

SOCIAL SECURITY COMMITTEE

SOCIAL SECURITY (SCOTLAND) BILL

SUBMISSION FROM VOLUNTEER EDINBURGH & QUEEN MARGARET UNIVERSITY

1. Introduction – benefits of volunteering

1.1. Volunteering is the giving of your own time and energy for the good of the community, society at large or an individual other than yourself, who isn't a member of your family. For individuals, it is widely recognised as a means to improve health & wellbeing e.g. by building confidence, resilience and self-esteem, developing physical stamina and combatting isolation by creating positive links with the wider community.

1.2. Volunteer Edinburgh is the local centre for volunteering in the city. It provides a range of services and support to members of the public who wish to volunteer, and to organisations who involve volunteers in their work. We receive referrals from a network of over 260 health & social care agencies in the city who identify volunteering as a recovery route for their clients/patients.

1.3. Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh has recently undertaken participatory action research with a group of adults with lived experience of mental illness who are engaged in unpaid voluntary work in the community through personal choice as part of their journey of recovery. Direct quotations from project participants are included in this submission (identifying details have been removed to preserve anonymity).

2. Inequalities in volunteering

2.1. 35% of adults in Edinburgh regularly volunteer; this compares well with the Scottish average of 27% (Scottish Household Survey 2015). However while this picture of volunteering in Edinburgh is positive there continues to be a worrying socio economic divide to participation. Only 27% of adults volunteer from households with an income of up to £15,000, compared to 42% of those with a household income of over £30,000.

2.2. Volunteer Edinburgh works to reduce this inequality with specialist programmes for those who face barriers to volunteering. This includes people with long term and/or fluctuating health conditions. The majority of individuals who engage with Volunteer Edinburgh's health & wellbeing service are in receipt of social security benefits.

3. The right to volunteer

3.1. Volunteer Edinburgh & Queen Margaret University share the commitment to the principle of human rights proposed in this Bill. We support the human right of *participation* and urge Parliament to protect people's *freedom to choose* to volunteer.

3.2. QMU research highlighted a number of individual benefits of volunteering that are consistent with current literature. Specifically, participants valued choice and flexibility, in relation to volunteering and staying well.

- *“A key benefit [of volunteering] is that it allows you to develop as a person with your skills and assets and can contribute without putting yourself under pressure which might have a negative impact on your wellbeing..”*

3.3. However, the prevalent theme which emerged from the research was a significant concern about the current welfare benefits system and how this is at odds with the recovery culture and thus undermining participants' health and wellbeing.

4. Experiences of the benefits system

4.1. Participants found the current welfare benefit system to be confusing and always changing, feeling at times misinformed and subjected to perpetual assessment and form filling that caused them stress. Participants commented on the arbitrary nature of how people are categorised and reported a lack of trust and cynicism with the current system. In addition, participants recognised that any form filling tended to focus on deficits rather than assets – this contrasted with their volunteering experiences which acknowledged and utilised their talents and assets. These experiences undermined people’s experience of self-management, recovery and resilience.

- *“..Part of the problem about volunteering now is that people are perpetually being assessed by the benefits system..”*
- *“That process made me so ill and every time it came up for renewal I would get ill again. Having to fill in forms and gather all the evidence, and you have to focus on the negative..”*
- *“So many people now even with quite serious health conditions, you know, medical conditions, have been [categorised] fit for work.”*
- *“in terms of the assessments.. people have to disclose some really difficult [information]. A lot of questions that you’re asked about especially about how you can cope with your personal care, daily living.. One of the things is how a lot of people think on a day-to-day basis. You know, they struggle to cope but in order to be able to carry on; they just have to keep persuading themselves I can cope. I can cope. I can do this. But that’s not the way to get the benefit though. On a day-to-day basis they survive by minimising their distress... Many people who had that personal pride element who said “I can’t cope very well but I find ways of overcoming it somehow”.. they didn’t get it [the welfare benefit]..”*
- *“The system forces you to exaggerate your condition in order to get what it is you need..”*

5. Risks to individuals’ volunteering & wellbeing

5.1. Volunteer Edinburgh is aware that many people who have much to gain by volunteering are dissuaded through fear of jeopardising their social security benefits i.e. by appearing “fit to work”. We know of individuals whose ability to undertake a few hours of supported volunteering each week in no way reflects an ability to undertake employment in the open labour market. This is of particular relevance for people with fluctuating or hidden disabilities such as mental illness or chronic fatigue.

