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# Advice NI Q&A Briefing Paper

## The Standard Assurance Unit Benefit Review

August 2021

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## The Standard Assurance Unit Benefit Review Supplementary Q&A Briefing Paper

The Standard Assurance Unit (SAU) is a section within DfC that carries out benefit reviews. These reviews are also called Home Visit to Check Your Benefit Payment<sup>1</sup>. Reviews can be conducted face-to-face but also over the phone. Since the COVID pandemic, they have been exclusively over the phone.

The purpose of the SAU review is to determine whether claimants are getting the right amount of benefit based on their circumstances. Evidence discovered during the review can be reported back to DfC if it has an impact on the amount of benefit being paid.

Claimants are selected at random for review and are notified of the date of their review by phone or post. A DfC information leaflet is available and a screenshot of the leaflet can be seen in the appendix). The leaflet presents the review as a fairly innocuous affair. This can lull claimants into thinking the review is an informal, chat-like process that does not have to be taken too seriously. Some claimants have been 'caught on-the-hop' when contacted by SAU and have continued with the review even when they are not in a position to give it their full attention. Some claimants have reported that their review was stressful and arduous and in certain cases, information has been reported back that resulted in claimants being reassessed, their award being reduced, or even their award being ended.

This is a detrimental outcome, and therefore, the SAU review should be taken as seriously as formal benefit reviews or assessments. But forewarned is forearmed, so it is best that claimants are fully aware of what SAU reviews entail.

This short paper is meant as a supplement to the DfC leaflet, answering additional questions that clarify the purpose and possible outcomes of reviews.

### **Confidentiality**

#### Is the information shared in the review confidential?

The first thing to note is this: the leaflet states that the review is confidential and that anything the claimant tells the review "is treated as strictly confidential". While this statement is accurate, it is also misleading.

It is accurate in the sense that SAU will not share the claimant's information with any third party. But it is misleading in the sense that they **can and do share** the claimant's information with other relevant branches within the Department.

That happens because when a review is carried out, SAU is looking to confirm that the details of the information held on DfC systems is correct. Where they find any differences,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/home-visit-check-your-benefit-payment>

they will pass that information to the appropriate paying branch to establish if the change now discovered has any bearing on the current entitlement. Therefore, confidentiality extends to third parties but not to other sections of DfC and they will report disclosures back to the relevant section. So, for example, if a claimant on UC makes a disclosure, it will be reported back to UC and their award will be reassessed accordingly. They will also report disclosures to the Housing Executive and the Department of Finance for Land and Property Services (LPS).

## **Advance Notice**

[Does the claimant get any advance notice of the review or are they expected to conduct the review at the time they are first contacted?](#)

SAU notifies each claimant in advance by letter, giving at least 7 days' notice between the posting of the letter and the date of review. This is supposed to ensure that the letter is received by the claimant in sufficient time before the planned date for the review. This also allows the claimant time to make any appropriate arrangements to facilitate the forthcoming review.

[Can the claimant have the review rescheduled?](#)

It is really important that the claimant has the time and privacy to conduct the review because it will last at least an hour and it will go into a fair amount of detail about their circumstances. They need to be in the right frame of mind and not have other distractions or demands. This means that if the planned date for the review is not convenient for whatever reason e.g. it is at a time when they will be at work, when they have another appointment, etc., they should ask for the review to be rescheduled to another date. DfC say that any requests to reschedule will always be facilitated so if a claimant is told it cannot be rescheduled, they should stand their ground in asking for an alternative date.

## **Mandatory**

[Can the claimant refuse to do the review?](#)

To all intents and purposes, the review is mandatory. DfC do not explicitly state that the review is mandatory and they will say that the claimant is within their rights not to continue the review at any time. However, refusal to participate in the review may lead to the claimant's entitlement to benefit being in doubt and their payments may be stopped. SAU will pass details of the non-participation in the review process to the appropriate Decision Maker (DM) in the paying branch. The DM in the paying branch will then decide whether to suspend or disallow benefit or contact the claimant directly.

But it is useful for the claimant to be aware that although the review is mandatory, they do have a little flexibility about how and when the review is done. Claimants have the right to refuse to be interviewed by telephone. The first thing SAU will do, is try to explain the

purpose of the telephone review and put the claimant at ease. But if a claimant still does not want to conduct a review over the telephone, SAU should arrange for a postal review form to be issued to the claimant at home. And if a claimant has a genuine reason for not wanting to be interviewed there and then (and has not already requested a rescheduling of the planned telephone review), they have the right to ask SAU to call back at a more suitable time.

