Fact sheet 2g:

Volunteering and welfare benefits

In theory, genuine voluntary work should not affect entitlement to any benefits. Unfortunately, in practice this is not always the case. It is therefore useful to be aware of the rules and regulations.

Individuals can volunteer and still claim benefits if:

* They meet the conditions of the benefit they are receiving; and
* The only money they are receiving whilst volunteering is to cover reasonable ‘out of pocket’ expenses.

Availability for work

People claiming Jobseekers Allowance, Employment Support Allowance (not in Support Group) and Universal Credit need to show that they are actively seeking work and available to attend an interview or start a job at short notice.

These people sign a contract with their Jobcentre Plus adviser agreeing to search for work for a certain number of hours each week, which they need to evidence. Under Universal Credit, this agreement can include volunteering for up to 50% of the time agreed in the contract.

‘Reasonable expenses’

This term covers, but is not necessarily restricted to:

* Travel to and from the organisation (or wherever the voluntary work is taking place).
* Meals taken while volunteering
* Post and phone costs
* Care of dependants (for example, children, elderly parents) while volunteering
* The cost of protective clothing or special equipment necessary for the volunteering role
* Travel while volunteering. The cost to a volunteer of using their own vehicle can be calculated by using the HM Customs and Revenue fixed mileage rate of 0.45p per mile.

Preventing problems for volunteers claiming welfare benefits

As a key definition of voluntary work used in benefits legislation is that it is unpaid, and because means-tested benefits may be affected by income, organisations should be able to demonstrate that claimants receive nothing more than their out-of-pocket expenses. Receipts or similar documentation should be retained for expenses paid. It is important to keep records, both for tax purposes and as proof that volunteers do not receive any financial income in the event of their status being called into question.

While at a senior level the Department for Work and Pensions and Jobcentre Plus understand and promote the value of volunteering to unemployed people, this unfortunately does not always filter down to local Jobcentre Plus branches. Some volunteers may find that they are told they cannot volunteer at all, that they cannot volunteer for more than a certain number of hours, or that they are not entitled to receive reimbursement for their expenses. This makes it important to have the rules to hand, both to inform volunteers and to help challenge any misapplication of the rules by Jobcentre Plus staff.

It is good practice to make volunteers aware of their obligation to inform Jobcentre Plus of any volunteering activities, as this is something that many claimants are unaware of. Whether or not volunteers then choose to tell Jobcentre Plus that they are volunteering is their decision. It can however help prospective volunteers if organisations can give them a letter or similar document outlining that the volunteering opportunity is in line with benefits regulations and that volunteers:

* Are only receiving reimbursement for out-of-pocket expenses
* Can be easily contacted if work becomes available
* Are free to attend interviews for paid work
* Are free to take up work without notice.

It can also be helpful to describe the usefulness of the voluntary opportunity for helping unemployed volunteers back to work, but care needs to be taken to avoid overselling this angle as it may sound like claimants are in an activity that they should be being paid for.

* [Sample letter to Jobcentre Plus](http://www.wcava.org.uk/volunteering/resource-library)

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**For more information**

[National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO)](http://www.ncvo.org.uk)

NCVO champions the voluntary sector and volunteering across Britain by connecting, representing and supporting voluntary organisations. It has a reputation as an authoritative voice for the sector.

* [www.ncvo.org.uk](https://www.ncvo.org.uk/) Phone: 020 7713 6161 Email: ncvo@ncvo.org.uk
* [Volunteering and welfare benefits](https://www.ncvo.org.uk/ncvo-volunteering/volunteering-and-benefits)

Government website: www.nidirect.gov.uk

* [Advice for individuals on volunteering and welfare benefits](https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/volunteering-while-benefits)

NCVO Knowhow Nonprofit

Knowledge and e-learning for charities, social enterprises and community groups. Learn from experts and peers, and share your experiences.

* [www.knowhownonprofit.org](https://knowhownonprofit.org/)

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