

# Will Volunteering Affect My Benefits?

***Does the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) policy statement on Work Capability Assessments reassure people or are people discouraged from volunteering?***

**Summary report and recommendations**

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*Volunteer Glasgow* July 2022



## **Why is this important?**

Governments across the UK recognise the importance of reducing inequalities. The UK Government launched its Office for Health Improvement and Disparities last October with Professor Sir Chris Whitty saying that, “Reducing health inequalities and keeping people in better health for longer is in everyone’s interest – it is good for the individual, families, society, the economy and NHS” (Gov.uk, 2021). The Scottish Government’s recently published Volunteering Action Plan aims to, “widen access to volunteering by understanding and reducing the barriers to participation...” (Gov.scot, 2022).

The health and wellbeing benefits of volunteering for volunteers themselves are widely recognised and are likely to be most significant for those people who are the most disadvantaged and excluded in society, yet are the least likely to volunteer due to the barriers they face (Linning & Maltman, 2019) (Stuart et al, 2020). When these benefits were included in the Bank of England’s assessment of UK volunteering in 2015, it concluded that the overall economic value of people’s volunteering was broadly equivalent to the size of the UK’s budget for education or possibly (subject to methodology) as significant as the UK’s budget for the NHS (BBC Radio 4, 2015).

There were stark inequalities in people’s participation in volunteering pre-pandemic. In Scotland, for example, only 11% of permanently sick or disabled people volunteered formally with organisations such as charities, the NHS, community groups and sports clubs (Linning, et al., 2021). This participation rate is less than half the average Scottish volunteering participation rate of 26%. Many of these inequalities are likely to have become worse at different stages of the coronavirus pandemic (Crawford, 2021).

As many as 2.5 million people in Great Britain (280,000 in Scotland) claim a welfare benefit from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) where a work capability assessment may be used to determine their eligibility and award<sup>1</sup> (DWP, n.d.).

## **What’s the current position with DWP work capability assessments and volunteering?**

Following a co-design process (Volunteer Glasgow, 2017) which resulted in the publication of DWP guidance initially in 2017 then on GOV.UK in 2019 (Department for Work and Pensions, 2019), claimants and DWP staff both asked for more information about how volunteering is treated during DWP work capability assessments. In the absence of sufficient published DWP guidance on this issue, people were unclear whether volunteering might impact on the outcome of an assessment.

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<sup>1</sup> 1,744,832 ESA claimants and 781,287 UC claimant households with limited capability for work or limited capability for work and work related activity in GB at November 2021. The two groups of claimants are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

In response, the DWP produced a policy statement, “Volunteering and Work Capability Assessments” but confirmed in 2021 that the statement could be provided to individuals by email or printed hard copy *only* and could *not* be published online.

On the basis of stakeholders’ initial reactions to the DWP policy statement and how it can be disseminated, there was an obvious need to gather evidence from people directly affected on whether the statement provides clarity for claimants and whether it reassures them or, in fact, discourages people from volunteering.

As a consequence of the DWP restrictions for the publication of their policy statement, we are unable to publish the statement alongside this report.

### **What have we all done?**

With some extra support in the form of a small grant and specialist social security advice from the Scottish Government, Volunteer Glasgow has worked with a small team of people directly affected to co-design a survey which gathered people’s reactions to the DWP policy statement in March 2022.

- Technical advice on the survey questions and methodology was provided by colleagues at Citizen Advice Scotland.
- Colleagues across the TSI Scotland Network and at Glasgow Disability Alliance were instrumental in identifying people to take part in the co-design group.
- Colleagues from across the UK gave their time and energy to help promote the survey.

### **How many people responded to the survey?**

After a huge amount of effort (see appendix 2 below) on the part of Volunteer Glasgow staff, a wide range of UK partner organisations and elected representatives from across the Scottish Parliament and local authorities, we received 84 responses of which 81 were from Scotland.

There is little doubt that the DWP’s restriction which prevented publication of its policy statement online was problematic. To work around it, potential survey responders were asked to supply an email address to receive a copy: undermining our aim to maintain complete anonymity.

Nevertheless, the responses received provide clear evidence that there is a significant problem with the policy statement for as many as 2.5 million claimants across Great Britain and more in the devolved social security system in Northern Ireland.

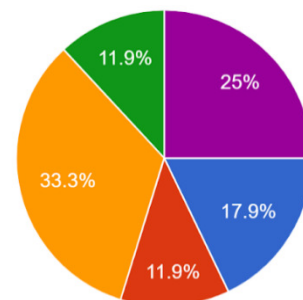
## What did people say?

Over 70% of people said the statement left them afraid or unsure if their benefits would be affected by volunteering.

