A Day in the Life of a Benefits Officer

**Background**

Benefits Officers are employed by the Benefits Service based in an office block located in Hulme, just near to the Princess Road roundabout at the Mancunian Way.

We are responsible for administering Housing Benefit (HB), Council Tax Support (CTS) (previously known as Council Tax Benefit) and Free School Meals, to the residents of Manchester. We currently have a caseload of about 69,000 customers who are in receipt of these benefits.

We are a very busy service dealing with several thousand items of post each week meeting very tight deadlines, coupled with delivering a high level of customer service.

The Benefits Officer (BO) role is essential to the success of the Service so we require individuals to be highly self-motivated, self-sufficient and highly organised to help us meet our goals and objectives. They must also be able to assimilate and analyse information quickly and to perform to high levels of accuracy, whilst working under pressure.

When a BO starts work for the Service they undergo an intense classroom based six-week training course, carrying out theoretical and practical work on live cases. Further classroom based training is delivered as you progress in your role. Whilst training, BO's work fixed hours but once the core training has finished they are able to access the Council’s Flextime Scheme and subject to compliance to this scheme can then be allowed to work the in-house ‘Superflex Scheme’ a few weeks later. This allows a lot more flexibility and freedom with core hours between 11am and 2.30pm and lots more besides!

Our work is almost exclusively carried out using two computer software systems. So anyone interested in this work would need to be aware that it is computer based, at a desk, using a variety of electronic systems to carry out transactional type work and produce letters via word processing software.

The Service uses a Document Management System known called Information@Work (I@W). This means that mostly we do not deal with paper claims or letters or memos etc. Our Administration Team process all incoming mail, documents and other ‘paper’ work and process this so that this can then be viewed electronically as an image by the BO, on a computer monitor.

In I@W all BO’s have their own work area known as their ‘In Tray’ which stores the work that they are responsible for and each day a BO will come in and ‘view’ their work here.

We also use a separate system known as ‘Academy’, which we use to hold all personal data about a benefit claimant and to carry out the processing and payment of claims once the BO has checked them. As a BO it is essential that the information entered onto Academy is accurate, otherwise you could pay benefit when the customer is not eligible, pay the incorrect amount of benefit or overpay benefit. Attention to detail is essential.
Once a BO successfully completes their training they will be relocated to one of 10 teams, which all deal with assigned areas of Manchester and also have a mix of claims from the variety of different tenure types e.g. Private Tenants, Social Housing tenants, Owner Occupiers etc.

Each Team is headed up by a Team Manager and is supported by two Technical Officers. The Team Manager is responsible for the day to day management of the team, workflow, staffing issues, performance management etc. The Technical Officers hold a supervisory role and also coach, mentor and support you as a BO. There is also a Liaison and Claim Compliance Officer on some teams who carry out all the home visits for all teams and some teams also have an additional Technical Officer who is responsible to paying discretionary payments, known as Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP), where there are shortfalls of benefit awarded and the customer is still having difficulties paying their rent.

If a BO prefers we will consider allowing them to work from home once they have achieved a high standard of quality and quantity and are assessed as having the necessary high standard of self sufficiency.

Day to Day Life

A normal working day starts with you logging onto your systems and processing the work in your In-Tray.

When processing a new benefit claim as a BO you would check that the details provided by the customer are correct and authentic. This may include evidence such as a passport, driving license, utility bill, national insurance number, income details, landlord details, tenancy agreement and in some cases nationality.

The checks can also involve cross referencing the information from the customer with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and HM Revenues and Customs (HMRC) systems – for which separate training and access are given.

In addition to new claims a large part of your duties comprise of dealing with a change in customers’ circumstances. Customers can have changes that relate to their household, rent, landlord details and income such as wages, state benefits paid by the DWP and HMRC such as Job Seekers Allowance, Income Support and Working Tax Credits.

These changes are reported to us by the customer, landlords, third parties and directly from the DWP and HMRC. The changes vary in complexity and number and make up the bulk of your daily work. As a BO you are responsible for identifying what the change is, what actions you need to take in regard to this, and to then carry out the necessary actions.

If the evidence which is necessary to process a new claim or a change in circumstance is not provided by the customer, it is your responsibility to request this from the customer in writing. You would compose a letter using Microsoft Word templates, which are already set up in our systems.
These templates already contain a framework for all letter types depending on the circumstance and will support you when writing a letter. You could write ten or more letters per day. So a good a standard of English is required.

If a customer does not respond to the letter then you must decide what action to take and notify the customer in writing about your decision. BO’s are also expected to follow up information they have requested in writing from a customer, by telephoning customers (and landlords). You will only occasionally take incoming calls as Contact Manchester (our call centre) deal with all our incoming telephone enquiries.

You are given a daily target of work that needs to be completed. You will also be told the level of accuracy of your work, that you will need to meet to be at standard and this will be monitored.

You will also be responsible for identifying and reducing fraud and error. This can be an interesting and challenging aspect of your work. Some individuals will deliberately try to obtain benefit by providing incorrect or false information. It is the responsibility of the BO to stop the claim before it is paid or challenge and pursue claims that they believe are fraudulent.

This area of work can involve working closely with the DWP Single Fraud Investigation Service. A typical example of a fraudulent case is where we discover someone has claimed to be living alone, in receipt of a low income but is in fact living with a working partner. If they had declared they were living together they may not have qualified for benefit. These cases are difficult to prove and may require you to carry out checks on the undeclared partner. For this you would check historical benefit data, carry out a credit reference check and challenge the customer in writing about the whereabouts of the undeclared partner.

**Summary**

This is a general overview of the role but there are many other individual tasks and exercises that we carry out. However, if you want to make a difference to Manchester residents and in particular those on lower incomes and those who are vulnerable, especially in light of the recent Welfare Reforms, then this is a role that really helps …