

ROLE OF RELIEVING OFFICER

Following the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, parishes in an area were joined together to form a Union, and provide a Union Workhouse for that area. The Guardians of the Union were responsible for the administration and distribution of relief, and it was their responsibility to ensure that only the deserving cases received it. There was a pervasive belief that '*there never was a time when there were so many loafers infesting our towns and cities, whose chief aim is to live without labour of their own*'. The aim was to relieve poverty whilst discouraging pauperism. In addition to admitting paupers to the Workhouse (a last resort), some relief was provided to people in their homes (known as out-relief).

It was the Guardians duty to appoint officers to administer such relief, including relieving officers, vaccination officers and (later) school attendance officers.

The distribution of out-relief was regulated two Orders: that of 21 December 1884, primarily in use in rural and agricultural areas, forbidding out-relief to able-bodied persons; and the Out-door Relief Regulation Order, 14 December 1852 in use in urban districts, which allowed out-relief to able-bodied persons under strict conditions (usually involving performing work), and was provided half in money and half in food, fuel or '*articles of absolute necessity*'.¹

The role of the relieving officer was to evaluate the cases of all persons applying for medical or poor relief, to authorize emergency relief or entry to the workhouse.² His duties were set out by the Poor Law Commissioners. This involved receiving applications for relief, calling on all the sick and infirm in the district, examining the circumstances and making enquiries re health, ability to work, family conditions, and income of the applicant or whether any family member could provide support, reporting the results to the Guardians who would then make orders for out-relief or admission to the workhouse.³ In an emergency situation the relieving officer could authorise relief or workhouse admission himself. He worked closely with the district medical officer, and often local doctors.

The National Archives provides a summarised list of the duties, which also involve an amount of paperwork, including tracking expenditure. The list is as follows:

DUTIES OF THE RELIEVING OFFICER⁴

1. To attend the weekly meetings of the guardians and any other meetings to which he might be summoned
2. To enquire into all applications for relief and report on their merits to the guardians at their weekly meeting
3. To give such temporary relief in cases of urgent necessity as each case, whether that of a person resident within the boundaries of the union or not, might require, either by sheltering the pauper in the workhouse or by giving out-relief in kind, not in money.

As a rule, the giving of out relief was not encouraged, but in certain cases, such as the illness or death of one member of a family, the wife and family of a militia-man, a widow with dependent children or a prisoner in gaol or in any other place of custody, relief was given out of the workhouse. Normally, any person or family in need of help was taken into the workhouse

4. To notify the medical officer of the illness of, or injury to, any pauper resident in the district for which he is appointed, and in the meantime to grant any relief needful; on the certificate of the medical officer, the relieving officer could grant any extras which the doctor should prescribe
5. To keep a full account of any money received or disbursed by him for the poor of each parish and of all articles received and dispensed by him as out-relief, to balance each account weekly and to present it to the guardians for their inspection
6. To report weekly to the guardians at their meeting all cases of emergency relief granted by parish officials
7. To keep, and present weekly to the guardians, a detailed nominal list of out-relief granted
8. To make out quarterly and exhibit in each parish, a list of persons relieved there

As part of these duties, the relieving officer had to investigate settlement claims, to determine whether a person found in the district was entitled to claim relief there, and if not to report to the Board of Guardians so that a removal order could be issued. In addition, he had to investigate distress warrants from other unions contesting a pauper's right to claim relief in their area. These warrants also requested monetary compensation for the costs incurred by the pauper while in the claimant's district.

In January 1892 the Board of Guardians decreed that relieving officers were also required to report to the Guardians meetings the number of able-bodied persons relieved on account of sickness per prohibitory order article No. 2.⁵⁶

During the years following 1834 the relieving officer acquired other duties; he had certain statutory functions under the Lunacy Acts and was often appointed collector to the guardians, registrar of births and deaths, vaccination officer, school attendance officer and inspector under the Infant Life Protection Acts.

Author: Lesley Hall, June 2025

¹ Rigby, E A; *The Powers and Duties of Guardians of the Poor*; London, 1899 (accessed via JSTOR)

² Higginbotham, Peter, Poor Law and Workhouse Administration and Staff,
<https://www.workhouses.org.uk/admin/>

³ <https://www.rootschat.com/forum/index.php?topic=419289.0>

⁴ Poor Law Unions: Relieving Officer Duties, summarised from the Poor Law Commission, The National Archives : <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/e5ceb273-3162-41ef-99aa-f56fbfcc5bd3>

⁵ *Guildford Union Board of Guardians minutes*, BG6/11/24, 23 January 1892; Surrey History Centre

⁶ Outdoor Relief Prohibitory Order 1844: <https://workhouses.org.uk/gco/outdoorreliefprohibitory.shtml>