

## **Volunteer Glasgow**

### NEWS RELEASE

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#### **Legacy 2014: clarity needed over welfare benefits and volunteering**

Volunteer Glasgow is urging the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to make it clear just how much volunteering people claiming benefits can do.

Despite claimants being free to volunteer as many hours as they wish as long as they continue to comply with their benefit conditions, the organisation that matches people with volunteering opportunities in the city is using National Volunteers Week to seek clarification on the issue. They claim dozens of potential volunteers have changed their minds after getting mixed messages about the impact it might have on their benefits from Job Centre Plus.

“The current published DWP guidance is very positive about volunteering but the detail is 3 ½ years out of date. And we are increasingly concerned that aspects of new Job Centre Plus procedures are undermining our shared goal of maximising a volunteering legacy from the Commonwealth Games,” said Volunteer Glasgow's Operations Manager, David Maxwell.

“Volunteering can have a massively positive benefit in helping people back into employment. It can boost confidence, refresh old and teach new skills and improve crucial communication and team work: all things that employers are looking for. It also has great health and community benefits.

“However, if people think they are going to lose basic welfare benefits they are not going to risk volunteering.”

Although the organisation warned of the impact this uncertainty has on potential volunteers, it stressed that volunteering should remain voluntary.

“We are totally against the DWP's new 'claimant commitment' process. If volunteering appears to be compulsory as part of entitlement to benefits, it ceases to be voluntary.

“Benefits advisers should know what can and cannot be done within the rules, but this doesn't seem to be the case. We are increasingly hearing of people on benefits being advised not to volunteer: clearly this is an issue for us all as we try and maximise volunteering on the back of the Commonwealth Games,” added David.

Depute Leader of Glasgow City Council and the Executive Member for the Commonwealth Games, Councillor Archie Graham, said: “Volunteers make a significant contribution to life in Glasgow and they will play a starring role at the Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games with around 16,500 people set to take on a variety of roles.

“But we need to make sure that we capitalise on the success of our volunteering programmes after the Games. It is vital that people are actively encouraged to volunteer – the benefits of doing so are vast and there for everybody to see. The DWP should make it clear that those who volunteer are entitled to claim benefits.”

Tressa Burke of Glasgow Disability Alliance said, "Our members are often telling us about their fear of losing benefits if they were to volunteer, so the letter in January from DWP to Glasgow 2014 is a very welcome development because it states that any DLA recipient can volunteer for as many hours as they wish in the UK and it suggests that they only need to have a discussion with DWP if their care or mobility needs change. But the detailed DWP guidance on volunteering needs to be changed to be consistent with this as it was published in October 2010."

'C' has a long term health condition and is an ESA (support group) claimant. She was surprised to learn that she should have talked to her DWP/Job Centre Plus adviser *before* volunteering (according to the 3 ½ year old DWP Job Centre Plus guidance). She has benefitted enormously from volunteering in terms of her general sense of wellbeing and feeling a sense that despite all her difficulties she can still make a valid contribution with the support of flexible opportunity providers.

The published DWP guidance states that people are free to volunteer for as many hours as they wish, as long as they continue to meet the conditions of their specific benefit claim. But the latest procedures need to be changed to be consistent with this, and the detailed guidance needs updated and clarified.

Volunteer Glasgow are calling on DWP Job Centre Plus to help the city's partners maximise a Glasgow 2014 volunteering legacy by bringing DWP guidance up to date, and by ensuring people claiming benefits are not unnecessarily restricted from volunteering:

- Sickness and disability related benefit claimants should not need to talk to anyone about volunteering in advance and DWP should state this clearly in line with their January 2014 letter to Glasgow 2014.

- People claiming job-seeking benefits should continue to be encouraged to consider volunteering opportunities by DWP Job Centre Plus advisers, but training and guidance for DWP staff should be improved and volunteering should *not* feature on claimant commitments and should *not* be subject to sanction.

