



The benefits barrier

What impact do welfare benefits have on volunteering?

A study of Citizens Advice Bureau volunteers and clients

John Ramsey
Citizens Advice

September 2005

About Citizens Advice

The Citizens Advice service helps people resolve their legal, money and other problems by providing free information and advice from nearly 3,400 locations, and by influencing policymakers. Advice provided by Citizens Advice Bureaux is independent, free, confidential and impartial and open to everybody regardless of race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, age or nationality.

Citizens Advice and each Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) are registered charities reliant on over 21,000 volunteers and need to raise funds to provide these vital services. The majority of our 17,088 advisers (78 per cent) are trained volunteers, helping people to resolve nearly 5.3 million new problems every year. Nearly one-third of these are benefit related.

All Citizens Advice Bureaux in England, Wales and Northern Ireland belong to Citizens Advice, the national charity which sets standards for advice and equal opportunities and supports bureaux with an information system, training and other services. Citizens Advice also co-ordinates social policy, media, publicity and parliamentary work and maintains an information and advice website at www.adviceguide.org.uk (over 275,000 visits per month).

(Data correct at 31 March 2005)

Index

List of tables	3
Executive summary	5
1. Background and aims	7
1.1 Background	7
1.2 Aims	10
2. Methodology	11
3. Analysis of the sample	12
4. Key findings	13
4.1 CAB volunteers: Before you started at the CAB were you concerned that volunteering might affect your benefits?	13
4.2 CAB volunteers: Has volunteering affected your benefits?	15
4.3 CAB clients who do not volunteer: If you do not volunteer at the moment have you thought about volunteering whilst receiving benefits?	17
4.4 CAB clients who do not volunteer: If you started volunteering how do you think it would affect your benefits allowance?	19
4.4 CAB volunteers and clients: Has your Jobcentre Plus office explained the impact that volunteering could have on your benefits allowance?	21
5. Conclusion	24
6. Recommendations	27
Bibliography	28
Acknowledgements	29

List of tables

Table i	Sample by gender, age and disability
Table ii	Sample by benefits
Table 1.1	Were you concerned that volunteering might affect your benefits: CAB volunteers
Table 1.2	Were you concerned that volunteering might affect your benefits: CAB volunteers by gender, disability and age
Table 1.3	Were you concerned that volunteering might affect your benefits: CAB volunteers by benefits
Table 2.1	Has volunteering affected your benefits: CAB volunteers
Table 2.2	Has volunteering affected your benefits: CAB volunteers by gender, disability and age
Table 2.3	Has volunteering affected your benefits: CAB volunteers by benefits
Table 3.1	If you do not volunteer, have you thought about volunteering: CAB clients
Table 3.2	If you do not volunteer, have you thought about volunteering: CAB clients by gender, disability and age
Table 3.3	If you do not volunteer, have you thought about volunteering: CAB clients by benefits
Table 4.1	How do you think volunteering would affect your benefits allowance: CAB clients

Table 4.2	How do you think volunteering would affect your benefits allowance: CAB clients by gender, disability and age
Table 4.3	How do you think volunteering would affect your benefits allowance: CAB clients by benefits
Table 5.1	Has your Jobcentre Plus office explained the impact that volunteering could have on your benefits: CAB volunteers and clients
Table 5.2	Has your Jobcentre Plus office explained the impact that volunteering could have on your benefits: CAB volunteers and clients by gender, disability and age
Table 5.3	Has your Jobcentre Plus office explained the impact that volunteering could have on your benefits: CAB volunteers and clients by benefits
Table 5.4	Has your Jobcentre Plus office explained the impact that volunteering could have on your benefits: CAB volunteers and clients by volunteering

Executive summary

The study

One of the barriers to volunteering that has long been identified for people who receive welfare benefits is the perception that volunteering adversely affects their benefits.

However, many of the studies and reports that have noted concerns regarding this have focused on particular target groups and been based on qualitative analysis and anecdotal evidence. The aims of this survey, therefore, were to provide a more quantitative analysis of the impact welfare benefits has on volunteering at a broader level, and to suggest how improvements could be made to enable more people on benefits to volunteer.

Key findings

1. Volunteers have real concerns that volunteering may adversely impact the receipt of their welfare benefits.

Forty eight per cent of CAB volunteers were concerned, before they started volunteering, that it might affect their benefits. However just 3 per cent had had their benefits affected. This was unexpected considering previous research had suggested the figure would be a lot higher. This discrepancy may have been because previous research had focused on particularly vulnerable groups such as homeless people, CAB volunteers are better informed due to their volunteering or that the correct information has now filtered through to most Jobcentre Plus staff.

