

Fraud-busters

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rap new report

BY PAUL KEILTHY

COUNCIL fraud-busters have defended their aggressive pursuit of false benefit claimants.

This follows a new report suggested many people who claimed benefit while working informally were motivated by 'need not greed.'

Brent's audit and investigation team have put 47 residents through the courts in respect of £675,000 of benefits during a high-profile clampdown on fraudsters ordered by the previous Labour regime in 2005.

But a report published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has called such campaigns into question after finding that complicated tax and benefit systems and irregular work kept 'hardworking' people on the poverty line and drove them into low-paid or cash-in-hand jobs while on benefits.

Report co-author, Aaron Barbour said: "People in deprived areas are resorting to informal paid work because they are trying to support, feed and clothe their families.

"They are hard-working, ordinary

Many led by greed not need

people trying to survive day by day. "The authorities should harness the assets of people working informally - their effort, skills and willingness to work - rather than seeing it as a problem."

The report questioned hard-line responses to the black economy. "Informal paid work continues to be regarded as fraud and therefore as a matter of enforcement by the Government. Punitive measures employed to 'tackle' this activity have limited success where poverty drives the decision to work informally."

The *Times* spoke to benefits claimants in South Kilburn, some of whom had taken low-paid work, and none of whom was willing to be named.

One 33-year-old single mother, who works informally as a child-carer, said: "Everybody does something to get by, if you didn't you'd have nothing.

"The benefits people catch a few, but it's just a lottery, and everyone carries on. I get nowhere near enough to come off benefits, but if I didn't do this I'd be short."

A 44-year-old man, who described his informal work as 'a bit of this and a bit of that,' said: "Anyone who thinks benefits in this country allow the unemployed to live in the lap of luxury hasn't been down to this estate."

But the council disputed the report's findings and insisted that each case was taken on its merits.

Simon Lane, the head of the audit and investigation team, said: "The individual circumstances are always considered when deciding what sanction to apply.

"The majority of people whom we prosecute are not forced to claim benefits by need."

He cited 10 recent examples of 'greed rather than need,' including 'EM, who was overpaid £30,000 in benefits while earning £1,500 per month as a nurse,' and 'MG, who failed to declare he was earning £27,000 per year as a commissions agent and claimed an extra £13,500 in benefits,' as well as several instances where residents claimed thousands in housing benefit while secretly owning separate properties.

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