### ***Detailed Information***

In the review, claimants will be asked to back up what they say with evidence, for example, bank statements, savings accounts, etc. Why is this level of detail required? It is not up to the claimant to report change of circumstances rather than a unit within DfC doing so?

SAU is essentially looking to confirm that the details of the information held on DfC Systems are correct. Where SAU find any differences, that information is passed to the appropriate paying branch to establish if the change now discovered has any bearing on the current entitlement (for the week selected for testing).

And while claimants are responsible for reporting changes in their circumstances, the SAU will use the review to identify any unreported changes and alert the appropriate paying branch.

### ***Another Person Present***

Since the SAU review is very similar to the process carried out in a benefit review or assessment, can they have another person with them during the review?

At the start of the review, SAU will ask the claimant security questions to verify their identity to make sure they are speaking to the right person. After the claimant's identity has been verified, the claimant can request another person known to them be present and answer questions on their behalf. Claimants regularly avail of the opportunity to have someone else present with them / answer questions on their behalf.

In addition, SAU are also supposed to determine during the initial interview whether it may be necessary to have another person present. In these cases, SAU will confirm any next of kin details and if the details of the potential other person are known, a referral will be made to an Outreach Officer to take the appropriate action, i.e. completion of form BF56 (which will gather details of the prospective other person). If no next of kin is known, the matter will be referred back to the paying branch to consider alternative action before any further review action is taken.

## Appendix

### What happens to the information we gather during benefit reviews?

The results from the benefit reviews are used by the Department for Communities to develop statistics about the amount of benefit paid correctly or incorrectly to customers.

These reports are published in the Departments Annual Report and Accounts and you can read them at

[www.communities-ni.gov.uk](http://www.communities-ni.gov.uk)

### Who uses the information?

The Department for Communities uses the information to improve the way it handles benefit claims.

Other government departments use the statistics as well.

They influence areas such as developing policy & processes and providing services.

This leaflet answers some of the questions you may have about Standards Assurance Unit and the review of your benefit.

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### Contact us

If you have any questions about this review of your benefit, please call Standards Assurance Unit on  
**028 90 138 136.**

Or write to:

Administrative Team  
Standards Assurance Unit  
43-45 Falls Road  
Belfast  
BT12 4PD



# Benefit Review

MARCH 2021

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### What is Standards Assurance Unit?

Standards Assurance Unit is part of the Department for Communities.

### What do we do?

We contact people who are claiming benefit either by telephone or by post to review their benefit award.

We check to see if the Department for Communities and Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) or Department of Finance for Land and Property Services (LPS) is paying the right amount of benefit.

### Is the review confidential?

Yes, anything you tell us is treated as strictly confidential.

If we find something wrong in your benefit payment, the Department for Communities and Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) or Department of Finance for Land and Property Services (LPS) will put it right.

We will also use information about the review to produce statistics. Nothing in the statistics will identify you or anyone in your household. There is more about this on page 5 of this leaflet.

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### Why did we choose you?

Your name was selected at random by statisticians from details we have of people getting benefits.

### What happens when we contact you?

At the start of the interview we will ask you to verify your identity to make sure we are speaking to the right person.

Then we will ask you some questions and ask you to make available various documents.

Depending on your situation and your answers to the questions, we may ask you for proof of what you tell us.

For example, if we are reviewing a benefit that is affected by any income or savings you have, we will ask you to show us proof of your bank or building society accounts.

If you do not have the information we need, we will ask you to send it to us as soon as possible. We will send you a pre-paid envelope to send the documents to us.

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### What happens after the review?

We work with other government departments and check with them that the information you give us is right.

If you are getting the right amount of benefit, nothing more will happen.

If you are not getting the right amount of benefit, the part of the Department for Communities and Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) or Department of Finance for Land and Property Services (LPS) that pays your benefit will get in touch with you.

If we overpay you because you haven't told us about a change, you may have to pay the money back.

If you have sent us any documents, we will send them back.

If you would like to comment on any part of this review, including the interview, write to us at the address on page 6.

If you want to ask us anything about this review, or about the interview, please call us on 028 90 138 136.

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