

## **For Volunteers: Guide to Benefits**

Dear Volunteer,

We have tried to pull together all the useful information we could, to hopefully ease the confusion about claiming benefits while volunteering, as it can be a complicated subject.

If you need any help or advice, please contact the website provided by the Direct.gov.

[http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/HomeAndCommunity/Gettinginvolvedinyourcommunity/Volunteering/DG\\_064299](http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/HomeAndCommunity/Gettinginvolvedinyourcommunity/Volunteering/DG_064299)

The site may provide answers to your enquiry straight away, and it has an easy index to search for any information. There are other website links you might find useful at the end of this document.

### **Job Seekers Allowance (J.S.A)**

This is the main benefit that volunteers claim during their placement. It is usually available if you are unemployed, and capable of work. This is dependent on any other income you or your partner may be receiving. If there is some reason why you are incapable of working, then Income Support or Employment Support Allowance (ESA) are usually the benefits that are claimed.

There have recently been changes in the law which recognise the value of undertaking voluntary work in order to increase your chances of finding paid employment, which means **that you can now take a full time volunteering placement as a volunteer and still claim Job Seeker's Allowance.**

There has been confusion over the issue of JSA and volunteering, since the 16 hour rule ( that you could only do 16 hours voluntary work per week whilst claiming JSA) was abolished in 1998. As volunteering is a complicated issue, there may be inconsistencies and difficulties surrounding this issue. Please be patient and work with both frontline staff in JCP, and the Decision Maker based in the Benefit Delivery Centre. The 16-hour rule only ever applied to Incapacity Benefit and never to JSA. **In any case, the 16-hour rule was abolished in late 1998**, so the 16-hour rule can be ignored completely. If Jobcentre staff quote this rule to you, politely direct them to Jobcentre leaflet DWP 1023 entitled 'Volunteering Whilst Getting Benefits' (<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/dwp1023.pdf>)

This leaflet states:

"Can I get Job Seekers Allowance if I do full time volunteering ?"

“Yes as long as you keep to the rules for getting Job Seekers Allowance, such as being available for work and actively looking for work “

You can also refer Jobcentre staff to the JSA section of the Job Centre Plus website. Once the Jobcentre Plus staff are made aware of this position, there should be no objection to your doing voluntary work.

However, as you might expect, the reality of the situation can be a bit more complicated. We have outlined some advice below that might be of use.

### **(1) APPLY IMMEDIATELY**

If you are not already claiming JSA, make your claim immediately. Claims often take a few weeks to process, and there are often queries, which need to be ironed out before your first payment can be made.

Additionally, the earlier you make your claim for JSA, the better off you'll be. To claim JSA the first action you must take is to ring the Contact centre on 0800 055 6688.

### **(2) GO PREPARED WITH APPROPRIATE INFORMATION**

In order to be granted Jobseeker's Allowance, you must be able to demonstrate that you are “available for and actively seeking work”. From 1 January 2003 the availability period for volunteers to take up a job was extended from 48 hours to one week (seven consecutive days). You will still have to be available to attend an interview with 48 hours' notice. Jobcentre Plus staff may require extra information to confirm that your volunteering does not interfere with your search for work. It is best to have all the relevant information with you, in order to satisfy these issues.

- Take with you a letter from your volunteer broker or placement organisation confirming that you will be volunteering (see attached example).
- If there are still problems, refer them directly to the volunteer placement organisation.
- If you haven't been asked to fill out a Volwork1JCP form, **ask for it** – this is an initial declaration that you are doing voluntary work.

If you are declaring voluntary work, it is a general expectation that you should still attend fortnightly signing sessions at your registered JCP Offices, and if you do so and meet the required criteria, you will continue to receive your JSA.

### **(3) THE STAGE 2 INTERVIEW**

After approximately 3 months of claiming JSA, you will be required to attend a 13-week interview. Before this point, you are allowed to be specific about the kind of job you are searching for. After 13 weeks you will probably be asked to broaden the net somewhat, perhaps by agreeing to accept a lower salary, or try for jobs outside your specific area of expertise. These stipulations will be agreed through discussion with your Personal Advisor.

You will need to be able to demonstrate to your Personal Advisor that you have actively been seeking work. You will need to produce records of your weekly job-search activities (Jobcentre Plus should have provided a booklet for this purpose). Be prepared to talk about the skills you have been acquiring which are increasing your employability.

#### **(4) NEW DEAL**

From the 5<sup>th</sup> October 2009, a new process called the Flexible New Deal came into operation. This process involves anyone who has been claiming for 12 months. After this period, you would be referred to a Flexible New Deal provider for a further 12 months, regardless of what voluntary work you are currently doing.

If this is an issue for you, please speak to JCP staff regarding your status, and to discuss what Flexible New Deal will mean for you.

#### **(5) EXPENSES**

Talk to your volunteering placement organisation about their expenses policy. You should not be out of pocket as a result of volunteering. You should be entitled to receive re-imbursments of travel expenses associated with doing your voluntary work. These will not affect your benefits, as these are described as “out of pocket” expenses.

N.B. Housing Benefit and the Council Tax Office also need to know that you are doing voluntary work, and about any expenses being reimbursed.

#### **(6) CRISIS FUNDS**

If for any reason there is a delay in your Jobseeker’s Allowance coming through, and you are in immediate need of money, you can apply for a Crisis Fund. The first action to claim a Crisis Loan is to call the Crisis Loans Contact Centre on 0800 169 9891. Your claim will be dealt with and (providing you qualify), funds money issued to you the very same day. In deciding whether you qualify, they take into account your previous wage (how long ago you received a wage, how much it was), and any savings you may have.

Unfortunately, you may not apply for a Crisis Loan when a crisis with Housing Benefit occurs – one reason to be extra vigilant when applying for a crisis loan.

## **(7) HOUSING BENEFIT**

If you are claiming Jobseeker's Allowance, you are almost certainly eligible for Housing Benefit. Your claim will be assessed using three criteria:

The suitability of the property for your needs:

The Council may decide that the house is more spacious or has more rooms than you require, limiting the amount of benefit they pay accordingly.

If you are single and under 25 years old, restrictions apply to the maximum amount of Housing Benefit you can get. This is known as the 'single room rent' level. You are unlikely to be able to afford to rent more than a room in a shared house; it's overly optimistic to hope for a kitchen or bathroom that you do not have to share.

If you are over 25 or intending to rent with your partner you will usually be paid benefit up to a standard figure known as the local reference rent. Each district calculates its own reference rent, based on the cost of renting the average property of that size, within that area.

Should the money you pay your landlord cover the cost of any bills or meals the Council will wish to know how this money is apportioned. If you are unable to provide this information they will use their own standard figures to calculate how much benefit they will pay you.

## **(8) USEFUL PLACES TO VISIT ON THE WEB**

<http://www.volunteering.org.uk/Resources/goodpracticebank/Information/volunteerin gandstatebenefits.htm>

-Volunteering England (formerly the National Council for Volunteering)

-This page contains information about claiming benefits while volunteering.

[http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/HomeAndCommunity/Gettinginvolvedinyourcommunity/Volunteering/DG\\_064299](http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/HomeAndCommunity/Gettinginvolvedinyourcommunity/Volunteering/DG_064299)

-From directgov

-This site has a link to the official information about Jobseeker's Allowance.

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