

Volunteering

while getting benefits

jobcentreplus

Part of the Department for Work and Pensions



This leaflet is only a guide and does not cover every circumstance. We have done our best to make sure the leaflet is correct as of February 2010. Some of the information may be oversimplified, or may become inaccurate over time, for example because of changes to the law.

Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| What is volunteering? | 4 |
| Why do it?..... | 5 |
| What if I get State benefits? | 6 |
| The basic rules | 6 |
| What are expenses?..... | 7 |
| What if I choose not to get paid for my work? | 9 |
| How will part-time volunteering affect my benefit? | 10 |
| Carer's Allowance..... | 10 |
| Disability Living Allowance or Attendance Allowance..... | 10 |
| Employment and Support Allowance, Incapacity Benefit or Income Support | 11 |
| Housing Benefit or Council Tax Benefit | 11 |
| Jobseeker's Allowance | 12 |
| National Insurance credits | 13 |
| Pension Credit..... | 14 |
| Tax credits | 14 |
| Full-time volunteering | 15 |
| Common questions about full-time volunteering | 16 |
| How do I get started? | 19 |
| Contact details | 21 |

What is volunteering?

This is when you choose to give your time and energy to benefit other people without being paid for it. You could do voluntary work with any kind of organisation, including:

- a charity, voluntary organisation or community group
- a public-sector organisation, like your local council
- a social enterprise supporting your local community, or
- a local business.

It's not volunteering if you:

- help out a family member
- are given money apart from your expenses, or
- are under contract to do it (this does not include any 'volunteer agreement' you may have).

You may be given expenses and, in some cases (for example, if you're volunteering full-time), you may also get a small subsistence allowance for food or travel or both.

If you're getting State benefits, you can be a volunteer and, in nearly all cases, your benefits will not be affected. However, there are some cases where your benefits can be affected – for example, if you get a subsistence allowance or if you're doing what someone else would normally be paid for.

Subsistence allowance

Some full-time volunteering programmes pay an allowance that usually covers food, travel and basic living costs. This allowance is paid by the organisation you're volunteering with, not Jobcentre Plus.

If you're getting benefits, you must always talk to Jobcentre Plus before you start any volunteering.

Why do it?

Volunteering helps other people and can also help you in many ways.

It can give you a better chance of getting paid work, by helping you to:

- learn new skills
- practise the skills you have
- become more confident
- put some volunteering experience on your CV
- pick up good ideas from other people
- show employers you can keep regular hours and stay committed to a task
- meet people who can help you find paid work
- have things to talk about in a job interview, and
- get references.

Volunteering is also a great way for you to:

- do something you enjoy
- find new interests
- stay active and healthy
- pass on your skills to other people
- keep to a daily routine
- get out and meet people
- give something back to your community
- increase your confidence, and
- thank people who have cared for a family member or friend.

What if I get State benefits?

We know that volunteering can give you a much better chance of finding paid work. So you can volunteer as many hours as you like while you're getting benefits as long as you keep to the rules for getting them.

The basic rules

The basic rules are that if you get Jobseeker's Allowance, you will still need to be looking for paid work. You must be free to go to an interview if we give you 48 hours' notice. You must be able to start work within one week of us giving you notice.

You must not be paid money or anything else for volunteering. It's OK to be paid your expenses but you must tell us what you get. So make sure you can get hold of your receipts.

You must contact Jobcentre Plus if you want to do any volunteering. We will ask you to fill in a simple form telling us about the volunteering you want to do.

To contact Jobcentre Plus, visit www.direct.gov.uk or get our details from the phone book.

What are expenses?

Expenses are costs you have to pay as a direct result of volunteering. Expenses can be things like:

- a bus or train fare for you to get to or from your volunteering
- the cost of somewhere to stay if you have to be away from home overnight because of your volunteering
- the cost of your meals while you are volunteering
- the cost of any special clothing or equipment that you need to carry out your volunteering, or
- the cost of some care expenses in certain cases.

It's OK to get your expenses paid upfront.

If Jobcentre Plus pays your benefit, you must tell us about:

- all your expenses – remember to keep your receipts
- any money you get on top of expenses – this counts as earnings, and
- anything else you are given – this may not be money.

Always talk to your personal adviser before you start volunteering. They can tell you if volunteering will affect your benefits.

If you live with your parents or partner, their benefits could be affected if you get money or anything else on top of expenses.

Partner

We will treat you as a couple if you live with your husband, wife or civil partner, or if you live with someone as if they were your husband, wife or civil partner. We call this other person your partner.

What if I choose not to get paid for my work?

Choosing not to be paid is not the same as volunteering. If you're doing what someone would normally be paid for – for example, if you're working in a business or for a member of your family where they would usually pay someone to do the work – we will class this as unpaid work, not volunteering.

