

(by email)

20 September 2013

FOI ref no 4194

Dear Mr Robertshaw

Freedom of Information Request No 4194

Thank you for your Freedom of Information request received on the 31 August 2013. You asked for the following information:

A number of stories across a broad selection of national newspapers dated the 31st of August have highlighted unusual excuses of benefit fraudsters. See for example:
"My skin colour changed' Scarcely-believable excuses of benefit cheats revealed" The Express

"Benefits cheat claimed skin changed colour because of a car crash" Yorkshire Evening Post

"The benefit fraudster who blamed his evil twin: Officials reveal the worst excuses" The Daily Mail

1) As these are virtually identical it would appear that they have been written from the same press release. Could you please provide me with a copy of the original press release or equivalent DWP source that was the origin of the story?

2) some of these stories make reference to a new campaign that will target areas of high suspected benefit fraud. Could you please clarify what the basis for such selection will be and provide me with any related supplementary materials relating to said basis for selection of an area?

3) This story is virtually identical to similar stories circulated in May of 2011. Could you please provide me with the original source of that round of stories too?

Response:

1) Original Press Release -

31.08.13: Benefit fraud: No excuses for stealing from the taxpayer

A benefit fraudster claiming his wife was really his sister and one saying she needed the cash for satellite TV are both examples of some of the oddest excuses DWP benefit fraud investigators have heard over the last year.

One claimant – using a fake ID – said her skin colour had changed after a road accident, one man blamed his evil twin, while another claimed she wasn't in a relationship but just had a three-night stand resulting in three children over five years.



The excuses are revealed as the Government announces a new campaign starting this autumn to target benefit fraudsters - encouraging claimants to come clean about changes to their circumstances and urging the public to call the National Benefit Fraud Hotline.

The campaign will target districts and streets of high suspected fraud with investigators' work backed up by local advertising and letters direct to claimants - aiming to catch benefit cheats, one street at a time.

The Government is reminding claimants to report all changes in their circumstances when they happen and before the investigators turn their attention to their claim. Teams are now going through claims to spot suspicious activity and double checking claims against records held inside and outside Government.

Members of the public can anonymously report suspected fraud on the Benefit Fraud Hotline on **0800 854 440** or online at: <https://secure.dwp.gov.uk/benefitfraud/>

Minister for Welfare Reform David Freud said: "Hardworking taxpayers lost an outrageous £1.2 billion in benefit fraud last year.

"Our investigators are stepping up and taking advantage of the latest technology so fraudsters can be identified, traced and caught.

"The minority of claimants attempting to siphon off benefit cash need to know our teams are cracking down on them and bare-faced lies are frankly transparent in the face of the evidence.

"Universal Credit will close the gaps in the welfare state that cynical benefit cheats try to take advantage of. The new benefit will reduce fraud by £200m a year when rolled out fully. "

Richard West, DWP Head of Fraud Investigations, said: "We are used to fraudsters telling tall tales to hide their crimes.

"When faced with the evidence, most people hold their hands up and admit what they've done. But some people refuse to admit they have been caught stealing. Some people will keep on trying to lie as a way out – even to the point of ridiculousness. They usually just end up digging them themselves deeper into a hole."

This summer DWP investigators were asked for the strangest excuses they've heard from benefit fraudsters. Here are some of the best:

- A claimant in West Lothian tried to explain her reason for falsely claiming: "I needed the money to pay for TV in each of the five bedrooms, as the kids have ADHT, and I have to keep them in." She failed to mention the children no longer lived with her.
- A Glasgow claimant tried to explain excessive income: "Any wages under £200 are mine but any over £200 must belong to someone else."
- A Bilston claimant questioned about a living together fraud: "I don't know why you're interviewing me, I'm bisexual!"
- In Liverpool a claimant insisted that she didn't have a relationship with a man who stayed most nights in a week. When it was pointed out that they had 3 children together in a 5-year period, she said: "We're all entitled to a one night stand aren't we"?
She was again reminded that there are three children. Her answer: "Well a three-night stand then".
- A claimant from Worcester tried to say: "It's not my partner, it's my sister." When the investigator held up their wedding certificate, he replied: "That was a drunken mistake."
- A man interviewed in Folkestone regarding failing to declare his night-watchman job said: "I only claim benefits during the day - what I do at night is my own business"
- Another claimant from Folkestone was interviewed regarding failing to declare her partner: "He doesn't live here, he just comes every morning to collect his sandwiches and kiss me good morning before going to work"
- A woman when asked why her husband's belongings were in a wardrobe in her Highgate bedroom, after failing to mention a partner in her benefit claim, said: "It's a spare wardrobe. I never look in a spare wardrobe." She pleaded guilty in court and was given a community work order for 12 months.
- A Gloucester jobseeker filled in his application form and said he didn't have a partner living with him: His excuse: "It's her property so she doesn't live with me, I live with her."
- In an identity fraud trial, the alleged fraudster from London claimed she was a white female depicted in photos even though her skin colour was black and suggesting her face had changed shape following a car crash.
- "We're not living together. The baby has his surname because my great grandmother and his great grandfather were married."
- "You have me confused with my evil twin brother. He lives in Pakistan and visits the UK regularly." He had two Pakistani passports, one in his own name and the other in the identity of his 'twin'. Both passports listed all his own children. "My brother

