be a financial requirement to extend the existing Age UK Teesside digital projects in Middlesbrough / Redcar and Cleveland to Stockton-on-Tees.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

10. There are no legal implications identified at this stage.

RISK ASSESSMENT

11. The review is categorised as low to medium risk. Existing management systems and daily routine activities are sufficient to control and reduce risk.

WARDS AFFECTED AND CONSULTATION WITH WARD/COUNCILLORS

12. Cases of fraud are not limited to certain areas of the Borough, therefore this review was not Ward-specific.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

13. None.

Name of Contact Officer: Gary Woods

Post Title: Scrutiny Officer

Telephone No. 01642 526187

Email Address: gary.woods@stockton.gov.uk