
Update on Fraud and Unfair Trading

Committee considering report:	Joint Public Protection Committee
Date of Committee:	16 December 2024
Chair of Committee:	Councillor Iskandar Jefferies
Date JMB agreed report:	2 December 2024
Report Author:	Sean Murphy
Forward Plan Ref:	JPPC

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 To provide the Committee with an update on the work of the Public Protection Service in tackling fraud, unfair trading and financial abuse.

2. Recommendations

The Committee:

- 2.1 **IS INFORMED** about the contents of this report.
- 2.2 **APPROVES** the approach being taken to tackling fraud, unfair trading and financial abuse.
- 2.3 **AGREES** to receive a further update in December 2025.

3. Implications and Impact Assessment

Implication	Commentary
Financial:	<p>The funding for these functions primarily comes from the service revenue allocations from Bracknell Forest, West Berkshire and Wokingham. The specialist investigation team consists of five Officers supported by financial investigators and intelligence officers. The total cost of the shared trading standards service is £1.45M. This includes the investigations team but also all other trading standards activity from food standards to animal health and weights and measures to product safety, age restricted products etc.</p> <p>In addition, Level 2 and Level 3 investigations are generally supported via grant funding from Department for Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) and managed by the National Trading Standards Board and Trading Standards South-East. In 2024/25 this grant funding will exceed £150K.</p> <p>Work to tackle scams also receives grant funding from various community safety partnership grants and has some input from the proceeds of crime asset recovery grant.</p>

	<p>(The current community safety partnership grant funding is due to cease in 2025 however it is hoped that the funding will be extended again across all three Local Authority areas going forward).</p> <p>With revenue funding under pressure this area of work will need to be considered and prioritised in the context of overall demand.</p>
Human Resource:	<p>This work has previously and continues to be delivered through specialist resource employed by the service on a permanent basis.</p> <p>PPP is also supported by regional and national investigative resource and occasionally additional agency resource is bought through deployed grant funding.</p>
Legal:	<p>The Councils have a significant range of statutory responsibilities that are discharged through the shared service. These relate to unfair trading, consumer rights and counterfeiting amongst other matters. These matters are delegated to the Committee and operationally through the Inter-Authority Agreements of 2017 and 2022.</p> <p>The Councils can also institute legal proceedings if they are in the interests of residents in their area or in the case of many trading standards matters for offences committed anywhere in England or Wales.</p> <p>There is a large volume of legislation and associated statutory codes that govern investigations including the Criminal Procedures and Investigations Act 1996, Data Protection Act 2018, Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2002 and Investigatory Powers Act 2016.</p> <p>The Councils must have regard to the Human Rights Act 1988 and, in particular, Article 6 (right to a fair trial) and Article 8 (right to privacy) of the Charter in Human Rights.</p>
Risk Management:	<p>Failure to comply with the framework set out in the legal section above could lead to defendants being acquitted and the Councils facing judicial challenge together with the risk of reputation, damages and other sanctions.</p>
Property:	<p>None</p>
Policy:	<p>The Joint Public Protection Committee is charged with oversight of the delivery of the Public Protection Service. This report sets out the programme of delivery in a significant area of the Service's work.</p>

	The Committee is invited to consider, comment and advise on strategic direction.			
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Commentary
Equalities Impact:				
A Are there any aspects of the proposed decision, including how it is delivered or accessed, that could impact on inequality?		x		
B Will the proposed decision have an impact upon the lives of people with protected characteristics, including employees and service users?		x		
Environmental Impact:	X			
Health Impact:	X			
ICT or Digital Services Impact:		x		
PPP Priorities:				The report will impact on the following PPP Priorities (delete those that are not appropriate) 1. Building Safer Communities 2. Protecting Consumers from Fraud 3. Protecting and Informing Consumers Business as Usual Activity is supported too.
Data Impact:				None
Consultation and Engagement:	PPP Officers, Joint Management Board and the Case Management Unit have been consulted.			
Other Options Considered:	None			

