

# Volunteering while receiving Social Security Benefits

## INFORMATION SHEET

People can volunteer while receiving Social Security Benefits. Many of the outcomes to be gained from volunteering can be particularly useful to people out of employment or with health related problems i.e. meeting new people, learning new skills, building confidence and contributing to personal health. The Department for Social Development is supportive of people taking part in volunteering; in fact, it has funded promotional campaigns to highlight the benefits of volunteering for people who are unemployed and seeking employment. There is also a body of research which has evidenced the health benefits from volunteering.

*Before beginning to volunteer it is important that an individual:-*

- *Informs their local Social Security Agency office about their intentions and tell them about any expenses they may get.*
- *Follows the 'basic rules' relating to the specific benefit they are on. Some of the basic guidance is included below. If an individual is unsure of any points, they should speak to a member of staff at a social security office or job centre. Sometimes people have a personal advisor, they can speak to, and individuals should be*
- *Able to go to any work- focused interviews or medical assessments.*

This information sheet goes through each of the main types of social security benefits people can receive, and the basic guidance which the Social Security Agency of the Department for Social Development has provided, with regards to claimants volunteering.

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## Incapacity Benefit (IB)

Volunteers who receive Incapacity Benefit should ensure that they carefully follow the rules for this particular benefit.

Volunteers can volunteer for as many hours as they like without affecting their entitlement to IB provided that:

- They receive only the reimbursement of genuine out of pocket expenses.
- The volunteering is not for a close relative.
- They inform the Incapacity Benefit Branch that they are volunteering. Although there is no guidance on when to inform the social security office, practice has shown that this is best if it is done before they start volunteering. Volunteers should wait for a reply from IB branch before they start volunteering.
- They inform the social security office if they receive any benefits in kind e.g. honorarium.

## Income Support (IS)

Income support will not usually be affected by volunteering as long as:

- Volunteers receive only reimbursement of genuine out of pocket expenses.
- **It is considered 'reasonable' for an organisation not to pay a volunteer a wage for the role they are doing.** If it is not considered reasonable the social security office may reduce IS by the amount the volunteer **could** be paid, even if they are receiving no wage. What is considered reasonable is left open to interpretation by each local office. If there is any doubt it is **essential** to seek more information on individual volunteers circumstances from the relevant agency.
- Volunteers must tell the social security office that they are carrying out their volunteering.
- Volunteers must tell the social security office if they receive any benefits in kind (e.g. honorarium).

## Employment and Support Allowance

From the 27 October 2008 'Employment and Support Allowance' replaced Incapacity Benefit and Income Support paid on incapacity grounds for *new* customers. However, the same basic rules for volunteering while receiving this type of benefit applies. The first thing to do is inform your Social Security Office of your interest in volunteering or in a specific volunteering role.

## Disability Living Allowance (DLA)

Volunteering will not affect a person's entitlement to DLA. However volunteers must inform the Social Security Agency that they are volunteering.

## Carers Allowance (CA)

Volunteering will not affect CA as long as it does not stop the volunteer caring for a severely disabled person for at least 35 hours per week.

## Volunteers, Expenses and Child-care

If volunteers incur costs for child-care in the course of their volunteering it is important that this expense is reimbursed. Choosing who should look after a child is a matter for parents and carers. Volunteer involving organisations that are reimbursing volunteer expenses have a responsibility to:

- Ensure the expenditure is legitimate.
- Encourage good practice in child protection.

For these reasons it is **preferable** that children are looked after by a registered childminder or in a play-group registered with the local Health and Social Services Trust. This is because:

- All registered childminders and playgroups are required to implement a comprehensive series of quality standards designed to ensure children in their care are well looked after.
- A registered childminder or playgroup will be able to supply a volunteer with a receipt which volunteer involving organisations can use to verify expenditure.

However in some cases registered childminders may not be available or some parents or carers may choose to have their child looked after by an adult they would trust to look after their child in other circumstances. This situation is less clear cut in terms of expenses and child protection.

**Child Protection** Parents and carers are responsible for their child's welfare at all times. It is up to them to make informed decisions about the adults that they choose to look after their children. However organisations can help by providing information to parents on child protection issues. This can range from information on health and safety to information on how to identify signs of abuse. The Our Duty to Care Team at the Volunteer Now will be able to provide information and support to organisations on all areas of child protection.

**Expenses** All volunteer involving organisations should encourage volunteers to submit regular expenses claim forms which the organisation should check before reimbursing the expenses. Receipts should back up these expenses where possible. Childcare expenses may account for a substantial portion of your volunteer expense's budget and many organisations will need a way of tracking this expenditure. Organisations may want to draw up a claim form, which deals specifically with the reimbursement of childcare expenses. The claim form should seek information on:

- The name, address and age of the person looking after the child.
- The amount of hours spent looking after the child.
- The amount of money paid to the person looking after the child.
- It should be signed by the person looking after the child, by the parent or carer and volunteer co-ordinator.

If an organisation follows good practice in the support and supervision of its volunteers and has a good relationship with its volunteers, it is reasonable for them to assume that when a volunteer fills in and signs an expenses claim form, that the expenses are legitimate.

**How much should we pay?** If a parent or carer is using the services of a registered childminder they will usually have a set charge for their services which the volunteer will have to pay. This is the amount that should be reimbursed. The Northern Ireland Childminding Association recommends a rate of £2.40 per hour for full time care and £2.70 per hour for part time or after school care. Organisations can use these rates as a guide but you should ensure that the rate you set is realistic for the volunteer and affordable for your organisation.

