

FRAUD RESPONSE PLAN

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Halton Borough Council is committed to the highest possible standards of propriety and accountability in all its affairs. It is determined to develop a culture of honesty and opposition to fraud and corruption.
- 1.2 In line with this commitment, the Anti-Fraud, Bribery & Corruption Policy outlines the principles the Council is committed to in relation to preventing, reporting and managing fraud and corruption.
- 1.3 The Fraud Response Plan reinforces the Authority's approach by:
 - Defining the types of activity that would require the implementation of this plan;
 - Setting out how employees or members of the public can voice their concerns about suspected fraud and corruption;
 - Outlining how the Council will deal with such complaints.
- 1.4 This Plan is one of a suite of documents that collectively constitute the policies of the Council in relation to anti-fraud and anti-corruption. The other key documents include:
 - Anti-Fraud, Bribery & Corruption Policy
 - Local Code of Corporate Governance
 - Finance Standing Orders
 - Procurement Standing Orders
 - Member Code of Conduct
 - Employee Code of Conduct
 - Confidential Reporting Code (Whistleblowing Policy)
 - Fraud Sanction and Prosecution Policy

2. Defining Fraud and Corruption

- 2.1 The Fraud Response Plan is intended to be implemented where suspicions of fraud or corruption have been raised:

Fraud is defined as:

Acting dishonestly with the intention of making a personal gain or a gain for another, or inflicting a loss (or a risk of loss) on another; this includes but is not limited to:

- *Dishonestly making a false representation*
- *Dishonestly failing to disclose to another person, information which they are under a legal duty to disclose*
- *Committing fraud by abuse of position, including any offence as defined in the Fraud Act 2006.*

Corruption is defined as:

The offering, giving, soliciting or acceptance of an inducement or reward, which may influence the action of any person.

2.2 Fraudulent or corrupt acts may therefore include:

Financial issues

Where individuals or organisations fraudulently obtain money or a financial gain from the Council, (e.g. insurance claims, Council Tax Single Person Discounts)

Asset issues

Where Council assets are misappropriated or used for personal use (e.g. theft of Council equipment, information or materials)

Accounting issues

Where employees falsify or alter accounting or other records (e.g. unauthorised amendment of financial records or timesheets)

Other issues

Activities undertaken by officers or elected members which may:

- Be unlawful;
- Contravene Standing Orders or Council policies,
- Fall below established standards or practices, or amount to improper conduct.

2.3 This is not an exhaustive list. Advice regarding the seriousness of any concerns can be obtained from the Head of Audit, Procurement & Operational Finance.

3. Reporting suspected fraud and corruption

3.1 Any officer shall immediately report to the Head of Audit, Procurement & Operational Finance, either directly or through line management, or via the Council's Confidential Reporting Code, any circumstances which suggest the possibility of financial irregularity or loss. The circumstances will be reviewed and the necessary action will be taken by way of investigation, report, sanction and recovery.

3.2 The Council's Confidential Reporting Code is intended to encourage and enable employees to raise serious concerns within the Council. This policy document makes it clear that concerns may be raised without fear of victimisation, subsequent discrimination or disadvantage. The policy applies to all employees and those contractors working for the Council on Council premises, e.g. agency staff, builders, drivers, consultants. It also covers suppliers and those providing services under a contract with the Council in their own premises, e.g. care homes.

3.3 The Council's Confidential Reporting Code provides details as to how concerns of fraud or corruption may be reported:

- Director and Monitoring Officer (Legal and Democratic Services);
- Operational Director – Chief Executives Delivery Unit; and
- Head of Audit, Procurement & Operational Finance

- Chair of the Standards Committee (who can be contacted by a letter addressed to the Chair of the Standards Committee and sent to the Municipal Building, Kingsway, Widnes, WA8 7QF).

4. Investigating suspected fraud and corruption

- 4.1 The Single Fraud Investigation Service of the DWP investigates and prosecutes Social Security welfare benefits and tax credit fraud. As a result, the Council will only complete investigation of Housing Benefit fraud when there are joint working arrangements agreed between the DWP and the Council.
- 4.2 For non-benefit related matters, the decision as to whether or not an investigation is warranted will be made by the Head of Audit, Procurement and Operational Finance.
- 4.3 The action taken by the Council will depend on the nature of the concern. The matter raised may be investigated internally or referred directly to the Police.
- 4.4 All internal investigations will normally be led by the Audit and Investigations Team, and each case will be judged on its merit. The purposes of any investigation shall be to:
 - Establish the facts of any suspected fraud in order to inform decisions regarding further action;
 - Clear innocent persons of any suspicion;
 - Enable the recovery of losses;
 - Assist with the prosecution and sanction of offenders;
 - Improve systems and controls to prevent and deter fraud and corruption in the future.
- 4.5 Investigations will be assigned to a lead officer who is suitably qualified and experienced. The officer will ensure that the investigation is conducted impartially and objectively, and will, as appropriate:
 - Determine and plan the resources needed for the investigation;
 - Carry out the investigation in a timely manner ensuring that all allegations are properly investigated and reported on;
 - Comply with all relevant statutory requirements, codes of practice, and the ethical standards of relevant professional bodies;
 - Ensure that the identity of the person raising the concern is protected wherever possible;
 - Ensure that all evidence obtained is properly recorded and retained securely;
 - Liaise as appropriate with the Director (Legal and Democratic Services), Insurance Manager, the Police or other relevant agencies as required;
 - Assist management in implementing the Council's disciplinary procedures;

- Advise and assist management in implementing improved procedures where necessary.

- 4.6 Where an investigation requires 'directed surveillance' or uses a 'covert human intelligence source', the investigating officer(s) must ensure that the investigation is undertaken in accordance with the Authority's RIPA policy. Any such surveillance may only be undertaken after the appropriate authorisation has been obtained by an officer with delegated powers under the policy.
- 4.7 At the conclusion of the investigation, the investigating officer(s) will produce a report setting out all of the facts relating to the case. The report shall be submitted to the Head of Audit, Procurement and Operational Finance to determine how the matter should be progressed to a resolution. Dependent upon the circumstances of the case this decision may be taken in conjunction with the, Director (Legal and Democratic Services), Director – Finance or the Chief Executive.

5. Recovery and Sanctions

- 5.1 Where an investigation indicates fraud or corruption, the Council will use the full range of sanctions available to it, including criminal prosecution, civil recovery, internal discipline and referral to other law enforcement agencies and professional bodies in order to deter fraud, bribery and any other associated offences.
- 5.2 The Council's disciplinary procedures will be used where the outcome of an investigation indicates improper behaviour. This may be in addition to any other recovery action or sanctions. Referral to the Police will not prohibit action under the disciplinary procedure.

6. Review of the Fraud Response Plan

The Fraud Response Plan will be reviewed and updated as required to reflect new legislative requirements, professional developments and any other relevant matters.