In contrast, less than 30% of people said the statement reassured them that volunteering would be OK.

*“Does the DWP statement reassure you that by volunteering your right to benefits will not be affected?”*

- 17.9% of all respondents were *very reassured that volunteering would not affect their benefits.*
- 11.9% were *slightly reassured.*
- 33.3% were *not sure.*
- 11.9% were *not reassured.*
- 25% were *afraid that volunteering would affect their benefits.*



An optional space for comments was left in order for individuals who did not feel reassured to *tell us why this was the case*: these are four examples. All responses are in appendix 1.

“Having to report this to DWP puts people off as it could be seen as an indicator that someone may be able to take steps to prepare for work when in actual fact, they're not.”

“Frankly I don't trust a word of what the DWP says. At every level they seem to be trying to catch you out. I've given up volunteering.”

“The last two paragraphs don't reassure me in any way. I suspect if you can volunteer for anything they will find you capable of work.”

“The necessity to explicitly declare voluntary activity to the DWP will always be a barrier and a prompt of fear to anyone wishing to undertake volunteering.”

## **Recommendations:**

The following recommendations are based on the survey responses and discussions with the co-design group members and others directly affected.

They have been endorsed by the Scottish Volunteering Forum, Volunteer Scotland, the Scottish Sports Association and the members of the TSI Scotland Network steering group for their partnership work with the DWP.

### ***UK Government –***

- With immediate effect, to provide clarity to a significant number of claimants (but also to DWP staff and to the many thousands of public and third sector organisations – and countless communities – needing their help as volunteers), the UK Government should publish a version of the policy statement as guidance on GOV.UK. This would also allow for additional evidence to be gathered.
- In the medium term, to achieve a shared vision to reduce inequalities both in volunteering and in health outcomes, the UK Government should completely drop the requirement for claimants to declare existing or intended volunteering to the DWP. As we've seen before and since the onset of the pandemic, volunteering is not simply “work related activity” as defined by the DWP: it is a different form of contribution to society and is hugely valuable in its own right to the economy and also, in the form of health outcomes, to volunteers themselves. People's freedom to volunteer should not be restricted by DWP rules if we are to reduce inequalities in volunteering participation and in health outcomes.

### ***MPs –***

- To read this report and to write to the UK Government and to DWP requesting progression of the actions identified above and a response to this report.
- Share the results of this report with constituents, those that may be affected and on social media.
- Continue to promote the importance of and benefits of volunteering.

### ***Scottish Government –***

- To write to the UK Government and DWP requesting progression of the actions identified above and a response to this report.
- To confirm that devolved social security procedures will not require people to declare existing or intended volunteering when receiving support.
- To review any opportunities for the Scottish Government to promote volunteering for everyone, and specifically to provide appropriate reassurance for individuals in receipt of devolved social security benefits.

### ***Scottish Parliament –***

- In the short term, the Scottish Parliamentary Committees on: Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice, Health, Social Care and Sport, Local Government, Housing and Planning and Social Justice and Social Security and the Cross Party Groups on Volunteering, Disability and Sport should consider this report and:
  - Write to the Scottish Government seeking confirmation that devolved social security procedures will not require people to declare existing or intended volunteering when receiving support.
  - Undertake a joint inquiry on this issue to further inform how the barriers outlined in this report can be overcome.

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- Share the results of this report with constituents, those that may be affected and on social media.
- Continue to promote the importance of and benefits of volunteering.

### ***Organisations that involve people in volunteering roles –***

- Organisations should ensure they know how to answer the question of whether volunteering with them might affect someone's social security benefits: signposting people to the published GOV.UK guidance, providing copies of the DWP policy statement re work capability assessments, referring people to specialist advice agencies and keeping up to date with future changes and developments.
- Organisations in Scotland can obtain updates and a copy of the DWP policy statement from their local Third Sector Interface (volunteer centre service), Volunteer Scotland and/or the Scottish Volunteering Forum.

## **Acknowledgements:**

The team at Volunteer Glasgow could not have undertaken the survey without the support of a very wide range of people and partners including the co-design group members, Scottish Sports Association, colleagues across the TSI Scotland Network, Scottish Volunteering Forum, Volunteer Scotland, UK Volunteering Forum, the Partnership Team at the DWP Scotland Director's Office, Citizens Advice Scotland, Glasgow Disability Alliance, the Scottish Government and Maree Todd MSP (Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport), Jeremy Balfour MSP, Jackie Baillie MSP, Liz Smith MSP, Brian Whittle MSP, David Linden MP and many others who shared the survey with their constituents and networks.

Our sincere thanks to you all.

