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# Working with Jobcentre Plus

**advice and information for Volunteer Centres  
and organisations that support volunteers**

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## 1. Introduction

In April 2010 Volunteering England and Jobcentre Plus signed an [agreement](#) to promote the value of volunteering to unemployed people in England and tackle the barriers they might face to volunteering. The agreement was the result of engagement over a number of years.

At the heart of the agreement is a commitment from both organisations to take action to promote the value of volunteering to unemployed people. We also want to remove the artificial barriers that can prevent people taking up an opportunity, such as the mistaken belief that benefits claimants can only volunteer for 16 hours a week or that they cannot be reimbursed for expenses.

Since the agreement was signed Volunteering England has been advising the Department for Work and Pensions, the Cabinet Office and Jobcentre Plus on the implementation of the 'Work Together' and 'co-location' initiatives, which are explained in section two.

This work included bringing together a number of Volunteer Centres with staff from the various agencies to talk about the initiatives to encourage unemployed people to volunteer. In particular, Volunteering England wanted civil servants involved in delivering Work Together to understand how national plans are playing out in practice.

Following the discussion, Volunteering England is convinced that - even in the current funding climate - working with Jobcentre Plus is of benefit to most Volunteer Centres, if not all. Delegates to the meeting cited many reasons for doing so, and main ones are captured in section three.

Something else that arose from the meeting was the importance of building a relationship at the local level. Section four contains suggestions for establishing a partnership, including how to manage some of the obstacles that Volunteer Centres have experienced in working with Jobcentre Plus.

All this advice is illustrated with case studies from Volunteer Centres around the country, as without their experiences it wouldn't have been possible to produce this guide at all.

Volunteering England hopes that you find it a useful resource in your work with Jobcentre Plus. We know there are many more examples of good practice out there, so if you have one that you'd like to share with us, please contact Dan Sumners, Senior Policy & Information Officer via [dan.sumners@volunteering.org.uk](mailto:dan.sumners@volunteering.org.uk) or 020 7520 8986.

## 2. The 'Work Together' initiative

'Work Together' is one element of the Government's '[Get Britain Working](#)' [PDF] initiative. Its aim is to encourage unemployed people to consider volunteering as a way of improving their employment prospects while they are looking for work.

In contrast to the Work Programme, which is mandatory for unemployed people once they've been claiming Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) for a specified period of time, Work Together is not a compulsory programme.

Volunteering England has welcomed the initiative as it has the potential to support our work on reducing barriers to volunteering. It aims to ensure that both unemployed people and Jobcentre Plus staff have better information about the benefits of volunteering and the range of opportunities available. It should also help to clear up misconceptions such as that someone can only volunteer for sixteen hours a week if they are receiving benefits.

We have therefore been working with staff from Jobcentre Plus, the Cabinet Office and the Department of Work and Pensions to guide its implementation.

### How is Work Together delivered?

Unlike the Department for Work & Pensions' [Volunteering Brokerage Scheme](#), which ran from April 2009 to November 2010, Work Together is not a referral scheme. It is simply an effort by Jobcentre Plus to raise the profile of volunteering as an option for unemployed people.

Work Together is therefore not so much a programme as an attempt to ensure that

- a. Jobcentre Plus staff understand the rules regarding volunteering and appreciate the role that it can play in helping someone gain employment;
- b. unemployed people are aware of the potential benefits of volunteering and the range of opportunities available to them; and
- c. unemployed people are signposted to sources of further information about volunteering.

Whilst it does hope that relationships will be built with local volunteering infrastructure, the Government is not prescribing how Work Together is delivered locally, but simply encouraging Jobcentre Plus to develop ways of informing its staff and promoting volunteering. Advisers are encouraging unemployed people to consider taking up volunteering whilst they are looking for paid work. Those individuals interested in volunteering will be given further information and signposted to

- local organisations that have agreed to support unemployed people;
- on-line support; and
- specific volunteering opportunities.