has children born on the same dates with the same names," said a claimant from Glasgow.

- "I didn't tell you about my private pension because it's private."
- A North East DLA claimant asked why she had claimed she was incapable of cleaning her own house when she was working as a full-time bus cleaner: "By the time I come in from work, I'm that knackered."
- "It's Christmas so I should be able to keep the extra money."

2) The basis for selection is to focus on locations with high levels of Fraud and Error loss, allied to a low propensity to report changes in on-going claims.

The data used for this analysis relates to Housing Benefit.

The last five "full" years of the annual measurement of fraud and error loss in Housing Benefit data has been used to identify Local Authority areas with high levels of fraud and error. This was combined with two studies that identified Local Authority locations with a low propensity to report changes in circumstances. The combined data provided a list of Local Authorities in order of risk.

In conjunction with an HMRC risk assessment of the same locations, this process and the resulting priority list have been used to identify the locations selected for Campaign Management.

3) Press Release from 2011

29 May 2011 Lord Freud: No more excuses

Fraud investigators are regularly faced with ridiculous excuses benefit cheats use to cover up their crimes, Lord Freud Minister for Welfare reform has said today.

Two recent cases of benefit fraud have shown the lengths people will go to con the taxpayer:

- Vitislav Podola from Leeds claimed nearly £17,500 to look after his sick father, but had to admit to the lying when his father revealed he hadn't seen his son for years.
- Trevor Osgood from Somerset claimed over £55,000 in disability benefits while he was actually working on a farm herding and milking cows.

Lord Freud, Welfare Reform Minister said:

"Benefit fraud is no joke, and yet our investigators are routinely dealing with bare faced cheek and ridiculous excuses for stealing money from the taxpayer.

"Universal Credit will simplify and automate the benefits system. This will make it much easier to catch people who make false claims."

A survey of fraud investigators has revealed the top ten worst excuses used by benefit cheats:

- *"We don't live together he just comes each morning to fill up his flask"*
- *"I wasn't using the ladders to clean windows, I carried them for therapy for my bad back"*
- *"I had no idea my wife was working! I never noticed her leaving the house twice a day in a fluorescent jacket and a Stop Children sign"*
- *"My wallet was stolen so someone must have been using my identity, I haven't been working"*
- *"I didn't know I was still on benefit"*
- *"I didn't declare my savings because I didn't save them, they were given to me"*
- *"He lives in a caravan in the drive, we're not together"*
- *"He does come here every night and leave in the morning and although he has no other address I don't regard him as living here"*
- *"It wasn't me working, it was my identical twin"*
- *I wasn't aware my wife was working because her hours of work coincided with the times I spent in the garden shed"*

£1.6 billion of taxpayer's money is lost through fraud in benefits and tax credits each year. The proposals for 21st Century Welfare will tackle the main causes of fraud and error in the benefit system. Universal Credit will remove fundamental design weaknesses and result in a more efficient and effective system.

If you have any queries about this letter please contact me quoting the reference number above.

Yours sincerely

DWP Communications Freedom of Information Focal Point

Your right to complain under the Freedom of Information Act

If you are not happy with this response you may request an internal review by e-mailing freedom-of-information-request@dwpgsi.gov.uk or by writing to DWP, Central FoI Team, 4th Floor Caxton House, 6-12 Tothill Street, London, SW1H 9NA. Any review request should be submitted within two months of the date of this letter.

If you are not content with the outcome of the internal review you may apply directly to the Information Commissioner's Office for a decision. Generally the Commissioner cannot make a decision unless you have exhausted our own complaints procedure. The Information Commissioner can be contacted at: The Information Commissioner's Office, Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow Cheshire SK9 5AF www.ico.gov.uk