

Knowing the regulations: Volunteering whilst on benefits

‘The Problem, Case Studies and Solutions’

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Registered Charity number 1018517 and Registered Company Number 2661182

linksUK

Our purpose is to champion social change. We pioneer new ideas and new ways of working locally and share the learning nationally with practitioners and policy makers. As a result, we are recognised as national leaders in regeneration and social policy.

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linksUK's informal economy website

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Community Links website

Introduction

For many, volunteering offers an opportunity for developing skills and confidence, experiencing new environments, and can be the springboard for formal training and paid employment. However, some benefit claimants face difficulties when volunteering or trying to volunteer, as many Jobcentre staff, benefit claimants and voluntary organisations simply do not understand the rules and regulations.

Community Links recognises the significant positive changes that Government has already made with regard to volunteering (we particularly welcome the government's recent decision to include childcare and other carer costs as a reasonable reimbursable expense), the proposed changes outlined in *'Ready for Work: full employment in our generation'* (DWP, December 2007) and other announcements; as well as the work of others including the Commission on the Future of Volunteering and the Morgan Inquiry. These changes and review bodies have the potential to support many with significant barriers to the labour market with 'opportunity, employment and progression'.

This short paper aims to address how existing policy can be better implemented at an operational level, regarding volunteering and benefit claimants. It builds on earlier research into volunteering conducted by Community Links' Social Enterprise Zone, and more recently by the Council on Social Action.

Community Links and its Volunteers

Community Links is an innovative charity running community-based projects in east London. Founded in 1977, we now help over 53,000 vulnerable children, young people and adults every year, with most of our work delivered in Newham, one of the poorest boroughs in Europe. We share the learning from our local work through **linksUK**, which provides practitioner-led consultancy and training, research and policy development and a programme of publications. (See appendix for more details).

Community Links has always worked with volunteers. They are vital and without them we would not be able to continue our work. As a result we provide volunteers with the opportunity to make a meaningful difference in the community while gaining practical experience, skills and insights for themselves, which is why hundreds of volunteers get involved in all areas of our work including Children and Youth, Advice, LinksUK, Management and our social enterprises, including Auction My Stuff.

In the last financial year alone (2006/07) 1,108 volunteers contributed 18,709 hours of their time to join us in championing social change.

The Current Regulations

Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) rules and legal regulations clearly state that if you are in receipt of benefits (IB, JSA, IS and others) you can undertake as much voluntary work, for as long as you like, and be paid reasonable expenses. Voluntary work is defined as work that is done for a charity or other not-for-profit organisation or for anyone other than a member of family for which you receive no payment other than for your reasonable expenses.

The main benefit with certain conditions is Jobseekers Allowance (JSA), whose rules state that a person can undertake voluntary work whilst claiming JSA if they are willing and able to take up an offer of paid employment with 7 days notice, and be able to attend a work related interview with 48 hours notice. A volunteer must still actively seek work every day, but voluntary work will be taken into account if it improves a client's chances of finding a job. A client needs to negotiate with their personal adviser and put it into their 'contract' about the voluntary work they undertake. (CPAG, 2007; CAB website, 2008)

The Problem

"Because of negative attitudes and lack of information on the part of (JCP) advisers, many people feel more comfortable keeping their volunteering secret."

Volunteering England Website, viewed on 28th May 2008

The fundamental problem is that everyone is unclear and confused about the exact nature of what the rules and regulations are in relation to volunteering whilst in receipt of benefits, including:

Jobcentre Plus staff	Many staff, including personal advisers, at Jobcentre Plus have a poor understanding of the regulations and inform clients in an ad hoc manner that they are not allowed to volunteer, or not allowed to exceed 16 hours, or that they must take a job as soon as it is offered.
Benefit recipients	Most claimants are very reluctant to challenge Jobcentre Plus staff.
Voluntary & Community organisations	Some VCOs are not clear on the regulations and are advising potential and existing volunteers in correctly, or at worse turning them away

Case Studies

The following case studies illustrate some of the issues that people face when volunteering or trying to volunteer in their local community.

Case Study 1

Jo recently volunteered for Community Links in Newham, east London. She was on JSA but her personal adviser at the local Jobcentre said she could not do more than 16 hours a week volunteering otherwise it would affect her benefits. Jo, even though she consulted Community Links advice team to verify her legal position, refused to challenge her Jobcentre adviser, as she thought it might affect her benefits. So Jo lied to her Jobcentre adviser, said that she was only doing 16 hours each week, when in fact she volunteered for over 35 hours each week. Jo subsequently worried about being found out; but continued because volunteering was helping her considerably. It helped to rebuild her confidence, skills and experience. Jo had been unemployed for more than two years, and with job search and personal development support from her placement manager at Community Links, she found full time paid work.

Case Study 2

James was on JSA and saw an advert which inspired him to volunteer full-time. He would spend 30 hours each week volunteering on an environmental, green-spaces project. His

Jobcentre adviser agreed that this meant he still had the time to look for work and attend interviews. However, because the volunteering programme lasts between three and six months and he was not available for work within that period, he would no longer be eligible for JSA. James had a wife and child and they were in receipt of several other benefits. At the time he could have moved on to the subsistence allowance that the volunteering organisation was offering, but the complications in reassessing his other benefits made it too difficult. James therefore did not go ahead with his voluntary placement.

