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Volunteering and Benefits

If you are currently unemployed or on benefits should you consider volunteering? Will it affect your entitlements? Will it help you to get a new job? In this week's article, we tackle the issue of volunteering and benefits and in next week's article we will discuss how it can improve your job prospects.

Benefit claimants are required to notify their benefits adviser of their intention to start volunteering and it is advisable for them to get advice in relation to their specific circumstances. In addition, rules can change, and your adviser will be the best person to keep you updated. This article gives only a general overview and should not be treated as a substitute for specific advice relevant to your specific circumstances.

Having said that, in general, if you are receiving state benefits you are still allowed to volunteer without it affecting your payments.

However, depending on the benefits you receive, there are a few things you should consider before you start.

Firstly, you must comply with the government's definition of volunteering. Broadly speaking they define it as unpaid work for someone other than a close relative - for example, working for a charity or not for profit organisation. In addition, you can't have a contract of employment, but you may have an informal non-binding "volunteer agreement". This means you decide how many hours you want to volunteer each week, at which location and for how long and there is no contractual obligation by either parties.

Although, under this definition you can't be paid for the work you do, you can be paid for legitimate "out-of-pocket" expenses such as travel cost, food or even childcare costs whilst volunteering. If you receive financial rewards apart from out-of-pocket expenses, this can be classed as income, it may be liable for tax, and it may affect the benefits you receive.

If you are receiving unemployment related benefits and you are required to take "reasonable action" to find a job, then volunteering can count towards this.

For example, you may have already agreed an individual plan; if you are on JSA you may have a “claimant commitment” that you agreed with your work coach. This may have specific tasks and activities that you are required to complete, such as a specified number of hours applying and searching for jobs. Volunteering, with the agreement of your work coach, can be incorporated into that plan.

To find out more about the issues discussed above or on volunteering in general please contact the Volunteer Centre at OCVA and we can book a one to one support session. Please visit “[ocva.org.uk/i want to volunteer](https://ocva.org.uk/i-want-to-volunteer)” or contact the Volunteer Centre via email: vol@ocva.org.uk or Telephone: 01865 251946.