2. There is a communication gap between Jobcentre Plus staff and claimants regarding the impact of volunteering on benefits.

Only 21 per cent of CAB clients on welfare benefits knew, correctly, that volunteering does not adversely affect their benefits. A further 21 per cent thought it did and 53 per cent did not know.

Just 8 per cent of CAB volunteers and clients received information from their Jobcentre Plus office about the impact volunteering could have on their benefits. However when this is broken down by whether or not they volunteer, 15 per cent of CAB volunteers and 23 per cent of CAB clients who volunteer elsewhere had received information, whereas only 2 per cent of CAB clients who do not volunteer had. This suggests that either information is only given in response to an enquiry or when staff do give out information it encourages people to volunteer.

3. There are people on benefits who want to volunteer but currently do not.

Twenty four per cent of CAB clients who do not volunteer stated that they had considered volunteering. Whilst it is not known why they do not volunteer, one of the most common reasons why people do not volunteer generally is that no-one asked them.

This suggests that the voluntary sector has a leading role to play in ensuring that the right opportunities are offered, that they are communicated effectively and that they are properly managed and supported.

Recommendations

- Information should be made clear to claimants that volunteering does not adversely affect their benefits.
- Jobcentre Plus staff should be better supported to encourage claimants to volunteer.
- Voluntary organisations should look to create more effective partnerships with Jobcentre Plus.
- Voluntary organisations need to better involve benefit claimants.

1. Background and aims

1.1 Background

There has been little research carried out on how many people who receive welfare benefits volunteer. The closest approximation that can be made is to look at levels of volunteering by unemployed people, which have traditionally been lower than amongst employed people.

The 1997 National Survey of Volunteering¹ found that 53 per cent of employees volunteered compared to 38 per cent of unemployed people seeking work and 29 per cent of people unemployed through sickness or disability. This trend was subsequently backed up by the 2001² and 2003³ Home Office Citizenship Surveys and supports the positive correlation made between socio-economic status and levels of volunteering.

However, it should be emphasised that benefits are not only available to people who are unemployed; Income Support, for example, is available to those on a low income.

One of the barriers to volunteering that has long been identified for people who receive benefits is the perception that volunteering adversely affects benefits. In a 1993 study it was found that volunteers who were registered unemployed 'were worried about the requirement that they be available for work in case their volunteering was seen as interfering with this availability.'⁴

In 1996, Niyazi⁵ commented that 'unemployed volunteers need protection from officials who would deprive them of their welfare benefits'.

Due to this problem, the 1990s saw some of the restrictions eased for benefit claimants who wanted to volunteer. The '24 hour rule', whereby unemployed people had to be able to take up paid employment within 24 hours, was extended to 48 hours for volunteers on Unemployment Benefit, and it was also made easier for disabled people on Invalidity and Incapacity Benefit to volunteer. The '48 hour rule' was subsequently retained when Jobseeker's Allowance was introduced.

¹ Davis Smith, J *The 1997 National survey of volunteering*, Institute for Volunteering Research, 1998

² *2001 Home Office Citizenship Survey*, Home Office Research, Development and Statistics Directorate, 2003

³ *2003 Home Office Citizenship Survey*, Home Office Research, Development and Statistics Directorate, 2004

⁴ Gaskin, K and Shaw, O *Opportunities for volunteering: projects in action: an in-depth study*, Department of Health and Centre for Research in Social Policy, 1993

⁵ Niyazi, F *A Route to opportunity: volunteering by unemployed people*, National Centre for Volunteering, 1996

In 2003, the '48 hour rule' was extended to one calendar week as part of the Government's policy to promote and enhance levels of volunteering activity, furthering its vision for strong, active and empowered communities.

However, as the Compact's *Volunteering: a code of good practice*⁶ notes, benefit rules, and how they are applied, are still seen as one of the 'real and perceived' barriers to volunteering, despite the fact that volunteering should no longer affect entitlement to any welfare benefit.⁷

Financial help if you work or are looking for work, the leaflet produced by Jobcentre Plus outlines the position for the various benefits:

Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA)

You can do as much voluntary work as you like. Your JSA will not usually be affected as long as:

- you are still looking for work as agreed with your personal adviser
- you can be contacted quickly if the chance of a job comes up
- you are willing to start work at a weeks notice or go for an interview within 48 hours
- you do not receive any pay other than to pay for expenses like fares or special clothing you need for the voluntary work
- it is reasonable for the person or organisation you are doing the voluntary work for not to pay you.
- You must tell your Jobcentre Plus office if you do any voluntary work.

