

VOLUNTEERING AND BENEFITS



If you are receiving state benefits you are still allowed to volunteer.

However, there are some rules that you need to be aware of to make sure that your volunteering doesn't have an impact on the benefits you receive.

This guidance drawn up by NCVO (www.ncvo.org.uk) aims to help you start volunteering by giving an overview of what you need to know and providing some answers to some of the questions you may have before you start volunteering.

This doesn't cover every situation and you may have questions about your individual circumstances. If you're unsure about where you stand in relation to the rules, you should speak to your job coach or benefits adviser. Your local Citizen's Advice Bureau may also be able to help.

Can I volunteer when I'm receiving state benefits?

People are allowed to volunteer while claiming state benefits, including means-tested benefits such as jobseeker's allowance (JSA), incapacity benefit, income support, and employment and support allowance (ESA).

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.

What are the rules?

The rules vary depending on the type of benefit you're receiving, but there are some key principles that you need to bear in mind.

The volunteering you do must comply with the government's definition of volunteering

The definition states that volunteering is 'when you choose to give your time and energy to benefit other people without being paid for it'.

You can volunteer with any kind of organisation including:

- charities
- voluntary organisation or community groups
- public-sector organisations, e.g. the NHS, police and other public services
- social enterprises

It doesn't count as volunteering if you are:

- helping out a family member
- given money other than being paid out-of-pocket expenses
- under contract to do the work (this does not include any 'volunteer agreement' you may have).

You must notify your job coach or benefits adviser if you intend to start volunteering

Benefits claimants are required to notify their benefits adviser of their intention to start volunteering.

The organisation you volunteer for cannot give you any money except for reimbursing you for out-of-pocket expenses

These must be expenses that you've incurred in order to volunteer, for example the cost of travel, meals while out volunteering, care costs etc.

The organisation should collect receipts from you and reimburse exactly what you've spent. This means that, if needed, you could show your benefits adviser that any money you were getting was a reimbursement and not a payment.

If you're receiving financial rewards beyond out-of-pocket expenses, this can be classed as income and will be liable for tax, and it can affect the benefits you receive. If you live with your parents or partner, their benefits could be affected if you get money, or anything else on top of expenses that could be seen as payment.

You must follow the rules for the specific benefit you are receiving and any plans or agreements you have in place

Make sure you are clear on this with your job coach or benefits adviser and be upfront about your intention to start volunteering.

You may have agreed an individual plan; for example, if you're on JSA you may have a claimant commitment that you agreed with your work coach. This may identify specific tasks and activities to complete.

Before you start your volunteering, you should make sure that it's part of this plan and that it has been agreed with your job coach or adviser.

If you don't follow the plan, you may face penalties for failing to meet your responsibilities. Your work coach should review the plan regularly and let you know what penalties you could face. If they've been informed about your volunteering and it's built into a plan to enable you to meet your other responsibilities, then it shouldn't be the cause of sanctions or penalties.

Volunteering and universal credit

You can still volunteer if you're on universal credit as long as you also undertake any activities, such as job searching, training or other requirements, identified by your Jobcentre Plus adviser. This is likely to be part of a claimant commitment.

How will I know what these requirements are?

When you first attend Jobcentre Plus, your adviser will decide which of four groups you will be put into, depending on your needs and circumstances. For example:

- if you are unable to work because of illness or disability, or you have a child under one year old, you will have no work-related requirements
- if you are the sole or main carer of a child aged between one and five years, you will be expected to attend a work-focused interview to help you keep in touch with the world of work and improve your opportunities for work
- if you have a limited capacity to work, perhaps because of an illness or disability, you may be asked to undertake activities in preparation for work, such as training or work experience ('work preparation requirements')
- everyone else will be expected to take 'all reasonable action' to find a job or increase their hours or pay ('all work-related requirements').

Your adviser will draw up a claimant commitment in consultation with you. This will set out which group you are in and what actions, if any, you will be expected to take to find work, find better-paid work or increase your hours. It will also say what will happen if you don't comply with this (your adviser may impose sanctions).

Does volunteering count as taking 'reasonable action' to find a job?

Yes, it can count towards up to 50% of the time you are expected to be looking for a job.*

This means that:

- if you are required to spend 35 hours a week looking for a full-time job, half of this time (17.5 hours) can be spent volunteering
- if you only volunteer five hours a week, then you will be required to spend 30 hours looking for work
- if you are looking for part-time work, e.g. 16 hours a week, you can volunteer for up to eight hours and spend the rest of the time looking for work.

* This will not apply to you if you are in the no requirements, work-focussed interview or work preparation category.

Does that mean I can't volunteer for more than 17.5 hours a week?

There are no restrictions on how many hours you can volunteer, but you will be required to spend at least 17.5 hours a week job seeking if you're looking for full time work, or half the expected number of part-time hours if you're looking for part time work, as illustrated by the examples above.

Can my Jobcentre Plus adviser require me to volunteer?

No. Volunteering is something that you choose to do because you want to freely give your time and energy to benefit others. No one can force you to volunteer.

You may be required to undertake work experience or a formal work placement, perhaps in a voluntary organisation, but that is not volunteering.

Can my Jobcentre Plus adviser insist on the type of volunteering that I can do?

No. You choose where you want to give your time. However, you may find it useful to discuss with your adviser how you can use the skills and experience gained from volunteering in your search for a job.

Can my Jobcentre Plus adviser approach the Volunteer Centre or the organisation I volunteer for to check up on me?

No. You have chosen to volunteer and you have a separate relationship with both your Volunteer Centre and the organisation you volunteer for. They should not give out any details about you without your permission.

What happens if I don't volunteer for as many hours a week as I agreed with my Jobcentre Plus adviser?

If there is a reason why you haven't been able to volunteer for a time-limited period, for example you or your child was ill or you had to move house, then you may be temporarily exempt from meeting your requirements.

If not, then you should make sure that you make up the time in other work-related activity so that you don't get penalised. Failure to comply with activities set out in your claimant commitment could lead to you being sanctioned, which could include the loss of your benefits.

What happens if the organisation I volunteer for reduces my hours?

Again, you may need to spend more time looking for work, or volunteering for another organisation to make up the time lost. It's always worth explaining your situation to your volunteer manager and asking them not to change your hours without giving you notice or consulting you first.

I've been told that I have to be immediately available for work. If I'm volunteering, what happens if I get offered an interview or a job?

As a volunteer you are given a little more leeway: you have 48 hours to attend an interview and one week to take up a job offer.

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This information is intended as a guide only. Claimants should always seek advice from their work coach and this needs to be done before the volunteering commences.

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