Any errors in this report are entirely the responsibility of Volunteer Glasgow.

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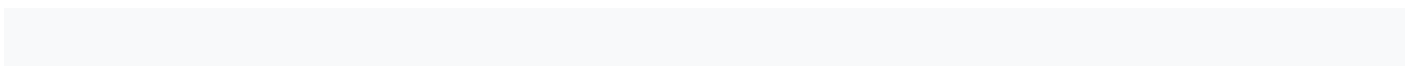
[Accessed 30 June 2022].



## Appendix 1:

*“If not reassured, please tell us why (optional)”*

26 responses received and listed below



<p>The last paragraph makes it clear any volunteering will be used against you in a WCA, though have obviously attempted to say this in a roundabout way as they can't say it directly.</p>
<p>Because the DWP doesn't follow its own guidance</p>
<p>I do not know.</p>
<p>I have not been given information on any of this</p>
<p>I feel if I am seen to be capable of volunteering this will affect the dwp's opinion of how I am managing and affect my benefits.</p>
<p>i don't understand what benefit im on.</p>
<p>They change things far too often without letting people know so don't trust them as far as I can throw them!</p>
<p>The last paragraph of the information sheet " automatically not result in a DWP outcome" this is particularly not - reassuring, as it is not clear what would automatically will result. There should be a cleared guidance , list of conditions possibly?</p>
<p>The last two paragraphs don't reassure me in any way. I suspect if you can volunteer for anything they will find you capable of work</p>
<p>I do not believe for one minute that the DWP wouldn't use the fact that I was volunteering, against me, hence affecting my benefits.</p>
<p>Have had periods when the benefits were stopped</p>
<p>Why should I keep informing the job centre about my volunteering work?</p>
<p>The last sentence seems a bit of a get out clause, that volunteering may be used as evidence you could work.</p>
<p>The supportive nature of some volunteering opportunities may not be obvious.</p>

Therefore the person may seem more able than they are due to lack of understanding of the role.

Hopefully procedure stays the same

The framing of WCAs in this policy statement is not reflective of real-life. Anyone even remotely close to experiences of WCAs, and the culture that exists within the DWP, will know that in order to access entitlement to benefits, you cannot simply describe your "typical day" as your words will be used primarily to demonstrate ability with little or no emphasis on barriers or disabilities experienced. Claimants \*must\* describe their worst day at all times for their real-life circumstances to be reflected in reporting with still little confidence that it will be acknowledged, understood or considered by decision makers. The necessity to explicitly declare voluntary activity to the DWP will always be a barrier and a prompt of fear to anyone wishing to undertake volunteering because there is every reason to believe that this will not be used an indicator of ability and go against determinations made in previous WCAs. The result is that the positive outcomes of volunteering, including improved mental health and future job prospects, are not realised and a negative cycle of stagnation is perpetuated for the most vulnerable in society.

The fact that any volunteering must be reported to DWP significantly reduces the chance of people taking up opportunities, in my opinion. Myself included. Depending on an individual's health condition and/or disability, they may be unable to sustain any voluntary work but would love to try. Having to report this to DWP puts people off as it could be seen as an indicator that someone may be able to take steps to prepare for work when in actual fact, they're not.

Because the original DWP PIP assessment was a gruelling and inhumane process that took 2 years to solve after giving me only enough points to say i was not entitled and i lost my support. It had to go to a tribunal and it has taken years to recover just from that. The assessor did not listen to anything i said about the difficulties i had and the MR process and tribunal broke me, even more than i was already broken. I wanted to take my life. It took hours to do the assessment which should have been an indicator of the difficulties i have. I have now been diagnosed with autism. I have a limited capability for work and after that horrible experience where the decision makers felt i could take part in normal day to day activities after telling them the hell i went through to go get a loaf of bread does not fill me with confidence to volunteer incase in my next assessment I end up with the same situation. I am unable to feel part of my community and wont until the barbaric PIP process for disabled people is overhauled. I beg the UK government to please see to this.

Frankly I don't trust a word of what the DWP says. At every level they seem to be trying to catch you out. I've given up volunteering because they kept pressuring me about how many jobs I'd applied for and wanted evidence of applications etc etc

Even a very little amount of time may be used against you even though especially

when people suffer from mental health issues professionals feel that volunteering is beneficial

Depends on the person who does your assessment whether you believe what they say

The organisations I volunteer wish want to provide me with an honorarium. Its unclear how this affects benefits, if at all.

They make you feel guilty for making progress. As soon as you let them know you have improved your mental state they assume you are capable of work. Clearly they are unaware that mental states fluctuate and aren't always stable.