More information can be found in the [Department for Work & Pensions' briefing on Work Together](#) [PDF].

## Providing information in Jobcentre Plus offices

One element of Work Together is ‘co-location’, an initiative that resulted from an updated memorandum of understanding between Jobcentre Plus and the Prince’s Trust. It involves Jobcentre Plus making a desk available to voluntary organisations in their office so that staff and volunteers can speak to unemployed people about volunteering.

The intention is not to develop a brokerage service, but to encourage people to think about volunteering and signpost them to the most appropriate organisation, in many cases the local Volunteer Centre. However, those on the desk may be able to access the [Do-it](#) online database and help the customer look for a role.

Whilst the details of co-location arrangements are being agreed upon at a local level, some central guidance for Jobcentre Plus has been produced. This includes information about safety, provision of Internet access and other technicalities. If you’re speaking to Jobcentre Plus about co-location, you may find it useful to refer them to this guidance if there are any sticking points that neither side is clear on. In particular, it should help overcome barriers that some Volunteer Centres have experienced with regard to the health and safety aspects of being hosted in a Jobcentre Plus branch.

If you are interested in co-locating in a Jobcentre Plus office, or are interested in working with your local Jobcentre Plus, you can contact your local Jobcentre Plus Partnership Manager. You can also contact Dan Sumners at Volunteering England via [dan.sumners@volunteering.org.uk](mailto:dan.sumners@volunteering.org.uk).

## Funding

There is no funding for any element of Work Together, including co-location, meaning that Volunteer Centres and other organisations that place volunteers will not be funded to support unemployed people who are signposted to them by Jobcentre Plus.

However, neither is there any obligation on Volunteer Centres to work with Jobcentre Plus. It is down to each independent organisation to make decisions about its work on the basis of its priorities and how it feels they can most effectively be achieved.

### **3. Why work with Jobcentre Plus?**

Many Volunteer Centres consider working with unemployed people to be an important element of their service as it targets groups that can be socially excluded and might not otherwise consider volunteering. As a diverse group, they may possess many of the skills that volunteer involving organisations need.

Volunteer Centres often have a relationship with Jobcentre Plus whether or not they have agreed to collaborate officially, simply as a result of working in the same area. For example, many receive referrals from the local Jobcentre Plus office. In such a case, it makes sense to build up a relationship in order to manage the situation.

It can also help with making existing funding go further and demonstrating impact to potential new funders. For example, arranging group referrals from Jobcentre Plus can help you make efficient use of current funds, rather than seeing unemployed people individually. And by working with this group, which is a focus for many social initiatives, you can demonstrate to existing and new funding bodies that your existing clients include key target groups.

#### **More appropriate referrals**

Many Volunteer Centres report receiving referrals of people from Jobcentre Plus who aren't ready to volunteer, could not be placed or simply don't want to volunteer. Having a relationship with the local Jobcentre Plus can enable you to explain that volunteering isn't for everyone, and it's not something anyone can or should be forced to do.

It can also lead to the agreement of a system of referral and signposting that means you're in control of who you see and when you see them, and that you aren't burdened with meetings that aren't going to benefit anyone. For example, some Volunteer Centres have put in place a group referral system that enables them to provide people with information on a group basis before spending more time with those who are still interested.

#### **Improved knowledge and understanding of volunteering**

So what we're talking about, and aiming for, is for Jobcentre Plus staff to have a better understanding of volunteering and the organisations that exist to support and promote it. And the best way to do that is by talking to them face-to-face.

Through training sessions, attendance at Jobcentre Plus staff meetings and one-to-one meetings, many Volunteer Centres have seen a dramatic improvement in attitudes and approaches. A little information can go a long way.

#### **More and better information about volunteering**

The outcome of many Volunteer Centre relationships with Jobcentre Plus is simply the provision of information - in the form of leaflets, posters and similar – both about the services they provide and the opportunities available in the area.

