

Guide to Volunteering & Claiming Benefits

Are you Allowed to Volunteer if you are Claiming Benefits?

The short answer is yes but you will have to follow some guidelines and rules depending on the benefit you are getting.

Definition of voluntary work

Voluntary work is work for a not-for-profit organisation, or work for someone who is not a member of your family, where only reasonable expenses are paid.

N.B: Before Starting Voluntary Work, it is always advised to inform your Jobcentre Plus office.

Informing Benefits Advisors

You must let your Personal Advisor know that you are volunteering. You may have to complete a form describing what you do as a volunteer (currently known as **Form ES672VJP**) but not always.

Some people may worry about declaring their volunteering. It is sometimes reported that advisors are not well informed about volunteering and can discourage or misinform claimants about rules on volunteering. However, in Gosport Jobcentre Plus, most advisors understand the value of volunteering. Why not take along a publicity leaflet about the voluntary organisation you intend to support or a role description, so that you feel more confident about explaining it to your advisor?

Volunteer expenses

Although as a volunteer you give your time for nothing, it's important that you should not be out-of-pocket. Most voluntary groups pay back money you have had to spend to volunteer, if you can give them the receipts i.e. bus ticket. If you need the money on the day, please let the group know in advance, so that they have it ready for you. Jobcentre Plus should not deduct any money from your benefits as long as you only receive **actual** expenses.

The Rules for Different Types of Benefits

Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA)

People receiving JSA can do as much volunteering as they want, as long as they remain available for and are actively seeking work. This means that you have to show that you are looking for work and applying for jobs where appropriate. Your voluntary group should give you time off to visit the Jobcentre Plus office for meetings and to sign on, and for interviews when they come up. If you are volunteering, then you must attend an interview within 48 hours' notice or take up paid work within one week of being offered it.

Income Support

Volunteering should not affect someone's Income Support as long as they are not receiving any money other than reimbursement of expenses.

Incapacity Benefit (IB)

There is a lot of confusion over Incapacity Benefit.

It is important to note that the '16 hour rule' which set a maximum time limit on volunteering by anyone claiming this benefit no longer exists and hasn't done since 1998. You can volunteer for any number of hours.

People often worry that starting to volunteer will automatically trigger an investigation into their need to claim Incapacity Benefit. This shouldn't happen unless you are doing a large number of voluntary hours in a similar role to the paid job you did before claiming IB.

There is occasionally some confusion about volunteering and 'permitted work' (similar to the old 'therapeutic earnings'). The permitted work rule applies only to paid work and should not affect volunteers.

Employment Support Allowance (ESA)

This is a relatively new benefit which was introduced in October 2008. The ESA replaces both Incapacity Benefit and Income Support paid because of disability or incapacity. (Incapacity Benefit and Income Support will continue to be paid to existing claimants; new claimants receive ESA).

The new regulations on Employment Support Allowance clearly state that claimants will be allowed to volunteer and that there is no limit on hours. The regulations also recognise that reasonable expenses can be reimbursed to claimants who volunteer.

Disability Living Allowance (DLA)

DLA is an allowance paid in acknowledgement of the fact that life for someone with a disability may be more expensive – for instance, someone with mobility problems may be reliant on taxis. Volunteering will not affect whether an individual receives this benefit or not.

Housing Benefit

This is usually paid to people receiving JSA, Income Support, Pension Credit or who have a low income. It should not be affected by volunteering but claimants should inform their local authority about any volunteer expenses they receive.

For any further information or advice regarding volunteering and claiming benefits, please get in touch with the Volunteer Centre on 02392 588347 or e-mail: gospportvb@gva.org.uk