Income Support

- You can do as much voluntary work as you like. Your Income Support will not usually be affected as long as you do not receive any pay other than to pay for expenses like fares or special clothing you need for the voluntary work.
- Your Income Support will not be affected if it is reasonable for the person or organisation you are doing the voluntary work for not to pay you.
- You must tell your Jobcentre Plus office if you do any voluntary work.

Incapacity Benefit and Severe Disablement Allowance

- You can do as much voluntary work as you like. Your Income Support will not usually be affected as long as you do not receive any pay other than to pay for expenses like fares or special clothing you need for the voluntary work.
- The voluntary work must not be for a close relative.
- You must tell your Jobcentre Plus office if you do any voluntary work.

⁶ *Volunteering: a code of good practice*, Home Office, Cabinet Office and Compact Working Group, 2001 (revised 2004)

⁷ Restall, M *Volunteers and the law*, Volunteering England, 2005

Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit

If you get one of these benefits, you must tell your local council about any kind of payment you get.

Other benefits

Other social security benefits are not usually affected by voluntary work.⁸

The initial impetus for this research came from a number of concerns that Citizens Advice Bureaux had reported. These included:

A bureau in the Midlands which reported that their client, who was moving off Income Support and onto Jobseeker's Allowance, was informed by her local Jobcentre that if she did any voluntary work she would lose part of her Jobseeker's Allowance.

A bureau in the South East which reported that two different Job Centre offices had given a client conflicting advice. The client was in receipt of Incapacity Benefit and wanted to do voluntary work – one office had told him that there was no limit on the number of hours he could work and another had told him that he was limited to doing 16 hours or his benefit would be affected. The client was deterred from trying to do voluntary work as he was unsure whether this would affect his benefit or not.

A bureau in the South West which was visited by a client who had been told his Jobseeker's Allowance would be sanctioned due to the voluntary work he was doing. He was told that this was because *the Department for Work and Pensions* did not agree that doing voluntary work would count as a step towards finding work.

This continued uncertainty has been highlighted by a number of studies looking at specific target groups. *Off the streets and into work* found that 35 per cent of homeless people believed volunteering could result in them losing welfare benefits.⁹

In *Volunteering for all? Exploring the link between volunteering and social exclusion*, which looked at the barriers faced by black and minority ethnic groups, disabled people and people with a record of offence, the Institute for Volunteering Research found that:

'Many respondents feared losing their welfare benefits if they volunteered...in many cases the message [that they could volunteer] was not getting through to potential volunteers so they were too fearful to volunteer. In other cases the message was not getting through to benefits staff, resulting in people being threatened with the withdrawal of their benefits.'¹⁰

⁸ *Financial help if you work or are looking for work*, Jobcentre Plus, 2004

⁹ Bowgett, K *Homeless people and volunteering*, off the streets and into work, 2005

¹⁰ *Volunteering for all? Exploring the link between volunteering and social exclusion*. Institute for Volunteering Research, 2003

Clark discovered similar problems when looking at involving volunteers with mental health problems. She found that:

‘The pervasive lack of accurate information about benefit entitlement and the negative encounters many people have had with the state system continue to create a significant barrier to volunteering for many people with mental health problems.’¹¹

The Russell Commission, which was set up last year to develop a new national framework for youth action and engagement, found ‘considerable confusion amongst young people, volunteering organisations and even benefits advisers themselves about whether volunteering on benefits is possible.’¹²

In its ‘Analysis of findings’, the Russell Commission noted the confusion some voluntary organisations still have:

‘Some organisations suggested a new benefit should be created for people out of work or on Incapacity Benefit who volunteer, as it is *not currently possible for someone claiming Incapacity Benefit to volunteer for more than 15 hours a week.*’¹³
[Italics added by author]

1.2 Aims

Many of the studies and reports that have noted concerns regarding welfare benefits have focused on particular target groups and been based on qualitative analysis and anecdotal evidence. The aims of this survey, therefore, are to provide a more quantitative analysis of the impact welfare benefits has on volunteering at a broader level, and to suggest how improvements can be made to enable more people on benefits to volunteer.