Whilst it may not seem like much, it has often been effective in raising the profile of the organisation, and helping people start to think about volunteering as a way to help them gain employment.

## 4. Building a relationship with Jobcentre Plus

The best way to begin thinking about building a relationship with Jobcentre Plus is to talk to someone who has experience, so we recommend you read the case studies in sections five and six. However, there are some general steps you can take.

### First contact

Some Volunteer Centres have had difficulty in identifying someone in Jobcentre Plus who's willing to talk to them about collaboration. Also, due to the high staff turn over and people changing roles a useful contact can be lost and the whole process has to start over again.

The people with responsibility for building relationships with local partners are called Partnership Managers. You can [contact DWP Partnership Managers](#) directly and they should be able to start things off for you.

However, often you can find someone within your local office, at whatever level, with a sympathetic ear and an understanding of volunteering and its benefits. [Contact details for all Jobcentre Plus offices](#) can be found on the Directgov website.

### Maintaining the relationship

Once you've successfully cleared the first hurdle and established a relationship with an organisation or individual, it's important to maintain that contact. This is especially important in the case of Jobcentre Plus, as mentioned above, due to the often high turnover of staff and people changing roles.

There are many approaches to maintaining a relationship, and often you'll be the best judge of which to take in a particular situation. However, here are some suggestions that you might want to consider.

#### Attend meetings

Many Volunteer Centres that have good working relationship with Jobcentre Plus arrange to regularly attend staff or development meetings. As well as being able to share information about available opportunities and current capacity, this enables them to keep up-to-date with issues within Jobcentre Plus and what its priorities are.

#### Offer training and information

As the experts on volunteering in the local area, Volunteer Centres can and should take a lead in setting the parameters for the relationship with Jobcentre Plus by explaining what volunteering is and isn't, and the benefits to unemployed people of taking up an opportunity. Volunteer Centres are often very well informed of benefits rules and how they apply to volunteers, which can be helpful for Jobcentre Plus staff.

Training and information doesn't need to be restricted to Jobcentre Plus staff either. Unemployed people will benefit from advice and guidance about what opportunities are available and how they could help them. You might even want to consider delivering joint sessions on a regular basis.

## **Offer volunteering opportunities**

Some Volunteer Centres have arranged volunteering days that bring together Jobcentre Plus staff, current volunteers, unemployed people and their own staff. These have helped to increase the understanding of volunteering, enabled people to witness its benefits first hand, and cement relationships between individuals and organisations.

Similarly, in some areas ‘taster days’ have been arranged, for either Jobcentre Plus staff, unemployed people or both. These may involve enlisting the help of local organisations and groups to explain what opportunities they have on offer, or the impact their work has in the local area.

## **5. Case study | Volunteer Centre Camden**

**Volunteer Centre Camden began building its relationship with the local Jobcentre Plus in 2008 as part of its outreach programme. By 2010, volunteers provided by the Volunteer Centre were seeing and referring clients from within the Jobcentre Plus office itself.**

The Volunteer Centre had always received informal referrals from Jobcentre Plus. Over time they recognised that, to improve the service to unemployed people, Jobcentre Plus staff needed greater awareness of the role of the Volunteer Centre and the variety of volunteering roles available.

The first challenge was identifying the right person to speak to at the Jobcentre Plus office. They began by asking clients about who had suggested they visit the Volunteer Centre, and found that a couple of names kept coming up. These contacts included an adviser who was found to be extremely positive about volunteering and its role in helping people into work.

Staff from the Volunteer Centre spoke with the adviser about what they did and how referrals could best be managed. Following this initial conversation, the adviser arranged for them to visit the Jobcentre Plus and speak to her colleagues about the role of the Volunteer Centre and volunteering in general. These Jobcentre Plus staff worked specifically with people who were disabled, single parents or long term unemployed - a great match with the Volunteer Centre's target audience.

