

Universal Credit and volunteering

Universal Credit in Newcastle

Universal Credit is a means tested benefit for working age people who are on low incomes, working, seeking work or unable to work. It is replacing the following benefits and tax credits:

- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance
- Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance
- Income Support
- Child Tax Credit
- Working Tax Credit
- Housing Benefit

Full Universal Credit was rolled out for new claims to the above benefits and tax credits for claimants living in the Newcastle City Jobcentre area on 25 May 2016.

The work-related requirements of Universal Credit

If you claim Universal Credit you will be placed into one of four groups based on your personal circumstances:

1. **No work-related requirements** – for claimants deemed unable to work or prepare for work or people who are earning enough money.
2. **Work-focused interview only** – for claimants expected to attend regular work focused interviews with Jobcentre Plus work coaches and to begin thinking about a move into work, more work or better paid work
3. **Work preparation** – for claimants not expected to look for work right now but expected to prepare for a move into work in the future.
4. **All work-related requirements** – for claimants considered to be ready for work and expected to move into work or increase their earnings. Claimants in this group will be expected to engage in work search activities for a minimum amount of time each week, which is at least the number of hours they are expected to be available for work. This is usually set at 35 hours per week, but this time can be reduced in certain circumstances, e.g. for those who have caring responsibilities or a physical or mental health impairment. It also includes activity in the above two groups, such as work-focused interviews and activity and placements in the Work Programme.

Your responsibilities, and the consequences of not meeting these requirements, will be set out in your **Claimant Commitment**, which is an agreement between you and Jobcentre Plus. You should review and update your Claimant Commitment on a regular basis with your work coach as it will include all the activities you are expected to do. This can include:

- attendance at the Jobcentre Plus office on time,
- taking part in interviews and training courses, and attending them on time,
- taking up work and work-related activity,
- the number of hours you will look for work – known as your **expected number of hours** – and the jobs you will apply for, and
- a personal work plan showing the work coach a record of your job seeking activity.



You are not restricted in the time of day you should be doing your work search activity, but you should ensure that you are available to attend a job interview or take up an offer of paid work within the requirements agreed with your work coach.

What Universal Credit means for volunteering

Volunteering is an important expression of citizenship and essential to democracy. It is the commitment of time and energy for the benefit of society and the community and can take many forms. It is undertaken freely and by choice, without concern for financial gain. Volunteering can be really useful if you are looking to develop skills and experience in order to increase your employability, particularly if you have been out of work for some time and are looking to build up both your confidence and your Curriculum Vitae (CV).

If you are in one of the first three groups shown overleaf you are fully entitled to volunteer. Volunteering will not affect your status and should not be used as evidence that you are capable of work. You are free to volunteer for as many hours as you like. **If you are in the 'all work-related requirements' category you are also fully entitled to volunteer, but in practice there may be some limitations.** You have to commit to work search related activities for 35 hours per week (or less in some cases). **Volunteering can be counted as up to 50% of this number of hours.** So, if you volunteer for 20 hours per week, 17.5 of those hours can be counted towards your work search commitments. This 17.5 hour figure isn't a maximum amount claimants in this group can volunteer for, but you do still have to find time for another 17.5 hours of activities to meet your work search commitments. You can also deduct the time it takes to travel to and from work. The volunteering activities that can contribute towards your work search activity will be considered on a case by case basis between you and your work coach, who must agree that your volunteering gives you the best chance of finding paid work.

If you have agreed to volunteer as part of your work search activities, it will be included in your Claimant Commitment. If you fail to attend you will be required to demonstrate that you have used that time constructively, or your Universal Credit may be stopped or reduced (sanctioned). **If you think you will not be able to complete your volunteering (e.g. if you are ill or have an emergency) and it is part of your Claimant Commitment, you should let Jobcentre Plus and your volunteer coordinator know. If you volunteer as part of your Claimant Commitment, you are allowed to have up to one week before taking up paid work and up to 48 hours to attend a job interview** so that you can rearrange your commitment. This is more than if you aren't volunteering as part of your agreed work search activities.

If volunteering isn't included in your Claimant Commitment because you are carrying out different work-related requirements, you will not be expected to volunteer, and you won't face a benefit sanction if you do not volunteer.

If it is accepted by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) that it is reasonable for you to give your services free of charge or at less than the going rate, then any expenses payments which you receive from volunteering (such as for travel or meals) are ignored for the purpose of calculating your Universal Credit payment.

- For more information on Universal Credit visit www.newcastle.gov.uk/universalcredit
- For more information on volunteering visit www.volunteercentrenewcastle.org.uk

This information sheet was produced by Newcastle City Council's Active Inclusion Newcastle Unit in partnership with the DWP and Volunteer Centre Newcastle. If you would like additional copies, please email activeinclusion@newcastle.gov.uk.

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