¹¹ Clark, S *You cannot be serious! A guide to involving volunteers with mental health problems*, National Centre for Volunteering, 2003

¹² *A National framework for youth action and engagement*, The Russell Commission, 2005

¹³ *Consultation on youth action and engagement: analysis of findings*, The Russell Commission, 2005

2. Methodology

The study surveyed both volunteers and non-volunteers who currently receive welfare benefits. In deciding how to survey non-volunteers on a cost-effective basis it was agreed that Citizens Advice clients currently on benefits were both easily identifiable and accessible.

Questionnaires were sent to a 10 per cent sample of Citizens Advice Bureaux across England and Wales.

Two types of questionnaires were used. The first questionnaire was targeted at Citizens Advice volunteers currently receiving benefits who were asked to fill them in by their bureau manager. The second questionnaire was targeted at Citizens Advice clients receiving benefits. They were asked to fill them in when they came into the bureau seeking advice. The sample size was, therefore, determined by the number of completed questionnaires returned.

Both questionnaires allowed respondents to add any further comments they wished to make.

Respondents were asked their age, gender, whether they considered they had a disability, and what benefits they were receiving. This was to see if there was a discernible pattern to their answers. Not all of the respondents replied to these questions. The breakdown sometimes gives an anomalous result due to a small percentage of people giving a particular answer.

The survey was conducted from 16 May to 17 June 2005.

It should be emphasised that with a sample of this size, the findings should be treated with caution and be considered no more than indicative of the general population.

All references to Jobcentre Plus includes the office network of Jobcentres and social security offices.

3. Analysis of the sample

Replies were received from 428 people currently receiving benefits, from 28 Citizens Advice Bureaux. An additional 11 questionnaires were spoilt.

All tabular figures are percentages.

Table i - Sample by gender, age and disability

	M	F	18-24	25-44	45-64	65+	No reply	Disability		
								Yes	No	No reply
CAB clients	43	57	11	36	34	14	5	39	57	4
CAB volunteers	36	64	2	48	35	9	6	48	51	1
All	42	58	8	40	35	12	5	42	55	3

Table ii - Sample by benefits

	Incapacity Benefit	Income Support	Job-seeker's Allowance	Disability Living Allowance	Carer's Allowance	Pension Credit	Working Tax Credit	Other
CAB clients	22	31	20	18	5	16	16	17
CAB volunteers	31	27	12	31	2	5	3	18
All	25	30	18	21	4	13	13	17

NB: The breakdown of benefits exceeds the sample population as some people receive more than one benefit.

4. Key findings

4.1 CAB volunteers: Before you started at the CAB were you concerned that volunteering might affect your benefits?

Nearly half of all CAB volunteers (48 per cent) were concerned, before they started volunteering, that it might affect their benefits. In some cases the concern was such that the volunteer did not inform their Jobcentre Plus office:

‘I did not inform [the] benefits office that I was doing voluntary work because I was worried about my benefits being stopped or being informed that I could not do this.’

Table 1.1 - Were you concerned that volunteering might affect your benefits: CAB volunteers

	Yes	No
CAB volunteers	48	52

Men were more likely to be concerned than women, with the majority of men concerned about the impact (58 per cent) compared to 43 per cent of women.

There was a larger discrepancy in terms of disability. 57 per cent of those who considered they had a disability were concerned compared to 39 per cent who did not. Volunteers of a working age were more concerned, with 55 per cent of the 25 – 44 age group and 53 per cent of the 45 – 64 age group concerned that volunteering might affect their benefits.

Table 1.2 - Were you concerned that volunteering might affect your benefits: CAB volunteers by gender, disability and age

		Yes	No
Gender	Female	43	57
	Male	58	42
Disability	Yes	57	43
	No	39	61
	No reply	100	0
Age	18 – 24	0	100
	25 – 44	55	45
	45-64	53	47
	65+	12	88
	No reply	40	60

Volunteers on Incapacity Benefit (75 per cent) and Disability Living Allowance (64 per cent) had raised levels of concern, as did those on Income Support (52 per cent) and Jobseeker’s Allowance (64 per cent).

One volunteer on Incapacity Benefit commented:

‘I am concerned, as I am on Incapacity Benefit, that my voluntary work at the bureau will be used as evidence that I am fit for work.’