Immediately following the meeting, the Volunteer Centre saw an increase in appropriate referrals. However, after a few months numbers decreased and people started turning up at inappropriate times. It was clear that more work needed to be done.

The Volunteer Centre discovered that Jobcentre Plus staff turnover was fairly high, so a second meeting was arranged to meet the new team members. It was also an opportunity to catch up with familiar faces and gather some feedback on the experiences of clients who had been referred.

Subsequently, referrals rose and were being properly managed. The Volunteer Centre also began supplying Jobcentre Plus with promotional materials.

In 2010, Camden Council approached the Volunteer Centre to talk about developing the relationship further. The Volunteer Centre agreed to provide a weekly outreach session, placing volunteers directly in the Jobcentre Plus office to speak to potential volunteers.

Even with the involvement of the Council it took months to identify someone in Jobcentre Plus who could authorise the arrangement. However, persistent emails, 'phone calls and conversations with senior managers paid off, and the Volunteer Centre began delivering outreach in October 2010.

Each week two volunteers go to the Jobcentre Plus office to speak to clients who have been booked in for appointments by advisers. This reduces administration for the Volunteer Centre and ensures the time is well spent.

Although the Volunteer Centre is no longer being funded by Camden Council to deliver this outreach service, the clear benefits it brings to the local community means it has decided to continue providing it. As well as speaking to clients about the benefits of volunteering, it's an

opportunity for the Volunteer Centre to build relationships with Jobcentre Plus staff, which has led to increased understanding and the development of other initiatives, such as two one-day volunteering events for Jobcentre Plus staff.

Following their experience, here are Volunteer Centre Camden's top tips for working with Jobcentre Plus:

- When people are referred to you from a Jobcentre Plus, ask who they spoke to. This information enables you to call and speak to them directly, which will help you to address issues such as inappropriate referrals.
- Talk to whoever will listen. It doesn't have to be a manager to start with.
- Find out who the local [Partnership Manager](#) is – it's their job to build links with local organisations.
- Speak to your local contacts, such as from the local authority or local strategic partnership, who may know who you need to contact.
- Tell Jobcentre Plus how you – and volunteering – can help people into work. We know volunteering and how it can help, but it's not always obvious to others.
- Ask for – and use - feedback on your services. It's good to hear from the advisers what they think of the service; have they had clients it has worked for? If not, why not?

For more information [contact Hayley Watts](#), Director, Volunteer Centre Camden.

## **6. Case studies in brief**

### **Volunteer Centre Warrington: a collective approach**

In Warrington, the Volunteer Centre is a member of the Jobcentre Plus Third Sector Liaison Group. Other members of the Group include regional benefit delivery centres, the Department for Work and Pensions, Citizen's Advice Bureau, YMCA, Vulnerable Tenants Support Service and the Warrington Disability Partnership.

When the Volunteer Centre and other third sector members provided Jobcentre Plus with examples of volunteers being wrongly advised about the effect of volunteering on their benefits, the issue was quickly addressed. Jobcentre Plus staff were reminded about *Volunteering while getting benefits* and the importance of promoting volunteering as a route back into work. Jobcentre Plus also refers claimants to Volunteer Centre training that prepares people for volunteering.

For more information contact [Alison Cullen](#), Chief Officer, Volunteer Centre Warrington.

### **Black Country Volunteer Centres: the importance of a personal relationship**

The Black Country Volunteer Centres - Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton - work with a named member of Jobcentre Plus staff. A personal relationship means that information and feedback can quickly be circulated. For example, a recent flyer resulted in fewer inappropriate referrals to Volunteer Centres, with Jobcentre Plus staff calling to discuss possible opportunities before referring a claimant.

The creation of the Black Country Volunteer Centre Partnership has meant that the Jobcentre Plus liaison officer is able to meet with all four Volunteer Centres as needed and Jobcentre Plus staff have provided information sessions at Dudley Volunteer Organisers Network meetings. This has led to written information about volunteering being circulated to all Jobcentre Plus staff in the area, and presentations on benefits for staff and volunteers from various organisations.