5.2. Participants in the research study commented that current systems are putting volunteering and the mental health and wellbeing of people at risk. Specifically they reported that the welfare benefit system disregarded what volunteering they were currently doing and what benefitted their mental health and wellbeing. They viewed the DWP’s railroad approach as intent on meeting targets to get people into work regardless of any detrimental effects on the person’s mental health and wellbeing.

5.3. Current welfare benefit systems were reported to remove choice, purpose and meaning in volunteering; to prevent flexibility in the number of hours volunteered as a person’s mental health allowed; and ultimately to disregard the fluctuating nature of mental health thus disempowering participants who have worked hard to build expertise in knowing what works to keep them well.

- *“People who are within [the] work related activity group.. are required to take on various activities towards getting ready to work in the future. But quite often, you know they get allocated fairly arbitrarily to one of the work programme providers and they’ll be required to do training and learning activities and maybe volunteering, which is maybe sort of allocated to them to do. So somebody who may already be dealing with an organisation and be doing volunteering.. They might be told “no you can’t do that anymore - we’re expecting you to go and work in this charity shop”. So maybe somebody who has been trained as an advocate and been doing advocacy for a while and that was their passion, is now suddenly being told we want you to go and work in a charity shop as part of your training. ..It’s this idea that if somebody you know gets a bit of experience in retail and whatever - they are more likely to get a job working in a shop or a supermarket... but it means that somebody who’s, you know, trained up to do something that they’re passionate about ...are able to feel that they are contributing something useful, but also maybe gives them some self-esteem because they are using their knowledge and skills to help other people.. And then suddenly being told, you know, you just need to go and work in the shop and sort out old clothes in the back room, or something that they have no passion for..”*
- *“..it also means that some people are worried about taking on voluntary work.. because they worry about it being seen as an indication that they are fit for work and they will lose their allowance. You know, people are worrying about maybe doing studying or anything because they think “If I’m seen to be doing anything”, you know whether its going to college to learn some stuff or doing voluntary work one or two days a week, it’s going to mean that people are going to think you know “I’ll be assessed as being capable for work and lose that..” and I think that’s really affecting people’s ability to volunteer or their aspirations to volunteer because there are so many people with... long term mental health issues, who are at the moment just really, really worried about losing their benefits and being forced ..to find work because they.. [know] that it is actually going to lead to a deterioration in their mental health because the pressure will be too much.. It is really having a negative impact..”*
- *“I think it is having a really negative impact on various aspects of volunteering.. I think there is misinformation and people aren’t clear and so maybe having clear guidelines about what people can do...”*

5.4. Participants reported anxiety that their own mental health would suffer when the pressure to find work becomes too much and this can ultimately lead to a crisis situation with loss of benefits and potential self-harm. Substantial gains from volunteering could be undermined by that anxiety. The participants stated that it was short-sighted of the government as there was a significant cost to servicing mental health crisis and managing deterioration in people’s mental health.

- *“I went for a job interview and even though I wanted it, I was terrified of getting it.. because for me I get very stressed, very preoccupied with it... and things become.. bigger than they are.. Someone in [my] situation can offer the community good voluntary work but stresses and becomes ill if they have to go into a paid environment..”*
- *“I’ve just been invited to apply for a post and it was very flattering to be invited and you’ll laugh because its seven hours a week for twelve weeks.. and I realised I couldn’t cope with that pressure..”*
- *“At the Crisis Centre we’ve often had people who have ended up taking overdoses*

because they've lost their benefit."

- *"It's so blind of the government, you know, its counterproductive. So it's probably going to cost them more money to look after people who are in crisis and need to go into hospital or need a lot of care, than it is to, you know."*

6. Guidance on Volunteering & Welfare Benefits

6.1. Volunteer Edinburgh welcomes the joint guidance *Volunteering and DWP Welfare Benefits* (DWP & Voluntary Action Scotland) issued May 2017. The clear statements on claimants unable to work through illness/disability (p2) and freedom of choice to volunteer (p3) are particularly welcomed.

6.2. However we are aware that knowledge on volunteering is variable among DWP staff and claimants can therefore receive inaccurate or contradictory guidance or instruction.

7. Further involvement

7.1. Volunteer Edinburgh and QMU's project research group support more collaborative working with those involved in decision-making about welfare reform and its impact on volunteering undertaken by people in receipt of benefits. We are keen to contribute ideas and share experiences within a collaborative forum to raise awareness of the issues faced and to contribute to effective and positive changes for the future.

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