Table 1.3 - Were you concerned that volunteering might affect your benefits: CAB volunteers by benefits

	Yes	No
Incapacity Benefit	75	25
Income Support	52	48
Jobseeker’s Allowance	64	36
Disability Living Allowance	64	36
Carer’s Allowance	0	100
Pension Credit	0	100
Working Tax Credit	33	67
Other	19	81

The results suggest that where the loss of benefits may be considered to have a greater impact on a person’s life the higher the level of concern.

4.2 CAB volunteers: Has volunteering affected your benefits?

It is reassuring to find that volunteering in the majority of cases has not affected benefit payments. Of the few affected, one suffered late payments and another successfully appealed against a decision to reduce the benefit.

One volunteer noted that whilst volunteering did not affect the payment of his Incapacity Benefit he was called for more frequent medicals on the basis that if he was fit for volunteering with the CAB he was, therefore, fit for work.

Another volunteer said that it had not affected his benefit but added:

‘I am only allowed [to volunteer] 16 hours a week though.’

Table 2.1 - Has volunteering affected your benefits: CAB volunteers

	Yes	No	No reply
CAB volunteers	3	91	6

With such a small sample that said ‘Yes’ it is impossible to draw any conclusions from the breakdown by gender, disability and age and benefits. The 100 per cent ‘Yes’ response by people who did not answer whether or not they had a disability is an anomaly of the small sample.

Table 2.2 - Has volunteering affected your benefits: CAB volunteers by gender, disability and age

		Yes	No	No reply
Gender	Female	2	93	5
	Male	6	88	6
Disability	Yes	2	91	7
	No	2	94	4
	No reply	100	0	0
Age	18 – 24	0	100	0
	25 – 44	7	86	7
	45 – 64	0	97	3
	65+	0	88	12
	No reply	0	100	0

Table 2.3 - Has volunteering affected your benefits: CAB volunteers by benefits

	Yes	No	No reply
Incapacity Benefit	4	96	0
Income Support	8	92	0
Jobseeker's Allowance	0	100	0
Disability Living Allowance	4	89	7
Carer's Allowance	0	100	0
Pension Credit	0	100	0
Working Tax Credit	0	100	0
Other	6	81	13

4.3 CAB clients who do not volunteer: If you do not volunteer at the moment, have you thought about volunteering whilst receiving benefits?

Nearly a quarter of CAB clients on benefits (24 per cent) who do not currently volunteer have thought about volunteering. This suggests there is a pool of potential volunteers, which Citizens Advice Bureaux and other voluntary organisations should be tapping into.

Table 3.1 - If you do not volunteer, have you thought about volunteering: CAB clients

	Yes	No	No reply
CAB clients who do not volunteer	24	71	5

Thirty three per cent of men said that they had thought about volunteering compared to just 19 per cent of women. People with a disability had a similar level of interest (22 per cent) to those without a disability (25 per cent), whilst interest decreased the older the respondents became.

Table 3.2 - If you do not volunteer, have you thought about volunteering: CAB clients by gender, disability and age

		Yes	No	No reply
Gender	Female	19	71	10
	Male	33	67	0
Disability	Yes	22	67	11
	No	25	70	5
	No reply	0	100	0
Age	18 – 24	100	0	0
	25 – 44	57	43	0
	45-64	20	80	0
	65+	0	90	10
	No reply	0	50	50

People on Income Support were significantly more likely to have thought about volunteering with 63 per cent having thought about volunteering compared with the next highest groups, Working Tax Credit (33 per cent) and Incapacity Benefit (32 per cent).

**Table 3.3 - If you do not volunteer, have you thought about volunteering:
CAB clients by benefits**

	Yes	No
Incapacity Benefit	32	68
Income Support	63	37
Jobseeker's Allowance	18	82
Disability Living Allowance	26	74
Carer's Allowance	30	70
Pension Credit	15	85
Working Tax Credit	33	67
Other	29	71

4.4 CAB clients who do not volunteer: If you started volunteering, how do you think it would affect your benefits allowance?

Just 21 per cent recognised that volunteering does not affect their benefits allowance. A further 21 per cent thought that they would get less money whilst than more than half (53 per cent) did not know.

Table 4.1 - How do you think volunteering would affect your benefits allowance: CAB clients

	Not at all	Might get less money	Don't know	No reply
CAB clients who do not volunteer	21	21	53	5

The breakdown by gender, disability and age does not show a discernible pattern, although women (25 per cent) were slightly more likely to think that there was no impact compared to men (18 per cent).