4. Background and Update Report

- 4.1 At the Joint Public Protection Committee (JPPC) meeting held in October 2023 Members received a report on the approach taken by the Public Protection Service to tackle fraud and unfair trading in all its forms. The Committee resolved to receive an annual update report on this important area of work. This report updates on recent activity. It also contains some of the background set out in the previous report for the benefit of new Members on the Committee.
- 4.2 At its meeting in June 2024 the Committee considered the Strategic Assessment for the service. Between that meeting and the meeting in October 2024 all three partner councils were consulted on the proposed priority areas and it was determined at the October 2024 meeting that tackling the harm caused by fraud and unfair trading was to be a high priority for the service.
- 4.3 To put it in context, fraud is one of the most common crimes in England and Wales, accounting for more than 40% of all crimes. According to the National Crime Agency UK Finance 2024 report criminals stole £1.17 billion through unauthorised and authorised fraud in 2023 alone. There are an estimated 3.5 million incidents a year perpetrated on those 16 years and older.
- 4.4 A range of organisations are involved in tackling both the perpetrators and impacts. The Public Protection Partnership plays a significant role in tackling fraud carried out in the course of business (or assumed business) activities or in the area of fraud commonly referred to as 'scams'. There are significant links and often a fine line between fraud and the statutory duty to enforce 'unfair trading legislation' as well as links to other acquisitive crime such as money laundering and dealing in counterfeit goods which is of itself considered a 'lifestyle crime' in law.
- 4.5 As fraudulent activity is often complex and has a high degree of sophistication it is often difficult for victims to identify that they are in fact victims of a fraud let alone how to protect themselves. Data shows that around a third of victims become repeat victims. People in vulnerable circumstances may be put on so-called 'suckers lists' that are used and shared by fraudsters and can lead to people being repeatedly targeted. As a service we see many instances where victims are repeatedly targeted, often by 'Organised Crime Groups' (OCG's).
- 4.6 The consequence of fraud is not only financial. The emotional and psychological impact on victims results in increased isolation, diminished confidence and impacts on health and well-being including thoughts of self-harm. The reasons for this are many but include:
- Victims may be or may feel heavily reliant on the trader/perpetrator and do not want to lose their support and services.
 - They may have been psychologically groomed into thinking they are making good, reasonable choices and making reasoned, empowered decisions.
 - They may be anxious about being deemed to be incapable of managing their affairs because they have become a victim – this is also a reason for under-reporting as they may have a fear of being removed from their home or the need for a power of attorney to be put in place etc.

- They are not aware they are a 'victim' or indeed find it hard to come to terms themselves that they have become a 'victim'. Embarrassment can sometimes be a reason for not reporting the crime.
- Victims are socially isolated with an absence of family or friends to encourage reporting and may feel it is too trivial.

4.7 The following extract from a victim impact statement from a PPP case sets this out clearly:

'It's a horrific moment when you realise you have been tricked out of a chunk of life savings. My wife was naturally upset. Upset with the situation, upset with the financial loss and upset with me for convincing her to give XXXX a chance after initial concerns.'

'Emotionally it was a tough time for a while. We had a garden completely destroyed. Many tonnes of soil and rubble left on the drive and a hole in our savings.'

'Trust and embarrassment became a personal issue. Firstly, its humiliating to share with your neighbours who have known about the excitement that I had stupidly paid several thousand with little security. There is a leap of faith when sourcing services such as this'

Quotes from other statements include:

'I felt extremely stressed out. He put so much pressure on us to keep paying him more money. I would feel physically sick and be shaking and sweating'

And.....

'This has destroyed me, torn me apart and made me feel ashamed of who I am. Unworthy of being someone who could have something nice. Unable to trust. I am told there is no cure, the medication only reduces the extremes of the phases of the illness, the illness is incurable'

4.8 As stated above tackling fraud and unfair trading has been identified as one of the Key Priorities for the Public Protection Service in the Strategic Assessment 2024 - 27. The document highlights working with partners. In the case of fraud and unfair trading the Service will continue to work with partners such as Thames Valley Police and the South-East Regional Organised Crime Unit. This work will include victim support and enforcement / intervention. Officers will continue to seek grant funding to support Level 2 / Level 3 fraud and unfair trading investigations and carry out operations to identify and tackle intellectual property crimes. The Service will also continue to undertake active media campaigns to raise awareness of fraud and the work we are undertaking to prevent it.

4.9 E-Crime has also been identified as one of the cross-cutting themes in the PPP's Strategic Assessment 2024/27. On-line trading has seen a significant increase in recent years, and this was accelerated by Covid and restrictions on high street trading creating more choice and convenience. The internet whilst being a vehicle for choice

and information is all too often a vehicle for fraud, unfair trading, environmental crime and licensing breaches. The PPP looks for opportunities to tackle consumer and business detriment caused by e-crime across all its themes, priorities and projects.

