

## Research Summary: Volunteering and availability for work

### Introduction

Recent government policy has been to encourage volunteering to build active communities and promote neighbourhood renewal. As part of this, government has attempted to ease restrictions on benefit claimants doing voluntary work without compromising the focus on jobseeking and paid employment.

Under Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) volunteers had a grace period of 48 hours before they were expected to take up an offer of paid work. This period is 24 hours for other recipients of JSA. From 1 January 2003, a further extension was piloted, allowing JSA claimants who volunteer a grace period of one calendar week before they have to take up the offer of a paid job.

The rule change is a significant step in the removal of barriers to JSA claimants' volunteering. This research was designed to establish the impact of the rule change and to inform the decision as to whether it should continue beyond a 12 month period.

An external independent researcher was commissioned by the Department to conduct qualitative research in four areas of Great Britain. One to one interviews were carried out with 28 staff in 15 Jobcentre Plus offices and volunteer coordinators in 72 charities and voluntary organisations. They included 21 national charities and 51 local organisations with a variety of different structures and working in a wide range of fields. The research was commissioned in 2002 and took place in 2003, with interviews being conducted in June and July, to allow a bedding in period for the rule change of five to six months. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

### Main findings of the research

- Jobcentre Plus staff and voluntary organisations did not anticipate fraud or abuse of the extended grace period, with rare cases effectively dealt with by Jobcentre Plus procedures
- Jobcentre Plus staff and voluntary organisations thought job search and the work focus of JSA would be enhanced, and not weakened, by the rule change
- The rule change was widely welcomed with the voluntary organisations unanimously positive about it and Jobcentre Plus staff generally in favour
- Voluntary organisations thought it would make a difference to them in allowing more time to rearrange volunteering and provide cover
- Voluntary organisations would be more likely to place volunteers on JSA in roles that require continuity and commitment, and to invest in training them for these roles
- Organisations thought the rule change might increase the commitment volunteers make to them
- Organisations would like to take on more unemployed volunteers but most have not turned them away in the past
- Jobcentre Plus staff generally thought the rule change would make only a small difference, because most employers did not demand a start in 48 hours and because people doing voluntary work were a small proportion of total JSA claimants
- Many staff did not promote voluntary work to claimants and knew little about it
- Some Jobcentre Plus staff and all voluntary organisations were very positive about the links between volunteering and employability
- The rule change is unlikely to cause significant increases in the numbers volunteering, without further encouragement and promotion of voluntary work.
- Some Jobcentre Plus staff were not aware of the rule change, as the conventional methods of disseminating changes are not effective
- Jobcentre Plus offices give out ambivalent messages about volunteering, which can be confusing.

## Executive Summary

### The research

The Department for Work and Pensions commissioned research to assess the impact of extending the '48 hour rule' to one calendar week for Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) claimants doing voluntary work.

Claimants are required to attend a job interview within 48 hours but are allowed a week's 'grace period' before taking up a paid job. The change was introduced on 1 January 2003 with the intention of encouraging voluntary organisations to make better use of unemployed volunteers and of promoting volunteering among unemployed people.

There is growing evidence that volunteering can be a route to employment, particularly for those most disadvantaged in the labour market, such as young people, long-term unemployed people and black and minority ethnic people. Voluntary activity can provide a direct stepping-stone into employment and a variety of indirect benefits in helping people back to work.

The encouragement of volunteering by unemployed people has often been in conflict with benefit rules, as voluntary organisations have pointed out. In the mid-1990s, government extended the 24 hour rule to 48 hours for those on Unemployment Benefit, retaining the rule when Jobseeker's Allowance was introduced in 1996.

The research conducted 100 interviews with Jobcentre Plus staff and voluntary organisations to determine the impact of the further change to one week and to inform the decision as to whether it should continue beyond a 12 month period.

### The general consensus

The view of the rule change was positive among a large majority of both Jobcentre Plus staff and voluntary organisations. The change was unanimously approved by voluntary organisations. All those interviewed welcomed it, although organisations varied in the impact that it

had on them. They saw it as valuable both practically and in principle for:

- Providing a valuable 'breathing space' for organisations to enable volunteering continuity
- Likely to affect the allocation of volunteer roles and training in many volunteering areas
- Enabling newly employed volunteers to adjust their voluntary input around their job
- Enabling newly employed volunteers to complete projects and have closure
- Enabling newly employed volunteers to brief, advise or train replacement volunteers
- Unlikely to weaken the work focus of JSA or to be abused
- An acknowledgement of the value of volunteering for unemployed people
- A sign of respect for voluntary organisations as employing organisations
- Recognition of the logistics of managing a volunteer workforce to deliver services
- A possible incentive to increase volunteering by unemployed people, though other encouragements may be needed.

