

Volunteering & State Benefits

There is a lot of confusion over whether volunteering affects an individual's benefits. This is not helped by the fact that many benefits advisers are poorly informed about volunteering and often give people the wrong advice. In actual fact the rules are quite simple, and it's well worth knowing them so that you can advise volunteers if they have any queries.

Definition of voluntary work

All benefits rulings agree that voluntary work is work for a not-for-profit organisation, or work for someone who is not a member of your family, where only reasonable expenses are paid.

Job Seeker's Allowance

People on JSA can do as much voluntary work as they want as long as they continue to actively seek work. This will mean that they will have to show that they are looking for work and applying for jobs where appropriate. This means that as an organisation you will have to give your volunteers some flexibility, as they will need to visit the Job Centre for meetings and to sign on, and will need to go for interviews when they come up. If an individual is volunteering, then they are entitled to an extra 24 hours' notice if they have to attend an interview.

Income Support

Volunteering should not affect someone's Income Support as long as they are not receiving any money other than reimbursement of expenses.

Incapacity Benefit

There is a lot of confusion over Incapacity Benefit because there used to be a rule that individuals in receipt of the benefit could only volunteer for 16 hours a week. This rule no longer applies, although many people are still being told that it does. If you are in receipt of Incapacity Benefit then you can volunteer for as long as you want. People often worry that starting to volunteer will automatically trigger an investigation into their need to claim Incapacity Benefit, but in fact this very rarely happens. Occasionally there is also some confusion

about volunteering and 'therapeutic earnings'. The therapeutic earnings rule applies only to paid work and should not affect volunteers.

Disability Living Allowance

DLA is an allowance paid in acknowledgement of the fact that life for someone with a disability may be more expensive – for instance, someone with mobility problems may be reliant on taxis. Volunteering will not affect whether an individual receives this benefit or not.

Vouchers

Asylum seekers are now free to volunteer as soon as they enter the country.

Expenses & Benefits

Apart from DLA, the above benefits are open only to people who are not in paid employment. Any kind of paid work would jeopardise an individual's right to claim benefits, and they may find that their payments are docked or suspended. However, expenses do not constitute a payment, so volunteers can receive reimbursement of reasonable out-of-pocket expenses (any expenses that they have occurred because they are volunteering) without their benefits being affected. But remember that only **actual expenses** should be reimbursed. If a volunteer pays £4.50 on travel every day, it might seem easier to round the sum up to £5 – but this is not a reimbursement of an actual expense and would constitute a payment. It is a good idea to collect receipts and keep records of what expenses you have paid, so that if there is any kind of query it can clearly be shown that you are reimbursing money rather than making a payment.

There have been some problems in the past where volunteers on benefits have been given advance payments (for instance for something that would cost a lot, such as childcare or a weekly travelcard). The **Social Security Amendment (Volunteers) Regulations 2001** has now shown that income support, JSA, and Incapacity Benefit are not endangered if a volunteer receives advance payment for expenses to be incurred in the future. It is still a good idea to keep receipts and records, and the volunteer would have to repay to the organisation any money that was not spent.

Occasionally a volunteer will have problems convincing their benefits adviser that they are volunteering and not working. If this is the case, be prepared to talk to the worker for them and send information about what you do and what the volunteer is doing for you. If they are having a lot of problems then it may be worthwhile using an Expenses Record Form (a sample is available from the information service at the National Centre for Volunteering, freephone 0800 028 3304 or e-mail information@thecentre.org.uk). This will enable you to record exactly what money the volunteer is getting and to show that it is a reimbursement rather than a payment.

Informing Benefits Advisers

Individuals in receipt of benefits are asked to inform their advisers if they take up voluntary work. It is good practice to let them know that in fact it is entirely up to the volunteer whether they tell their adviser or not. Because of negative attitudes and lack of information on the part of advisers, many people feel more comfortable keeping their volunteering secret. As an organisation you have no duty to inform the benefits office of who is volunteering for you – leave it up to the individual volunteer to decide. Do bear in mind that if someone has not informed the benefits office that they are volunteering, they may be wary of their name or photograph appearing in any publicity, so do always check first before ‘outing’ someone as a volunteer.

Expenses & Equal Opportunities

Most people in receipt of benefits are on very low incomes and could not afford to volunteer if their expenses were not paid. When you decide how you will pay expenses, make sure that you are not creating unnecessary barriers. Many organisations prefer to reimburse expenses weekly or monthly rather than daily and some always reimburse by cheque. This can create problems for someone on a low income who cannot afford to wait for money to be reimbursed. If possible, always try to reimburse expenses on the same day in cash. Do not assume that a small amount of money for you is a small amount of money for everyone else. In particular, asylum seekers in receipt of vouchers have very little access to cash so may find it difficult to pay for travel or go out and buy a sandwich. If you are not sure which methods of reimbursement suit people, just ask them – in some cases it may be more efficient to develop different systems for different people.

Further Information

WK4 – Financial help if you are working or doing voluntary work. Benefits Agency/Employment Service. Contains some information on JSA not included in this information sheet. This leaflet is currently being reprinted but is available on the DSS website at: <http://www.dss.gov.uk/publications/2000/index.htm>

JSAL7 (Rev) Jobseeker's Allowance. Voluntary work when you're unemployed and it needn't affect your benefits! Employment Service. This leaflet is currently being reprinted.

If you need any further information or want to talk through an individual case you can contact the Volunteering England Information Team on: 0800 028 3304 (freephone and textphone open Mon-Fri 10:30-12:30 & 2-4) or e-mail information@volunteeringengland.org.uk