People aged 25 – 44 and 65+ were slightly more likely to think there was no impact whilst young people were most likely not to, with just 13 per cent actually knowing the true impact.

Table 4.2 - How do you think volunteering would affect your benefits allowance: CAB clients by gender, disability and age

		Not at all	Might get less money	Don't know	No reply
Gender	Female	25	21	49	5
	Male	18	22	56	4
Disability	Yes	23	19	52	6
	No	22	21	54	3
	No reply	0	44	56	0
Age	18 – 24	13	17	66	4
	25 – 44	25	23	47	5
	45-64	19	23	54	4
	65+	36	14	45	5
	No reply	0	18	74	8

There is no discernible pattern by benefits. Although the research suggests people on Pension Credit were the most likely group to think that it did not affect benefits, they account for just 5 per cent of the total sample so this may be due to an anomaly caused by the size of the sample.

Table 4.3 - How do you think volunteering would affect your benefits allowance: CAB clients by benefits

	Not at all	Might get less money	Don't know	No reply
Incapacity Benefit	17	21	56	6
Income Support	21	17	58	4
Jobseeker's Allowance	20	24	51	5
Disability Living Allowance	28	25	36	11
Carer's Allowance	20	20	60	0
Pension Credit	37	26	37	0
Working Tax Credit	15	24	55	6
Other	26	27	41	6

4.5 CAB volunteers and clients: Has your Jobcentre Plus office explained the impact that volunteering could have on your benefits allowance?

A large proportion of volunteers and clients (84 per cent) received no information from their Jobcentre Plus office about whether volunteering could affect their benefits allowance, with just 8 per cent saying they did.

Table 5.1 - Has your Jobcentre Plus office explained the impact that volunteering could have on your benefits: CAB volunteers and clients

	Yes	No	No reply
CAB volunteers and clients	8	84	8

There is no discernible pattern when this is broken down by gender, disability, age and benefits, although women are slightly more likely to have received information (10 per cent) than men (5 per cent).

Table 5.2 - Has your Jobcentre Plus office explained the impact that volunteering could have on your benefits: CAB volunteers and clients by gender, disability and age

		Yes	No	No reply
Gender	Female	10	81	9
	Male	5	88	7
Disability	Yes	7	86	7
	No	9	82	9
	No reply	0	100	0
Age	18 – 24	8	84	8
	25 – 44	12	81	7
	45-64	3	88	9
	65+	5	93	2
	No reply	17	66	17

Table 5.3 - Has your Jobcentre Plus office explained the impact that volunteering could have on your benefits: CAB volunteers and clients by benefits

	Yes	No	No reply
Incapacity Benefit	6	84	10
Income Support	8	85	7
Jobseeker's Allowance	11	80	9
Disability Living Allowance	6	84	10
Carer's Allowance	7	85	8
Pension Credit	7	90	3
Working Tax Credit	5	95	0
Other	11	80	9

However, when broken down into those who volunteer and those who do not, there is a significant correlation between receiving information and volunteering.

Those who volunteer, whether they are CAB volunteers or CAB clients who volunteer elsewhere, were significantly more likely to have had it explained to them (15 per cent of CAB volunteers, 23 per cent of CAB clients who volunteer elsewhere) than those who do not volunteer (2 per cent). Nevertheless, even the vast majority of volunteers did not receive information.

Table 5.4 - Has your Jobcentre Plus office explained the impact that volunteering could have on your benefits: CAB volunteers and staff by volunteering

	Yes	No	No reply
CAB volunteers	15	72	13
CAB clients who volunteer elsewhere	23	77	0
CAB clients who do not volunteer anywhere	2	91	7

The problem with the wording of this question is that it does not take into account whether the correct information was being given out. From some of the comments it was clear that incorrect information had been given:

'If I was to volunteer I was told it would affect my benefits. I therefore chose not to volunteer (publicly...).'

'All I was told was that if you volunteer 16 hours or more your benefits could be affected.'

Another theme was the attitude of some Jobcentre Plus staff towards volunteering, who believed that the priority was to first find paid employment:

'...apart from some attitudes of staff, who take the view if I am doing voluntary work I should be taking up employment work instead.'

' [They told me] try to obtain paid work rather than volunteering.'