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### **Notes to the editor**

- Volunteer Glasgow is the independent charity that promotes and supports volunteering across the Glasgow City Council area. One of our current functions is to help deliver a Glasgow 2014 Legacy and we are working with community groups, sports clubs, charities and both public and private sector partners to increase volunteering rates in the city in 2014 and beyond.

- Glasgow's active volunteering rates have consistently been below the national average measured by the Scottish Household Survey. In the 2009 'baseline' review for the city's legacy strategy, the city's volunteering rates were 24% compared with Scotland's 30%. But the inequality of rates *within* the city has been even starker: 16% of people (*living in the*

*neighbourhoods measured as the worst 15% in the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation)* had taken up volunteering opportunities compared with 28% *(in the rest of the city)*.

●And in a recent study by GCPH which used an ONS measure, Glasgow has significantly lower rates of volunteering than Manchester and Liverpool, increasing the plausibility of the theory that this contributes to Glasgow's 'excess'

mortality.[http://www.gcph.co.uk/publications/440\\_exploring\\_potential\\_reasons\\_for\\_glasgow\\_s\\_excess\\_mortality](http://www.gcph.co.uk/publications/440_exploring_potential_reasons_for_glasgow_s_excess_mortality)

●Research confirms that volunteering has much wider benefits for the unemployed and society at large than simply getting people back into work. It can serve as a meaningful alternative to paid work for individuals with disabilities, long-term illnesses and caring responsibilities. It can play a big part in maintaining self-worth and counteract the negative psychological effects of social exclusion. And the impact on society is huge: for example, every community sports club and charity in the country is governed by volunteers.

●Current DWP guidance on volunteering while claiming welfare benefits can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/volunteering/when-you-can-volunteer> where you can view the detailed guidance PDF which was accurate at October 2010.

●A DWP response to a Freedom of Information request dated March 2013 can be found here:

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/186952/foi-783-2013.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/186952/foi-783-2013.pdf)

●Volunteer Glasgow and Glasgow Disability Alliance are both actively working with Glasgow's Poverty Leadership Panel which has recently adopted a position statement on volunteering. <http://www.volunteerglasgow.org/partners/poverty-leadership-panel/>

●Volunteer Glasgow has three principal concerns in relation to welfare benefits:

1. Volunteering must be voluntary: claimants who are actively seeking paid employment are being increasingly coerced into volunteering by virtue of the new 'claimant commitment' process. If volunteering appears on a 'claimant commitment' it immediately ceases to be voluntary as it becomes subject to the threat of sanction. We believe volunteering should be promoted to claimants by Job Centre Plus advisers, but it should not appear on any claimant commitment if it becomes subject to sanction.

2. Echoing the findings of research in England undertaken by NCVO, we are also hearing cases anecdotally of people being 'advised' not to volunteer by Job Centre Plus staff, and would welcome increased efforts on the part of DWP to work with us to ensure their staff are up to date and receive all appropriate support and training on volunteering. Volunteer Glasgow welcomes our local DWP District's circulation of the

published guidance to their

staff.[http://www.ncvo.org.uk/images/documents/practical\\_support/volunteering/vsc-policy-final.pdf](http://www.ncvo.org.uk/images/documents/practical_support/volunteering/vsc-policy-final.pdf)

3. The published guidance for claimants of health and disability benefits must be clearer: people are understandably concerned that volunteering for any length of time regardless of the nature of the role may lead to questions about their capability and availability for paid employment. But according to a recent letter dated 6 January 2014 (ref: TO/13/28352) from DWP to Glasgow 2014, “volunteering in Great Britain does not affect payment of Disability Living Allowance. However, volunteers will still be expected to notify the Department if their care or mobility needs change.”

**Media contacts:**

Craig Cowbrough, 0141 354 1324, [craig@cowbrough.co.uk](mailto:craig@cowbrough.co.uk)

For Volunteer Glasgow and 'C': David Maxwell, 07834-651065,  
[david.maxwell@volunteerglasgow.org](mailto:david.maxwell@volunteerglasgow.org)

For Glasgow Disability Alliance: Tressa or Brian on 0141 556 7103