If you get Income Support, Jobseeker's Allowance, income-related Employment and Support Allowance, Housing Benefit or Council Tax Benefit, we might decide that what you would have been paid are 'notional earnings'. If we decide this, it may affect your benefits and tax credits.

We decide by looking at whether:

- someone would normally be paid to do the same kind of work
- your work helps society or your community in some way, and
- you work for a charity or similar group.

How will part-time volunteering affect my benefit?

Carer's Allowance

You still can get Carer's Allowance if you do volunteering in the UK and:

- care for a disabled person for at least 35 hours a week, and
- they get the right disability benefit.

If your volunteering takes you abroad for over four weeks, it could affect your Carer's Allowance.

Disability Living Allowance or Attendance Allowance

Volunteering in the UK won't affect your Disability Living Allowance or Attendance Allowance.

Volunteering abroad for less than six months won't affect your Disability Living Allowance or Attendance Allowance.

If you want to volunteer abroad, tell the Disability and Carers Service. You should also tell them if your care needs or walking difficulties change.

To find out more, contact the Benefit Enquiry Line (see page 21).

United Kingdom (UK)

This is England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but not the Channel Islands or the Isle of Man

Employment and Support Allowance, Incapacity Benefit or Income Support

You can still be a volunteer and get Employment and Support Allowance, Incapacity Benefit or Income Support as long as you:

- follow the basic rules for volunteering (see page 6)
- can still go to a work-focused interview when we ask you to, and
- let Jobcentre Plus know before you start, and tell them about any expenses you may get.

To find out how to contact Jobcentre Plus, visit www.direct.gov.uk or get our details from the phone book.

Housing Benefit or Council Tax Benefit

You normally get Housing Benefit or Council Tax Benefit (or both) if you're getting Jobseeker's Allowance, Income Support, Employment and Support Allowance or Pension Credit, or you have a low income.

You can still get Housing Benefit or Council Tax Benefit if you follow the basic rules for volunteering (see page 6). You must tell your local council about any volunteering you do, and any expenses you get.

Jobseeker's Allowance

You can still be a volunteer and get Jobseeker's Allowance as long as you:

- follow the basic rules for volunteering (see page 6)
- are still actively looking for a full-time paid job
- are available for work (or treated as being available for work)
- are still able to go to an interview at 48 hours' notice
- are still able to start a job at one week's notice, and
- let Jobcentre Plus know before you start, and tell them about any expenses you may get.

If you've been unemployed for six months, there may be extra help if you're thinking about volunteering. Speak to your personal adviser to see what's available in your area.

National Insurance credits

You will usually get National Insurance credits if you're getting a benefit like Employment and Support Allowance, Jobseeker's Allowance, Incapacity Benefit or Carer's Allowance.

You should carry on getting them as a volunteer.

You won't get National Insurance credits just because you are a volunteer. But you may get National Insurance credits even if you don't get benefits. This could be if you're listed as actively looking for, and being free to, work or if you can't work because of an illness or disability.

United Kingdom (UK)

This is England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but not the Channel Islands or the Isle of Man

Tax credits helpline

Phone:
0845 300 3900

Textphone:
0845 300 3909

Open 8am to 8pm every day.

You can also visit
www.hmrc.gov.uk/taxcredits

Partner

We will treat you as a couple if you live with your husband, wife or civil partner, or if you live with someone as if they were your husband, wife or civil partner. We call this other person your partner.

Pension Credit

Being a volunteer in the United Kingdom should not affect your Pension Credit, as long as the only money you get is for expenses. But if you go abroad as a volunteer for more than 13 weeks at a time, your Pension Credit could be stopped. You should tell The Pension Service if you go abroad for any reason.

Tax credits

Working Tax Credit

You have to be in paid work for at least a set number of hours a week to get Working Tax Credit. The hours you volunteer don't count towards your weekly working hours.

If you or your partner are responsible for a child or young person, or a disability makes it harder for you to get a job, you must be working at least 16 hours a week.

Otherwise, you must be 25 or over and working at least 30 hours a week.

Child Tax Credit

The amount of Child Tax Credit you get is based on your income. You may get it, whether or not you work, if you or your partner is responsible for a child or young person who normally lives with you.

Being a volunteer will not change how much Child Tax Credit you get.

Full-time volunteering

If you become a full-time volunteer, you may be given:

- a full-time subsistence allowance to cover food, travel and basic living costs
- somewhere to live, if you have to live away from home
- a chance to link your volunteering to a qualification, and
- help with childcare costs, if you need your children looked after while you are volunteering.

The subsistence allowance is paid by the organisation you're volunteering with, not Jobcentre Plus.

Common questions about full-time volunteering

Q Can I get a full-time subsistence allowance as well as my benefits?

A Not normally. However, a subsistence allowance won't affect your Disability Living Allowance or Attendance Allowance.

It also won't affect Carer's Allowance, but you would still need to care for a disabled person for at least 35 hours a week.