5. Conclusion

Three main issues have been raised by the findings:

1. **Volunteers have real concerns that volunteering may adversely impact the receipt of their benefits.**

Nearly half of CAB volunteers were worried about the impact their volunteering might have had on their benefits. This is hardly surprising considering their benefits are likely to be either their main source of income or assisting a low income.

The good news is that just 3 per cent said it did affect their benefits. This was unexpected considering previous research had suggested the figure would be a lot higher. This discrepancy may be because previous research had focused on particularly vulnerable groups such as homeless people, CAB volunteers are better informed due to their volunteering or that the correct information has now filtered through to most Jobcentre Plus staff.

Gaskin had previously identified that getting news of rule changes through to frontline staff was a problem:

‘Advisors said that rule changes are posted on the intranet and that major ones would be mentioned at staff meetings. The problem with the intranet is that ‘it comes up with changes on a daily basis’... Most staff do not have time to study the intranet daily and tend to rely on someone at the District Office or in their local office spotting important changes and circulating the information.’¹⁴

Gaskin reported that many of the Jobcentre Plus staff did not know of the change of the ‘48 hour’ rule to one calendar week, implemented on 1 January 2003 until April or May of that year.

However, it should be noted that whilst only 3 per cent said it did affect their benefits, the study was unable to specifically target people whose benefits had been affected and subsequently stopped volunteering.

2. **There is a communication gap between Jobcentre Plus staff and claimants.**

Clearly there is a large gap between what people think is the impact of volunteering on benefits and the true position. Just 21 per cent correctly identified that volunteering did not have any impact whilst, worryingly, the same percentage believed they would be worse off. Over half the respondents admitted they did not know.

¹⁴ Gaskin, K *Volunteering and availability for work: an evaluation of the change to Jobseeker's Allowance regulations*, Department for Work and Pensions, 2004

Information about volunteering whilst on benefits does exist. Jobcentre Plus has produced two leaflets for claimants: 'Volunteering while unemployed helps others and can help you' and 'Financial help if you work or are looking for work'. The information is also available on their website www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk.

The importance of knowing that there is no impact to claimants' benefits whilst volunteering is highlighted by the well-researched link between volunteering and employability. The Jobcentre Plus' own leaflet *Volunteering while unemployed helps others and can help you* states:

'Employers see volunteering as having something to offer, and making a positive contribution is a great way to boost self-confidence. Volunteering gives you the chance to explore your interest. It can help you use and improve skills. It can also give you the chance to try out jobs that you may not have thought about before. Volunteering can keep you familiar with the work place, giving you knowledge and confidence at job interview.'¹⁵

The problem would seem to be that the information is not getting through to the claimants with 84 per cent of people having received no information from their Jobcentre.

From the breakdown of people who are already volunteering, there is a positive correlation between people who volunteer and whether or not they received information about the impact it would have on their benefits. Whilst just 2 per cent of CAB clients who do not volunteer received information, 15 per cent of CAB volunteers did and 23 per cent of CAB clients who volunteer did.

This suggests that either information is only given in response to an enquiry or when staff do give out information it encourages people to volunteer.

The former is supported by Gaskin's study, which said that Jobcentre Plus staff would talk about volunteering 'should it arise'.

Gaskin noted that:

'...many [Jobcentre Plus staff] did not see it as their role to encourage volunteering and had very limited knowledge of local voluntary opportunities.'

One of the Jobcentre Plus staff that was interviewed commented:

'We don't promote it because then people will ask us where can I volunteer? We haven't got the information.'¹⁶

¹⁵ *Volunteering while unemployed helps others and can help you*, Jobcentre Plus, 2004

¹⁶ Gaskin, K *Volunteering and availability for work: an evaluation of the change to Jobseeker's Allowance regulations*, Department for Work and Pensions, 2004

3. There are people on benefits who want to volunteer but currently do not.

Nearly a quarter of those people surveyed who do not volunteer stated that they had considered volunteering. This suggests there is a large pool of potential volunteers. However, it is less encouraging that the respondents who had thought about volunteering but were not volunteering at present, were completing the survey in a place where they could volunteer.

Whilst it is not known why they do not volunteer, previous research has suggested that one of the most common reasons is that no-one asked them.

The 2001 Home Office Citizenship Survey¹⁷ found that:

- 44 per cent of people would have become more involved in formal volunteering if 'someone had asked me directly to get involved'
- 32 per cent said they would if 'someone who was already involved was there to help me get started' and
- 28 per cent said if 'there was more information about the things that I could do was available'.