For more information [contact Eileen Fielding](#), Development Officer, Dudley CVS Volunteer Centre.

### **Voluntary Action Maidstone & Malling Area Volunteer Bureau: a programme for change**

Voluntary Action Maidstone and Malling Area Volunteer Bureau worked with Jobcentre Plus to pilot a six month programme of partnership working, funded by Kent County Council, with the aim of raising awareness of volunteering amongst Jobcentre Plus staff and claimants.

A member of Jobcentre Plus staff was designated 'Volunteering Champion' and received an induction from both Volunteer Centres. This contact has been vital for communication, ensuring that staff on both sides of the relationship have known who to go to. Key activities included workshops for Jobcentre Plus managers and advisers, leaflets promoting volunteering and a one-to-one advice event for unemployed people.

All involved agreed that the pilot was beneficial in a number of ways, including an increase in the quantity and quality of information about volunteering that is available to unemployed people.

There is now a much better understanding amongst Jobcentre Plus staff of volunteering and the benefits for people who are unemployed.

For more information [contact Charlotte Osborn-Forde](#), Chief Executive Officer, Voluntary Action Maidstone.

### **Trafford Volunteer Centre: feel free to have some fun!**

Trafford Volunteer Centre has built up relationships with several Jobcentre Plus offices over the years, including at local cross sector meetings. These contacts increased significantly during the Department for Work and Pensions volunteering brokerage scheme, with no clients sent to the Volunteer Centre without an appointment being made first.

Most recently, Jobcentre Plus advisers and staff from the Volunteer Centre found out a little more about each other's work at a 'speed dating' event. After about five minutes of chatting with an adviser, Volunteer Centre staff moved along to the next table, so everyone met everyone else. As well as being a valuable opportunity to increase understanding, it demonstrated that there are more ways than one to meet your local partners.

For more information [contact Barbara Bleeker](#), Trafford CVS & Volunteer Centre.

### **Oswestry Volunteer Centre: as simple as a bit of information**

Oswestry Volunteer Centre is a member of a group that has been considering initiatives to tackle unemployment in Shropshire, including the role of volunteering in helping people develop new skills. To further this aim, the Centre has developed a folder containing information for both Jobcentre Plus advisers and unemployed people.

Its aim is to clarify rules about volunteering whilst receiving benefits, including claiming expenses, and promote the benefits of volunteering. So as well as clear, concise information, the folder will include case studies that demonstrate how volunteering has helped people into work. Once the project has been rolled out in Oswestry, it's hoped that it will be extended to the entire county.

For more information [contact Laurel Roberts](#), Oswestry Community Action.

## 7. Further information

### **Volunteering England**

To discuss any aspect of your work with Jobcentre Plus, contact Dan Sumners on 020 7520 8986 or via [dan.sumners@volunteering.org.uk](mailto:dan.sumners@volunteering.org.uk).

#### **Good Practice Bank: Expenses and state benefits**

This Core Theme of the Good Practice Bank contains resources to help you develop a volunteer expenses policy and support volunteers who have questions about state benefits. It includes our [free information sheet on Volunteering and state benefits](#).

#### **Members' Information Service**

Exclusive to Volunteering England members, call or email our expert team with your queries on good practice in volunteer management.

#### **Policy & Information Team**

The Policy & Information Team provides the Good Practice and Information Services, as well as working with government departments and voluntary sector organisations to take the issues facing volunteers and the organisations that support them. Feel free to contact us to discuss any issue related to volunteering policy and practice.

#### **Directgov**

Directgov is the official UK government website for citizens. The [Directgov pages on volunteering while on benefits](#) contain lots of information that will be of help to both volunteers and those that support them. This includes the leaflet [Volunteering while getting benefits](#), which lays out the rules very clearly, including that “you can volunteer as many hours as you like while you’re getting benefits as long as you keep to the rules for getting them”.