PPP Resource with respect to Tackle Fraud and Unfair Trading

- 4.10 Fraud can range from a crude to a highly sophisticated activity. To tackle fraud the response must be equally sophisticated, and a range of tools and expertise needs to be deployed.
- 4.11 The Public Protection Service delivery model is based on the 'National Intelligence Model'. Through this model we seek to tackle all areas of our work with a combination of preventative actions, intelligence gathering and analysis and enforcement. To this end, we have a strategic assessment and control strategy supported by a tactical tasking process with the service delivered through a number of specialist teams; trading standards, investigations team specialising in acquisitive crime, financial investigators and the case management and intelligence functions.
- 4.12 In addition, the service currently has a Fraud Victim Support Officer who assists victims of scams and their families with a range of preventative interventions and community engagement activities. This is supported by the PPP communications function and officers from trading standards forming a dedicated fraud awareness function.

Prevention

- 4.13 Preventing residents and businesses becoming the victims of crimes including fraud and unfair trading is a key priority for the service. The PPP recognises that awareness and information is key in protecting residents from scams and fraud and it is important to educate consumers to be fraud aware.
- 4.14 To this end we have a range of interventions in place including:
- Investigation of scams complaints and the provision of advice.
 - Practical interventions including the installation of free telephone call blockers and video doorbells. These are actively promoted and a number of blockers are currently available for supply on a loan basis and installation at no cost to the resident. Wellbeing surveys conducted before and after installation and these simple devices have been shown to make significant improvements to wellbeing and the resident feeling secure in their own home.
 - Regular talks and scams presentations are made to local community groups.
 - Challenging banks under the 'Banking Protocol' to recoup monies for consumers (often successfully) where there may have been some identified failing. Since this work began a total of £812,450 has been recovered for victims within the PPP area.
 - Training of bank staff focusing on signs to look out for when a customer may be at risk of financial abuse.
 - No Cold Calling Zones - [No Cold Calling Zones - PPP](#)

- Provision of scams information and no cold calling door stickers.
- Attending events including partnering with TVP, banks and other agencies to raise awareness of scams and fraud.
- Ongoing programme of work with Citizens Advice – West Berkshire.
- Attendance and contribution to multi-agency meetings to help combat fraud (regular MAFF meetings with Thames Valley Police)
- Networking with the Adult Social Care teams to raise awareness of what we do.
- Promoting the national trading standards initiative known as Friends against Scams: <https://www.friendsagainstscams.org.uk/>
- Promoting the work of the National Illegal Money lending team. The PPP recently became an official partner of the Team.

4.15 Communication also plays a significant role in preventative measures and our social media channels and website are actively used to highlight enforcement actions and to issue warnings to create a deterrent. Press releases are issued directly to the local media which are often recognised and published more widely. Examples of these can be found at Appendix A. In addition, we conduct regular radio interviews on the scams and fraud work conducted and our work, in relation to tackling unfair trading and fraud, was recently featured in an episode of SAS Catching the Criminals on BBC. This can be found here. [BBC iPlayer - SAS: Catching the Criminals - Series 1: Episode 12](#)

4.16 We also participate in National Trading Standards Scams projects which includes the Friends Against Scams work and supporting victims identified through national and international enforcement measures. More on these projects can be found here: [National Trading Standards Scams Team - National Trading Standards](#)

4.17 All staff within the Public Protection Service are required to have safeguarding training including the identification of financial and other forms of abuse and the service has a designated safeguarding lead - currently our Senior Programme and Community Officer. Where an officer believes someone is the victim of financial abuse e.g. so-called 'romance scams' we will work with colleagues and partners to ensure the appropriate support and safeguards are put in place. Significantly, we also work with friends and families of victims to put in place measures ourselves such as those described in 4.14 above. Likewise, we receive referrals from social care colleagues and attend safeguarding forums to share ideas and best practice. The services Fraud Victim Support Officer and Investigators conduct joint visits with partners to support victims.

4.18 We also raise awareness of these issues and general unfair trading matters through briefings with police colleagues. At various times we have presented alongside TVP officers. For many years we have also been involved in delivering the training for all PCSO's participating in the TVP training programme at Sulhamstead in recognition that it is often the neighbourhood teams on the ground that can play a big role in identifying possible fraudulent activities and unfair trading practices.

