

# Benefits fraudsters are shown the red light by government scheme

A government scheme designed to tackle fraudsters has identified almost £2 billion of fraudulent benefits claims and overpayments.

Since it was set up in 1996, the National Fraud Initiative has identified thousands of attempts to defraud taxpayers, with attempts to steal money from pension frauds, council tax claims and even the abuse of disabled parking badges.

Latest figures show that between April 2018 and April 2020, a total of £245 million of fraud and overpayments was detected across the UK, taking the total figure identified since 1996 up to £1.9 billion.

One of the government's key manifesto pledges was to ensure those who commit benefit fraud are punished. And action taken under the National Fraud Initiative, which uncovers some of the more difficult to track fraud cases, has resulted in £57.7 million of fraudulent payments being recovered and a further £132 million of payments being prevented between 2018 and 2020 in England alone.

The most common cases included the abuse of housing benefits, with £26.3 million of fraud found between 2018 and 2020 and claims for single person council tax discounts, with £17.2 million of fraudulent claims detected over the same period.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Michael Gove, said:

Schemes such as those to reduce council tax and provide housing benefit are there for the most vulnerable people in our society, not those who will try to cheat the system and fraudulently claim money that they don't deserve.

We know that there will always be a small minority who try to cheat the system and the work of the National Fraud Initiative shows that we will not let them get away with it.

Among the most recent National Fraud Initiative cases, the London Borough of Greenwich identified a woman who claimed she was homeless and needed social housing, despite owning five other properties across the country, some of which she had bought under the right-to-buy scheme. An investigation into her finances later revealed she had an estate worth over £1.5 million.

Further investigations over the past two years resulted in 6,092 false applications made by people across the country being removed from housing waiting lists.

Other common frauds include the abuse of disabled parking badges and subsidised travel cards. Between 2018 and 2020, investigations led to 151,815 travel passes and 46,750 blue badges being cancelled.

The misuse of blue badges belonging to people who had actually died is estimated to have cost taxpayers £26.9 million in the past two years. People fraudulently using concessionary travel cards which belonged to dead people is predicted to have cost a further £3.4 million.

John O'Connell, the chief executive of the TaxPayers' Alliance, said:

With billions lost every year in benefits fraud, schemes like this are delivering real bang for their buck.

Every penny of fraud is a slap in the face for struggling taxpayers, so continuing this low-cost crackdown is very much called for.

Well done to ministers for sticking up for taxpayers and waging a welcome war on benefits waste.

Following the coronavirus pandemic, it has also been confirmed that the National Fraud Initiative will be extended to help make sure that grants for emergency relief have only been paid to those who deserve it.