This suggests that the voluntary sector has a leading role to play in ensuring that the right opportunities are offered, that they are communicated effectively and that they are properly managed and supported.

¹⁷ 2001 Home Office Citizenship Survey, Home Office Research, Development and Statistics Directorate, 2003

6. Recommendations

1. Information should be made clear to claimants that volunteering does not adversely affect their benefits.

Claimants are unaware that volunteering does not impact on their benefits despite this information existing. This suggests that the current information is not being communicated in an effective manner. To support the more detailed information in the leaflets and on the website, simple measures could be adopted such as a notice that states 'Volunteering will not affect your benefits' greeting people in Jobcentre Plus Offices or put at the bottom of claim forms.

2. Jobcentre Plus staff should be better supported to encourage claimants to volunteer.

Despite it being Government policy to promote volunteering and Jobcentre Plus extolling the benefits of volunteering, Jobcentre Plus staff are unable to proactively encourage claimants to volunteer. Jobcentre Plus staff, therefore, need to be better supported and informed about opportunities to volunteer. At a basic level this should consist of:

- knowing that volunteering does not adversely affect benefits;
- knowing the benefits of volunteering and encouraging claimants to volunteer; and
- being able to direct claimants to their nearest volunteer development agency/volunteer bureau.

3. Voluntary organisations should look to create more effective partnerships with Jobcentre Plus.

Part of the responsibility lies with the voluntary sector. Whilst many voluntary organisations are already involved with their Jobcentre Plus office through the New Deal, this scope needs to be widened. One positive measure would be to set up employee volunteering schemes with local Jobcentre Plus offices to encourage more staff to become more involved; there is no better advocate of volunteering than a volunteer.

4. Voluntary organisations need to better involve benefit claimants.

The research did not look into why the 24 per cent who had considered volunteering did not volunteer. However, it is highly likely that at least some of them did not find an opportunity that could meet their circumstances or were unaware of the array of the opportunities available. At a time when many voluntary organisations are looking to recruit more volunteers, the onus must lie with them to better promote their opportunities and become more adaptable and flexible when involving volunteers on benefits.

Bibliography

2001 Home Office Citizenship Survey, Home Office Research, Development and Statistics Directorate, 2003

2003 Home Office Citizenship Survey, Home Office Research, Development and Statistics Directorate, 2004

Consultation on youth action and engagement: analysis of findings, The Russell Commission, 2005

Financial help if you work or are looking for work, Jobcentre Plus, 2004

A national framework for youth action and engagement, The Russell Commission, 2005

Volunteering: a code of good practice, Home Office, Cabinet Office and Compact Working Group, 2001 (revised 2004)

Volunteering for all? Exploring the link between volunteering and social exclusion. Institute for Volunteering Research, 2003

Volunteering while unemployed helps others and can help you, Jobcentre Plus, 2004

Bowgett, K *Homeless people and volunteering, off the streets and into work*, 2005

Clark, S *You cannot be serious! A guide to involving volunteers with mental health problems*, National Centre for Volunteering, 2003

Davis Smith, J *The 1997 National survey of volunteering* Institute for Volunteering Research, 1998

Gaskin, K *Volunteering and availability for work: an evaluation of the change to Jobseeker's Allowance regulations*, Department for Work and Pensions, 2004

Gaskin, K and Shaw, O *Opportunities for volunteering: projects in action: an in-depth study*, Department of Health and Centre for Research in Social Policy, 1993

Niyazi, F *A Route to Opportunity: volunteering by unemployed people*, National Centre for Volunteering, 1996

Restall, M *Volunteers and the law*, Volunteering England, 2005

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to the Citizens Advice Bureau volunteers and clients who took part in the survey and to Richard Baldwin, Eileen Barrett, Kate Cross, Laura Jarque, Caroline Loden, Jodi Manning, Julie Short, Rachel Salt, Colin Shearer, Mark Southwell, Diane Stitt, and Beth Taylor for their advice and guidance.

John Ramsey
Head of Volunteer Development
Citizens Advice

September 2005

Citizens Advice
Myddelton House
115-123 Pentonville Road
London
N1 9LZ
Tel: 020 7833 2181
Fax: 020 7833 4371

www.citizensadvice.org.uk

Registered charity number: 279057
Citizens Advice is an operating name of The National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux

Produced: September 2005