- 4.19 This year we have conducted a number of proactive checks 'Rogue Trader days' to check on trading activity across the PPP area. Through these we have identified crimes in progress as well as been able to make interventions saving residents from further loss by taking over the negotiation of any debt. This pro-active approach is welcomed by residents as well as local traders who are concerned that the reputation of certain trading sectors is being damaged by 'rogue traders' thus affecting their legitimate business and operation.
- 4.20 Finally we work with colleagues from community safety teams and partnerships from all three Local Authorities to deliver against common objectives and attend meetings such as the Wokingham PTSG (Priority Setting Tasking Group), and in some cases access funding to support victims.

The Deployment of Intelligence

- 4.21 Credible intelligence is critical to tackling fraud and unfair trading. The biggest source of intelligence by far are members of the public who report matters directly to us or to our partner agencies such as TVP, Citizens Advice Consumer Line and Action Fraud. These reports are accessed through the data sharing agreements we have in place.
- 4.22 It is these reports from residents, businesses and consumers that are often the trigger for an investigation. Every referral and notification from the national Citizens Advice Consumer Line and those directly entering the service (via email, telephone and web forms) are monitored on a daily basis. They are then considered in the context of the intelligence picture with a view to identifying any emerging issues related to unfair or fraudulent trading activities. Every two weeks there is a tactical tasking process where the PPP's Intelligence Team raises areas of concern. Through this process the next steps are identified which can include advice and/or warnings to residents and businesses, appeals for further intelligence or reports and where deemed necessary the allocation of investigative resource, whether that be a cross service or multi-agency approach.
- 4.23 Once an investigation is commenced the intelligence picture is developed using a range of sophisticated techniques and software packages that are able to connect nominals and assets. Often this involves the analysis of financial data as well the occasional use of communication data both of which can be obtained within a system of strict regulatory and (in the case of financial information) judicial oversight.
- 4.24 Finally, the service has a range of data sharing protocols which give us access to vital information. This includes access to material held on the Police National Database (PND) and the Police National Computer (PNC) and also data sharing protocols with HMRC, DWP and the National Anti-Fraud Network. We also share an intelligence database with all other trading standards services, regional trading standards enforcement teams and the National Intelligence, Scams and eCrime units of National Trading Standards.

Enforcement - Level 1/2/3 Fraud and Unfair Trading

- 4.25 At any one time the service is investigating a significant volume of unfair trading and acquisitive crime matters including counterfeiting, fraud, money laundering and the sale of illicit goods. These are investigated by trading standards and the specialist

investigation team comprised of Trading Standards Officers and Investigators who are solely dedicated to the most complex matters.

- 4.26 Where there is evidence of offences inside and outside of the PPP area grant funding is sought from the National Trading Standards Board to progress these investigations. Funding and other practical support mechanisms (including allocated staff) are also available from Tri Region Investigation Team which covers the South-East, London and the East of England. Financial support includes support for investigation work, expert witnesses, forensics and legal costs.
- 4.27 Day-to-day the service operates a Rapid Response Protocol with respect to Doorstep Crime incidents and officers will attend blue light events as soon as notification is received that a crime is in progress.
- 4.28 The Service will also work closely with other partners including TVP other trading standards services and regional crime units. Investigations often require warrants to be executed at home addresses and arrests to be made and we work with a number of police forces and regional crime teams such as South-East Regional Organised Crime Unit (SEROUCU) to arrest suspects where arrest criteria are met and it is necessary to further the investigation.
- 4.29 The Service has four staff accredited by the National Crime Agency to conduct and supervise investigations under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 into money laundering and where appropriate to conduct confiscation proceedings to recover the proceeds of crime. This includes the ability to restrain assets whilst proceedings are on-going or in the event of a conviction. Judicial oversight of this work is undertaken by the Judiciary at Reading Crown Court. We also have the support of a Financial Intelligence Analyst.
- 4.30 A number of the victims Officers encounter have vulnerabilities that make them eligible for so called 'special measures'. This includes video recorded evidence in the main. The service has a number of officers specially trained and highly skilled officers to take video recorded evidence from both adults and children. We engage these measures following review and assessment by the relevant senior manager.
- 4.31 The service engages a wide variety of expertise whilst investigating matters. These can include expert witnesses e.g. chartered surveyors, vehicle examiners etc, along with computer and phone forensics experts, forensic accountants, handwriting and other forensic experts. Digital data can be critical and in the modern era we have seen several complex investigations built around digital and financial evidence. We also have staff trained in online investigations with access restricted to two officers with digital data expertise who follow the ACPO guidance on digital evidence.
- 4.32 Over the period of the PPP's existence, we have investigated a large range of complex fraud and unfair trading matters relating to a range of trading activities including second hand car sales, doorstep crime, advanced fee fraud, solar energy, locksmiths, plumbing, timeshare re-sale and the sale of puppies. The scale of these investigations has included levels of detriment ranging from hundreds or thousands of pounds to multi-million-pound frauds and money laundering cases.
- 4.33 The Joint Case Management Unit supports the enforcement functions. Every investigation with a degree of complexity is allocated a lawyer from the unit from the outset. It may also be allocated to an Accredited Financial Investigator if appropriate.

