

## **Stroud District Council Policy on Operating the Verification Framework Scheme**

### **General**

This policy contributes to the implementation of Stroud District Council's corporate aims of working with others to make the district a better place to live and work, which incorporates the objective of helping those in particular need.

Stroud District Council is committed to reducing fraud and error within the Housing Benefit and Council Tax benefit system. Efficient and effective verification of all details supplied by claimants will minimise the risk of fraud and error entering the system.

Verifying information supplied by claimants enables us to determine entitlement to benefit. Housing Benefit (General) Regulations 1987, Regulation 73(1) requires that:

'...a person that makes a claim shall furnish such certificates, documents, information and evidence in connection with a claim...as may be reasonably required by the appropriate authority to determine that person's entitlement to housing benefit..'

Stroud District Council implemented the Verification Framework in 1999 and is currently fully compliant with all core guidance contained in the framework.

This policy is intended as a guide to the verification of claims to be used in conjunction with the detailed training and guidance issued to officers who deal with benefit claims.

### **Purpose**

The verification framework scheme ensures that:

- Claims for Housing Benefit and Council Tax benefit are fully supported and documented by all necessary evidence required to determine a claimant's entitlement
- All documentary evidence will be in accordance with the standards set by the Verification Framework Scheme.

### **Objectives**

We will operate the verification framework scheme in order to:

- Minimise the risk of fraud and error entering the benefit system.
- Identify through verification of claims where fraud and error exists and ensure it is corrected.
- Ensure that any discrepancies identified through the verification of claims are followed up, resolved and the reasons for the discrepancy are fully documented.
- Provide an efficient and effective visiting programme.

### **Verifying Claims**

We will verify claims by:

- Ensuring that all documented evidence is provided in its original form and checked for authenticity
- Training all staff on identifying false documents

- Photocopying all original documents received over the counter and marking with an auditable stamp to show:
  - That the original document was seen
  - That it was checked for authenticity
  - The date the documented was seen
  - Identity of the member of staff checking the document
- Directly scanning all documents received in the post into the housing benefits Document Image Processing system. An acknowledge will be sent back to the claimant with the original documents.
- Training all staff accepting documents to use the ultra violet scanners to check the validity of documents where appropriate.
- Issuing a counter form or assessors letter requesting further documentary evidence for all incomplete claims. An electronic copy of the form/letter is held on the computer system.
- Cross-checking all information supplied on the claim and the associated documents against existing claims and/or available systems. Any discrepancies found will be investigated.
- Any discrepancies that cannot be resolved will be referred to the Benefit Fraud team for investigation.
- Fraud awareness training will be given to all new council wide staff as part of the induction process. In depth training and refresher training will be given annually to all staff that deal with benefits.
- All action will be taken in a fair and equitable manner having particular regard to the Human Rights Act, Race Relations Act and any other legislation or Policies, which may have an impact.

### **Management Assurance**

We will provide management assurance by:

- Using the computer system that requires all documents to be verified before the claim can be processed.
- Checking our work in accordance with Department of Works and Pensions (DWP) requirements. A quarterly return will be made on the results of operating the Verification Framework.
- Identifying errors and putting things right through changing working practices, procedures and staff training.
- Visiting all claimants at the appropriate interval as set out by the Verification Framework Scheme to check the details of their claim.
- Fully documenting the details of these visits.

### **Quality Assurance**

We will provide a visiting service that is:

- *Courteous* - we will listen and respond to what our customers have to say and treat them with respect
- *Fair* - we provide services fairly and within the law regardless of matters such as race, sex, sexual orientation, religion or disability.
- *Confidential*- we treat the information we get in absolute confidence. Information is protected by law (including data held on computers by the Data Protection Act).

- *Discreet*- the issues we have to deal with are sometimes of a personal and sensitive nature and our staff receive training to be tactful and sympathetic.
- *Private*- we respect the right to privacy and will provide private interview facilities on request.
- *Accessible*- we will be available for our customers, whether they call in person, write or telephone. There are facilities for the disabled at Ebley Mill and we have a dedicated 24hr answer phone service.

### **Changes from April 2004**

- The visiting requirements Verification Scheme will change from April 2004 and will be replaced by visits identified by the Housing Benefit Matching Service (HBMS) rather than the local authority.
- Housing benefit claimants will be identified by a risk criteria used by HBMS. Local authorities will undertake the visits and report the findings back to the HBMS. The visits will be conducted to the same standard as the verification framework.

### **Commitment**

All of our customers will be treated in a fair and equitable manner having particular regard to the Human Rights Act, Race Relations Act and any other legislation or Policies, which may have an impact.