The Solutions

The objectives in implementing these solutions and recommendations is to ensure that all people (benefit claimants, Jobcentre Plus staff and voluntary & community organisations) clearly understand and consistently comply with the regulations about volunteering whilst on benefits; and to appreciate the role that volunteering plays in getting people back on the road to paid employment. Our solutions include:

1. Training for front line staff and managers at Jobcentre Plus and outsourced providers, to raise their awareness about the rules surrounding volunteering.
2. A communications and marketing drive to increase awareness and understanding about the regulations; and the opportunities and benefits gained from volunteering. Some ideas about the methods that could be used include:

▶ **Jobcentre Plus staff:**

- Through a briefing note / paper – sent out in wage slips and/or in team meetings
- Staff handbook
- Include in new staff inductions
- Include in all staff training (new recruits and in on-going training for staff)
- In-house JCP staff magazine e.g. ‘DWPeople’, ‘In-Touch’ or ‘Government Opportunities’ magazines
- Intranet and DWP/JCP website and press releases
- Announcement by all JCP directors and managers to all staff at their weekly local training sessions (and then announced each month for three months to get the message through)
- Include in monitoring of performance indicators / floor targets i.e. staff must know about the correct rules concerning volunteering whilst on benefits

▶ **Benefit recipients:**

- Through their personal adviser and/or a named member of staff responsible for volunteering in local Jobcentres
- Explained to people when they initially sign on; and then at bi-monthly meetings (if appropriate)
- Include in benefit recipient information packs
- Through local information campaigns, possibly including leaflets and posters in Jobcentres – though word of mouth is the strongest.
- There are already two leaflets available about volunteering. These could be more widely circulated.

- Financial help if you work or are looking for work - Jobcentre Plus leaflet WK1
 - Volunteering while unemployed helps others and can help you - Jobcentre Plus leaflet JSAL7

 - ▶ **Voluntary & Community Organisations (VCOs):**
 - Through information campaigns by national volunteer organisations e.g. Volunteering England, NAVCA and local CVS, NCVO, CSV
 - Information campaigns to volunteering and HR departments of VCOs

 - ▶ **General public**
 - Through the national media and press
 - Through specialist / trade media and press
 - PM and ministers could make announcements
3. DWP and Jobcentre Plus should offer and make available (downloadable) an exemption memorandum certificate for voluntary organisations wishing to offer long term volunteering placements at a local level.
 4. Formal monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be put in place to ensure quality and consistency of advice about volunteering given by staff and outsourced providers.
 5. DWP should formally recognise, accredit and reward claimants for volunteering, and the organisations that offer volunteering opportunities. From the understanding that volunteering can be part of the journey for people to paid work.
 6. DWP should explore the possibility of introducing volunteering as an option for people on Incapacity Benefit (ESA from October 2008), supporting them to take those steps back into work (c.f. New Deal's volunteer option).
 7. A 'sounding board' or 'claimant advisory panel' should be set up to work with head office DWP officials and Ministers to develop new strategies, policies, programmes and initiatives; including the strategic approach to roll out training and communications about volunteering.
 8. DWP should develop a simple and effective mechanism through which 'road blocks' identified by claimants, the voluntary and community sector and outsourced providers, can be addressed. The 'sounding board' could be part of that mechanism; as could named staff members in Jobcentres (local and district levels) responsible for volunteering.

Appendix

An introduction to Community Links

Community Links is an innovative charity running community-based projects in east London. Founded in 1977, we now help over 53,000 vulnerable children, young people and adults every year, with most of our work delivered in Newham, one of the poorest boroughs in Europe.

Our Vision is to be champions of social change.

Our Purpose is to tackle the causes and consequences of social exclusion by developing and running first rate practical activities in east London, and by sharing the local experience with practitioners and policy makers nationwide.

Our Work is based on the belief that we all have the potential to do great things. Community Links aims to encourage everyone to fulfil their own potential and knows that every adult can build their own ladder out of poverty or disadvantage. This is reflected by 80% of Community Links' services being provided by people who were themselves service users.

In east London we provide advice, training and practical support, including education programmes for non-school attenders, play and care schemes, family advice sessions, youth work with young people on the street, training schemes, counselling groups, emergency services and much more.

linksUK explained

Community Links shares the learning from our local work through **linksUK**, which provides practitioner-led consultancy and training, research and policy development and a programme of publications

Over the last eight years, linksUK has:

- ▶ published over 32 books and reports based on our research
- ▶ worked with over 5,000 local people using our innovative 'Everyday Innovators' approach
- ▶ succeeded in securing 12 national policy changes
- ▶ influenced government strategy and policy on the informal economy and deprived neighbourhoods
- ▶ hosted seven government secondments
- ▶ and has successfully tested 11 ideas for improving delivery of local services.

Further information

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