No sure if my benefits will be affected

The decision maker would take voluntary work into consideration when applying for benefits.

## **Appendix 2:**

### ***Initial Promotion of the Survey***

From 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2022:

- Survey and policy statement initially disseminated to 1235+ Volunteer Glasgow Kinetic registered volunteers who have identified as disabled and were signed up to receive email communication.
- Survey and statement disseminated to
  - A Volunteer Glasgow list of local referral organisations working with disabled people, who were encouraged to share with any affected staff, volunteers and service users.
  - TSIs who were encouraged to share with relevant individuals, networks and local organisations.
  - Councillors who were encouraged to share with affected constituents, SNP group colleagues and wider networks.
  - Members of Scottish Disability Sport and other disability sports organisations in Scotland.
  - Home Country Sport Associations who were encouraged to share with relevant members and networks.
- A google form was created and shared on social media for organisations to sign up to receive the survey and DWP statement by email.

### ***Additional Promotion of the Survey***

Due to a low response rate from the initial promotion of the survey, it was decided to extend the survey deadline from the 21<sup>st</sup> March to the 28<sup>th</sup> March. Additional measures were also taken in an attempt to boost response rates:

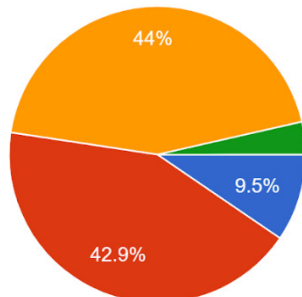
- Further graphics and copy were created to be shared on social media.
- Social media posts created with an invite to sign up to receive the survey and statement by email was extended from organisations to include affected individuals.
- Involvement of the Scottish Sports Association who raised awareness of the survey with MSPs and Scottish MPs.
  - Videos created by MSPs encouraging individuals to sign up to receive survey and statement were shared and circulated on social media.
  - Email communications to members of the CPGs on Volunteering, Disability and Sport.
- Volunteer Glasgow Kinetic registered providers, original organisation sign ups and national bodies for volunteering were sent reminder alongside social media graphics and copy which they were encouraged to share on their own platforms.
- Volunteer Glasgow Kinetic registered volunteers were sent reminders to complete the survey, informing them of extended deadline and with heavier emphasis on anonymity of participation.
- The project's co-design group were sent the social media graphics and copy to share within their own networks.

## Appendix 3:

### Profile of people that completed the survey:

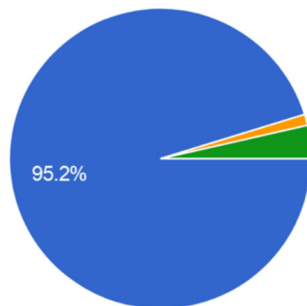
Age of respondents;

- 9.5% - 16-24
- 42.9% - 25-49
- 44% - 50+
- 3.6% - prefer not to say



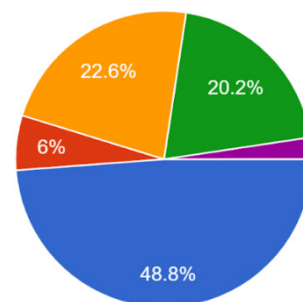
Location of respondents;

- 95.2% - Scotland
- 3.6% - Wales
- 1.2% - Northern Ireland
- 0% - England



Respondents were asked if they were currently in receipt of a benefit that may require them to undertake a Work Capability Assessment;

- 48.8% - Yes
- 6% - Used to be
- 22.6% - No
- 20.2% - Do not know
- 2.4% - Prefer not to say

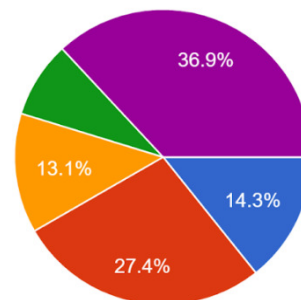


Additionally, it was asked what benefits respondents are currently/have been in receipt of;



It was then asked when respondents had last taken part in a Work Capability Assessment;

- 14.3% - 0-1 year ago
- 27.4% - 1-3 years ago
- 13.1% - 3+ years ago
- 8.3% - Prefer not to say
- 36.9% - I have never had a work capability assessment (WCA)



Out of the 84 respondents, 70.2% had volunteered in the recent past, whilst 29.8% had not.

It was further asked if respondents' DWP advisor had discussed volunteering with them. 19% said they had, whilst 81% said they had not.

Of the 84 respondents, 15.5% were aware of the policy statement prior to completing the survey, whilst 84.5% were not.

64.3% of respondents had not had a Work Capability Assessment where volunteering was discussed, whilst merely 9.5% had.

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