

No hiding place for benefit fraudsters

by Sally-Anne Stewart

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WITH severe public spending cuts on the way, the average taxpayer needs every bit of help they can get.

So a crack team of investigators are busting a gut to make sure greedy benefit thieves don't get their hands on your hard-earned cash.

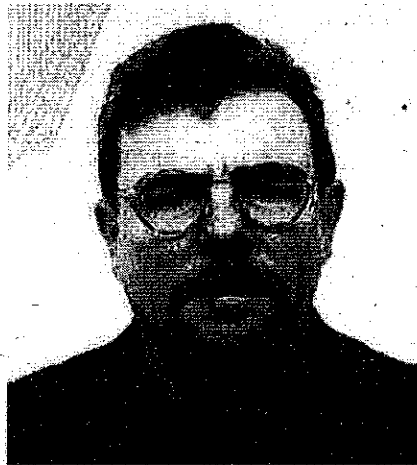
In an exclusive interview, investigations manager Paul Taylor told the Luton News that in the past year his team has doubled the number of benefit fraudsters they're catching.

In the last year the Luton Borough Council investigators have netted thieves responsible for stealing £500,000 from Luton taxpayers, and are now even seizing criminals' assets worth hundreds of thousands of pounds under the Proceeds of Crime Act.

But now Paul and his team need your help - to catch a prolific benefit thief who should be behind bars.

James O'Shea, (pictured) 55, formerly of Maple Court, disappeared once a prosecution got under way to bring him to book for stealing more than £36,000 of benefits.

He was tried in his absence on four counts of housing benefit fraud against the council, which he carried out by claiming he was privately



renting a property in Alpine Terrace from a landlord called Noel O'Brien. Once Paul's team started digging, however, they found out that O'Shea and O'Brien were one and the same person.

He was even using the O'Brien alias to claim benefits for a second property he owned in Maple Court, in Stockwood Crescent.

"In the early part of the investigation he appeared in court, although he wasn't really co-operating with us," said Paul.

"But then he skipped. We think he's operating in north London but making regular return visits to Luton. If people know where he is, call us or

call the police."

Sentencing O'Shea in his absence at Luton Crown Court on June 29, Judge Bright QC said his actions had been "a sophisticated series of frauds" and recommended a higher tariff than usual for the financial gain from the crimes.

Paul said: "Everyone's talking about cuts at the moment. We want to cut crime and stop people stealing from the taxpayer in Luton, and we're working harder and smarter to do that."

In the financial year up to April 2010, the team caught a total of 70 benefit thieves, double the previous year's tally. Of those, five have gone to prison, seven have received suspended sentences, 26 have been fined, 21 have received community orders and 11 have had conditional discharges.

In addition, the council has been able to seize nearly £200,000 worth of assets from those convicted, as the team can look back at six years' worth of financial records.

"We're really hitting the villains in the pocket," said Paul.

What really helps the team is the public's support, and the number of calls reporting benefit thieves has also doubled in the last year.

If you know where O'Shea is, or know someone who's stealing from the taxpayer, call the team on 01582 546000.

Youngsters at the ready!



CROWDS from Luton turned out for Armed Forces Day on Saturday. For our picture special turn to pages 88, 89.