Jobcentre Plus staff were slightly less unanimous in their positive assessment of the rule change, with a small minority unenthusiastic about it. But in general they saw the change as:

- More likely to enhance the work focus of JSA than to weaken it
- Unlikely to encourage abuse or fraud
- Recognition of usual employment practice in allowing a week's notice for appointments
- A relatively insignificant change which would not affect their own work greatly
- A constructive acknowledgement of the needs of claimants who volunteer
- Unlikely to be a great incentive to those claimants who are already keen to volunteer
- Legitimisation of the encouragement and promotion of volunteering by some staff

- Recognition of the needs of organisations in managing their voluntary workforce
- Unlikely to increase volunteer numbers significantly without additional encouragement
- For a small minority, an unnecessary change and a possible loophole.

### **Jobcentre Plus staff**

Jobcentre Plus staff were fairly well informed about what constituted voluntary work but many did not see it as their role to encourage volunteering and had very limited knowledge of local voluntary opportunities. Some would like more information and support to enable them to direct suitable claimants towards voluntary work.

Staff said that there was little evidence of the 48 hour rule acting as a major deterrent to claimants who were motivated to volunteer, but it could put some people off making a commitment to voluntary work. Staff emphasised that many claimants were not interested in unpaid work and that volunteering claimants are generally a small part of their overall workload.

Staff made two key points about the impact of the rule change. First, that the vast majority of employers do not demand a start in less than a week and, second, that most claimant volunteers are strongly motivated towards obtaining paid work. These two factors meant that there was little expectation of fraudulent use of the extended grace period.

Most staff did not see the rule change weakening the work focus of JSA or reducing claimants' job search activities. On the contrary, easing the pressure on claimants and linking them in with the development potential and jobseeking assistance of voluntary organisations could enhance movement into work. Some staff who were familiar with the voluntary sector saw that the rule change would help organisations which take on unemployed volunteers.

Most staff were doubtful that the rule change would have a significant impact on the numbers of claimants taking up voluntary work. However, for those who recognised the value of voluntary work and wanted to encourage it more, the rule change offered some legitimacy and made it an easier option to promote, so it may have an indirect effect on increasing numbers.

Many of the Jobcentre Plus staff were very positive about the links between voluntary work and employability. Volunteering could be particularly important for gaining experience and serving an apprenticeship in some employment areas and could benefit certain types of claimant, such as young people, people who had been unemployed for a long time, women who had never worked, and black and minority ethnic people.

The general benefits of doing voluntary work included establishing or maintaining work habits, getting a reference, demonstrating personal motivation, boosting confidence and keeping skills up to date. Many staff advocated a more proactive approach by Jobcentre Plus in enabling JSA clients to take up voluntary work, citing the successes of past and current programmes such as the Community Programme and the New Deal voluntary option.

### **Voluntary organisations**

Voluntary organisations welcomed the rule change for recognising the value of volunteering for unemployed people, standardising the notice period to one week, and acknowledging the logistics of managing a volunteer workforce.

Although many organisations stressed that they did not monitor employment status or discriminate on the basis of it, some had been reluctant to allocate certain volunteer roles to people on JSA. These were roles where continuity and a high training investment were necessary, where they involved rotas or forward booking, and where most volunteering took place during working hours rather than in evenings or weekends.

Organisations welcomed the week's "breathing space" to make arrangements to cover the voluntary input, recruit another volunteer, rearrange rotas or inform project staff and clients. The longer grace period also enabled volunteers to rearrange their voluntary input, complete projects, say their goodbyes, and to brief or train a replacement volunteer. As a result, organisations would place unemployed volunteers in roles from which they might previously have been excluded and were more confident about investing in training them.

Most organisations did not foresee a dramatic effect on their own recruitment of JSA volunteers, because they did not turn them away previously and because additional promotion was needed. However, numbers might increase in the longer term. Some organisations anticipated that claimant volunteers may make a greater commitment to volunteering.

Few organisations expected a negative impact on job search and movement into work, confirming the view that most unemployed volunteers are strongly motivated towards finding paid work. Abuse of the rule change was considered very unlikely.

Voluntary organisations were unanimous that voluntary work could help people into paid work and cited examples of volunteers progressing to employment. They particularly highlighted the importance of experience for getting into some areas of employment, such as caring, work with children and environment and conservation work; and of the value of volunteering for sampling different types of work, and helping define career ambitions. Almost all the organisations interviewed were very happy to play a role in developing unemployed volunteers' skills and confidence and enabling them to progress to paid work.

The vast majority of voluntary organisations had in the past experienced no barriers except for those arising from

benefit rules or claimants' anxieties about them. Some claimants found it difficult to get consistent information or were afraid of breaking the rules and losing benefit. Many organisations advocated a more systematic approach and partnership between Jobcentre Plus and the voluntary sector in promoting JSA volunteering.

### **Conclusion**

The rule change benefits claimants and voluntary organisations and may encourage organisations to make better use of unemployed volunteers. It is unlikely to have a dramatic effect on volunteering rates by JSA claimants without further promotion.

The scope for more consistency across the service in recognising the value of volunteering and promoting voluntary work should be explored. Both Jobcentre Plus and the voluntary sector could benefit from a closer relationship, drawing on existing models of effective partnership that include better links, information exchange and mutual briefings.