

Volunteers Receiving Benefits

The regulations relating to volunteers who are receiving welfare benefits can be complex, prone to local variations in interpretation and can be subject to change. If you or any of your volunteers are unsure about the rules in relation to benefits and volunteering, ask your local Volunteer Bureau adviser or the Benefits Agency for up-to-date information

The current regulations state that people in receipt of benefits can volunteer and are entitled to receive out-of-pocket expenses providing that they comply with relevant regulations. The Job Centre produces a booklet (WK4) for people interested in volunteering which has details of how benefits may or may not be affected.

People in receipt of benefits are supposed to advise their benefits advisers if they take up voluntary work. It is good practice to let your volunteers know that this is the case, but it is entirely up to them whether they do tell their advisers or not. As an organisation, you have no duty to inform the benefits office – it should be left up to the individual.

Jobseekers' Allowance (JSA)

If someone is receiving Jobseekers Allowance, there is no set limit to the amount of volunteering they can do, so long as they can prove that they are still actively seeking work, are available to attend interviews and are able to start work at one week's notice. This means that as an organisation you may have to give volunteers some flexibility to attend interviews, sign on at the Job Centre, etc.

Income Support

People in receipt of Income Support can do as much voluntary work as they like, as long as they do not receive any payment other than out-of-pocket expenses.

Incapacity Benefit

The Benefits Agency states that a person's Incapacity Benefit should not be affected by doing voluntary work. Being able to volunteer is not the same as being able to work, as voluntary work is more flexible than paid employment and volunteers can stop whenever they want. In addition, the rules state that people receiving Incapacity Benefit can volunteer for as many hours as they wish. Before October 1998 there was a

rule stating that people in receipt of the benefit could not volunteer for more than 16 hours per week. This no longer applies – although some people are still being told that it does.

However, national regulations can often be prone to local variations in interpretation and to avoid potential problems with the Benefits Agency, it might make sense to advise your volunteers against taking on too much and to make sure that they pace themselves, bearing in mind their health.

Disability Living Allowance

DLA is paid in acknowledgement of the fact that having a disability can make everyday life more expensive. Volunteering will not affect whether an individual receives DLA or not.

Sometimes volunteers can have problems convincing their benefits adviser that they are volunteering and not doing paid work. If this is the case, you should be prepared to send information about what your organisation does and how the volunteer is involved in helping. If they are receiving out-of-pocket expenses, you should make sure that you are using an expenses form to record exactly what money the volunteer is receiving and to show that it is reimbursement rather than paid work.

If your volunteers are in any doubt or have any queries on benefits and volunteering, they can call staff at any of Wirral's Volunteer Bureaux for advice or support.

Further information

WK4 – Financial help if you are work or are doing voluntary work. Benefits Agency/Employment Service

Contains some additional information on Jobseekers' Allowance. Available from the DSS website at www.dss.gov.uk/publications/2000/index.htm

JSAL7 Jobseekers Allowance Voluntary work when you're unemployed and it needn't affect your benefits. Employment Service