The unit provides a variety of roles which includes advising on the application of the law throughout the lifetime of the investigation, checking procedural applications such as warrants, considering intelligence data applications and ultimately considering case files and disclosure related matters. The team work closely with West Berkshire Legal Services on West Berkshire cases.

4.34 The Case Management Unit Manager also oversees the conduct of financial investigations and along with the Service Lead is able to authorise the making of judicial applications under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002. Finally, we also have a specialist disclosure function to ensure our obligations under the Criminal Procedures and Investigations Act 1996 are fulfilled.

Activity Since Last Report

4.35 In the last twelve months the Service has investigated or is investigating over twenty cases relating to property related fraud and unfair trading. A number of these are now in the court system and a number are still under investigation. In addition, there are ten cases being investigated with respect to money laundering and confiscation. Confiscation with respect to these types of cases is focussed on recovering money for the victims. The total amount of detriment under investigation by the service runs to several million.

4.36 At the time of writing (end November 2024) the total amount paid out by PPP residents on doorstep crime / householder incidents is £946K. The losses to all victims including those out of area is significantly higher. The following table gives more detail:

Identified Loss	Total Number of Incidents	Average Loss	Money Recovered	Live Level 2/3 Operations
£946,195	131	£7,222	£221,600	19

4.37 Examples of unfair trading and fraud cases from 2024 can be found in the links at **Appendix A** to this report.

5. Concluding observations

5.1 A so-called scam is a fraud and it is one of the biggest crime issues of our time. Although fraud and unfair trading is as old as time it has become more sophisticated and many consumers are subject to frequent attempts to defraud them through all mediums, phishing emails, scam telephone calls and unsolicited doorstep traders.

5.2 There has been a huge growth in e-crime. This is probably the largest emerging threat. The perpetrator does not need to be physically present, the risk of being caught is reduced. Multiple people can be targeted at the same time, and the scam can be changed at the push of a button to exploit changing circumstances. Something that

has been seen time and again, recently with the winter fuel payments and the digital switchover.

- 5.3 Fraudsters will exploit peoples lack of knowledge as we have seen in green energy scams, some will exploit people's trust pretending to be family members in need of money or catfishing on social media. These can be professional and convincing and the vast majority of these frauds or attempted frauds still remain unreported.
- 5.4 We are all capable of falling victim to fraud and unfair trading – everyone has moments of vulnerability where they are caught off-guard. Sadly, the majority of actual victims of fraud and unfair trading are often amongst the most vulnerable in our communities. For those most vulnerable, the effects of becoming a victim can be life-changing – losing large sums of money can impact on their financial security, there may be a loss of confidence and an on-going fear of further targeting. The effects can quite literally lead to the loss of independence, health issues and more reliance on support from family and the state. The impacts on mental health can be devastating as can be seen from the impact statements above. Alternatively early intervention and focus on preventative measures can be change the course of peoples lives and the need for costly interventions such as care costs further down the line.
- 5.5 This report sets out some of the steps the Public Protection Service is taking to protect residents and legitimate businesses. This work is delivered across Bracknell, West Berkshire and Wokingham under the various shared service arrangements. Our ability to deliver these levels of protection in the way we do is enhanced by those very arrangements and deliver on the original business case which includes pooling resources and developing expertise. That expertise is recognised both regionally and nationally.

6. Appendices

Appendix A – Example press and social media releases as part of our 'Scams and Fraud Communication Strategy

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