As with all volunteer expenses it is not good practice to reimburse a flat rate of expenses e.g. £20 a week to cover childcare regardless of the actual cost. Volunteers should be asked to detail the amount of hours for which childcare was required and should be reimbursed based on this information. Organisations can establish upper limits for childcare expenses, which are appropriate for your organisation and fit within your budgetary constraints. For example, if the upper limit for childcare is £15 this means that volunteers should be reimbursed the exact amount they have spent on childcare but it should be no more than £15.

## SAMPLE 1

### SAMPLE LETTER TO LOCAL SOCIAL SECURITY OFFICE FOR REIMBURSEMENT OF VOLUNTEER EXPENSES IN ADVANCE.

Dear

**RE: Volunteer Expenses for (*volunteer's name and address*)**

The above person is a volunteer with (*organisation*). They commenced volunteering with us on (*date*) and volunteer for an average of (*number*) hours per week. They will receive expenses to reimburse what they spend in the course of their volunteering. These expenses cover: (*select relevant expenses*)

- Travel to and from the place of volunteering
- Meals taken while volunteering
- Care of dependants during volunteering
- Travel in the course of volunteering
- Cost of protective clothing

We have taken (*volunteer's name*) individual circumstances into account and the estimated amount of expenses that he/she will incur is an average of £x per week. This will be paid at the beginning of each week and (*volunteer's name*) will submit evidence of expenditure at the end of each week.

If you have any questions or would like more information please feel free to contact me on (*contact details*).

Yours sincerely

Volunteer Co-ordinator

## Jobseekers Allowance (JSA)

In order to qualify for JSA you must fulfil a number of requirements.

You must be:

- Actively seeking work
- Available for work

People can still volunteer as often as they like and fulfil these requirements provided:

- They are **still looking for work** as agreed with their Personal Advisor
- They can be **contacted quickly** if the chance of a job comes up
- They are able to attend job interviews at 48 hour's notice and available to work at one week's notice.
- It is **considered 'reasonable'** for an organisation **not** to pay a volunteer a wage for the role they are doing. If it is not considered reasonable the social security office may reduce JSA by the amount the volunteer **could** be paid, even if they are receiving no wage. What is considered reasonable is left open to interpretation by each local office. If there is any doubt it is **essential** to seek more information on individual volunteers circumstances from the relevant agencies.
- Volunteers must tell the social security office that they are carrying out their volunteering. Staff at each office have considerable discretion in deciding if a person is meeting the obligations under JSA. It is in the volunteer's best interest to create an open and honest relationship and show how volunteering does not contradict the terms of their JSA. Volunteer involving organisations should assist the volunteer by providing them with information and support. Overleaf is a sample of the information organisations should provide.
- Volunteers must tell the social security office if they receive any benefits in kind (e.g. honorarium).

## **Sample Letter for Volunteers in receipt of Job Seekers Allowance**

Dear

RE: (volunteer's name and address)

*The above mentioned person is a volunteer with our organisation and is based at (address of place of volunteering). He/she contributes approximately (number) hours per week volunteering as a (volunteer role) in order to gain valuable experience in his/her chosen career.*

*While undertaking this role he/she:*

- *Will not be asked to do work, which would normally be done by some one in paid employment.*
- *Will receive no remuneration only the reimbursement of genuine and reasonable out of pocket expenses.*
- *Will be available to attend an interview or take up employment at 48 hours notice.*
- *Will be contactable while volunteering should a job opportunity or interview become available. (Organisation) will endeavour to pass on messages as quickly as possible.*
- *Will receive (on-the-job training/other training), which is essential for the volunteer role.*
- *Will receive a reference from (Organisation) if requested.*

*If you require further information please do not hesitate to get in touch.*

*Yours sincerely*

*Volunteer Co-ordinator*

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## Distinguishing between the role and tasks of paid staff and volunteers

It is important that organisations make a clear distinction between the roles and tasks carried out by paid staff and those carried out by volunteers. The involvement of volunteers should complement and supplement the work of paid staff, and should not be used to displace paid staff or undercut their pay and conditions of service. Job substitution occurs when a volunteer is asked to carry out tasks / roles which are normally undertaken by a paid staff member. Within the Department of Work and Pensions document '*Volunteering while getting benefits*', it is stated that benefits may be affected if a volunteer is "*doing what someone else would normally be paid for*" (p.4).

Furthermore, if an individual chooses not to be paid for any work they do, this is not the same as volunteering. The wage they would normally receive could be counted as 'notional earnings'. Therefore, if they receive an income-related benefit, such as Employment Support Allowance, Income Support, Jobseekers Allowance or Housing Benefit, it could affect the benefits they receive. Further information can be found on the NI Direct Website <http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/index/information-and-services/leisure-home-and-community/getting-involved-in-your-community/volunteering/volunteering-while-on-benefits.htm>

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Reasonable precautions have been taken to ensure information in this publication is accurate. However it is not intended to be legally comprehensive; it is designed to provide guidance in good faith without accepting liability. If relevant, we therefore recommend you take appropriate professional advice before taking any action on the matters covered herein. Charity (Inland Revenue) No. XT22896. Company Limited by Guarantee No. NI602399. Registered in Northern Ireland.