You may get Housing Benefit or Council Tax Benefit depending on your income and the amount of rent or council tax you pay.

Q Can I get Jobseeker's Allowance if I do full time volunteering?

A Yes, as long as you keep to the rules for getting Jobseeker's Allowance, such as being available for and actively looking for work (see page 12).

If you volunteer and want to get a full-time subsistence allowance, you may have to stop claiming Jobseeker's Allowance.

Always talk to Jobcentre Plus before you start volunteering.

Q If I have to stop claiming Jobseeker's Allowance, what happens to my other benefits, like Housing Benefit?

A If you were getting Housing Benefit before Jobseeker's Allowance, you may still be able to get it. Talk to your personal adviser for more details.

Q Can I do full-time volunteering if I get Employment and Support Allowance, Incapacity Benefit or Income Support?

A Yes. Any reasonable expenses you get will not affect your benefit.

If you volunteer and want to get a full-time subsistence allowance you may have to stop claiming Employment and Support Allowance, Incapacity Benefit or Income Support

If you are on Employment and Support Allowance or Incapacity Benefit, always ask your personal adviser for more information about permitted work.

Q Will volunteering away from home affect my benefit?

A If you get Housing Benefit or Council Tax Benefit, or get Income Support for your housing costs, you may be able to live away from home for up to 13 weeks and still get benefit. An adviser will be able to explain the rules about this.

If you're away from home for more than 13 weeks, these benefits will usually stop. However, they can continue for up to 52 weeks in some exceptional circumstances.

If you get Carer's Allowance and volunteer away from home, you can get benefit but must still be caring for a disabled person for at least 35 hours a week.

Q Do I have to pay tax or National Insurance on the full-time subsistence allowance?

A Not if it's your only source of income.

Q What about tax if I get a full-time subsistence allowance and do paid work?

A If the allowance and your wages take you above the tax-free limit, you will have to pay tax.

How do I get started?

- 1 A Volunteer Centre will have details of places that need volunteers. You can find your nearest Volunteer Centre by using the contact details on page 20.

You can go for an informal chat, or set up a more detailed interview with one of the staff to talk about what you want to do.

- 2 If you know who you want to volunteer for, you can contact them direct.

Many organisations have a volunteer co-ordinator who will discuss opportunities with you. This can help you make the best use of your abilities.

- 3 Other ways to find out about what you can do are to:

- ask friends and family
- look in your local library or community centre
- look on the internet, or
- check local newspapers and radio for organisations that may want volunteers.

There are many opportunities, so it's worth searching for something that's right for you. By having a chat with friends or the Volunteer Centre, you might find out about something you had not thought of.

To find out more about being a volunteer in your area, contact your local Volunteer Centre or Volunteer Development Agency. Their details are in the phone book.

Useful websites:

Volunteering England:

Website: www.volunteering.org.uk/finder

Volunteer Development Scotland:

Website: www.volunteerscotland.org.uk

Wales Council for Voluntary Action:

Website: www.volunteering-wales.net

Contact details

Jobcentre Plus

To contact Jobcentre Plus, visit www.direct.gov.uk or get our details from the phone book.

Benefit Enquiry Line

This is a confidential telephone service for disabled people and carers.

Phone: 0800 88 22 00

Textphone: 0800 24 33 55

Open Monday to Friday 8.30am to 6.30pm, Saturday 9am to 1pm.

Directgov

Directgov provides information from UK government departments on topics ranging from travel safety to special educational needs and local NHS services.

Visit www.direct.gov.uk for more information.

Tax credits helpline

For advice about Child Tax Credit and Working Tax Credit.

- Phone: 0845 300 3900
- Textphone: 0845 300 3909

Open from 8am to 8pm.

Or visit: www.hmrc.gov.uk/taxcredits

The Pension Service

For general enquiries about pensions.

- Phone: 0845 60 60 265
- Textphone: 0845 60 60 285

Open Monday to Friday 8am to 8pm.

Or visit: www.direct.gov.uk/pensions

Call charges

Charges were correct as of the date on the back of this leaflet.

Calls to **0800** numbers are free from BT land lines, but you may have to pay if you use another phone company, a mobile phone, or if you are calling from abroad.

Calls to **0845** numbers from BT land lines should cost no more than 4p a minute with a 9p call set-up charge. You may have to pay more if you use another phone company, a mobile phone, or if you are calling from abroad.

Calls from mobile phones can cost up to 40p a minute, so check the cost of calls with your service provider.

Textphones

Our textphone numbers are for people who cannot speak or hear clearly. If you don't have a textphone, you could check if your local library or citizens advice bureau has one. Textphones don't receive text messages from mobile phones.

Directgov provides information from UK government departments on topics ranging from benefits to driving licenses and local NHS services. Visit www.direct.gov.uk

Jobcentre Plus is committed to applying the principles of equal opportunities in its programmes and services.

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