

Visiting Officers' Code of Conduct

General guidance

Visiting Officers must recognise that the vast majority of claimants are honest. When carrying out their duties, Visiting Officers must at all times keep in mind that their primary function is to verify the information provided to support a benefit claim.

Claimants must be given every opportunity to explain the facts, and must only be required to provide information where it can be shown to be reasonable that they should do so.

Guidance on particular operational matters

1. Visiting Officers are required to identify themselves to claimants as Benefits Visiting Officers, state where they are from, produce their official identification badge, and state the purpose of the visit.
2. Visiting Officers must not enter a claimant's home when the person is not present, or enter premises if not invited as there is no legal right of entry and if the customer refuses the Visiting Officer must not insist.
3. Visiting Officers must not carry out visits before 8.30am and after 5.00pm without the approval of the Benefits Manager or Head of Revenues. This will only be appropriate when it is difficult to contact people or organise visits during the normal working week.
4. Male officers must not enter premises occupied by a woman who answers the door not fully dressed. Officers must always arrange to return to the property.
5. If a male officer visits a woman who is alone in a property he must consider in each case, whether he should be accompanied, or whether it would be appropriate to arrange an interview at the offices.
6. (4) and (5) to apply to female investigators in reverse.
7. In cases where it is known that claimants are potentially violent, Visiting Officers must visit in pairs.
8. Reports on all interviews with aggressive or distressed claimants must be referred to the Benefits Manager.
9. Visiting Officers must inform the Benefits Manager immediately of situations likely to lead to a complaint from a claimant.

10. Detailed records of visits must be kept on the office's approved stationery, and filed with case papers.
11. Records of visits must be entered onto the Authority's systems within 48 hours of carrying out a visit.
12. Admin Assistants will log all visits in desk diaries and this will include name, address and claim number of customer and estimated time of visit.
13. All journeys must be planned economically in both time and mileage.
14. Visiting Officers must email The Benefits Manager (with a copy to the Admin Assistant) when starting and finishing visits.
15. Visiting Officers must telephone the office when the last visit is complete and when they arrive home. If there is no one in the office a message must be left on the answer-phone.
16. Visiting Officers must ensure that mobile phones are switched on at all times.
17. Visiting Officers must not use mobile phones for personal calls.
18. All paperwork will be prepared in advance of the visits by the Administrator. Visiting Officers must make themselves aware of all aspects of the claim before approaching a property.
19. Visiting Officers must request the identity of all persons present in the property at the time of the visit.
20. Visiting Officers must be observant and make a mental note of anything that indicates that the claim may be suspicious.
21. Visiting Officers must restrict their questions to those specified in the questionnaire.
22. If a customer declares a change in circumstances or in the course of an interview a undisclosed change of circumstances is discovered a statement must be completed and signed by the customer.
23. If the claim warrants further investigation a suspected fraud report must be completed and the file passed to the Fraud Investigator.
24. If the claim appears to be in order the benefit team must be notified, the case closed and the working papers filed away.
25. Visiting Officers must always be aware of their personal safety. When entering a property Visiting Officers must identify the exits, have mobile phones to hand and leave immediately if feeling vulnerable. Visiting Officers must arrange to visit with a colleague if concerns arise prior to a visit.
26. Visiting Officers must be aware of the potentially violent list and check cases against it.
27. Visiting Officers physically assaulted, if not badly injured, must:-
 - contact the offices immediately;

- report the incident to the Police;
- return to the offices;
- obtain a medical check-up;
- file a report of the incident to the Benefits Manager within 24 hours.

28. If investigators are injured, they must:-

- seek immediately medical assistance;
- report the incident to the offices as soon as possible;
- contact the Police as soon as possible;
- file a report of the incident to the Benefits Manager as soon as possible.

29. All incidents of verbal abuse and threats must be reported to the Benefits Manager within 24 hours of the incident.

30. Officers must read the Council's Health and Safety Policy, Violence to Staff Policy, Safety Guidance, Home Working Policy and Lone Working Policy and follow the advice contained in them.