

Position statement from Volunteer Centres and Voluntary Sector Local Support and Development Organisations across Greater Manchester

Volunteers, Volunteering and Employment Support

A key function of Volunteer Centres is to match potential volunteers to volunteering opportunities in organisations in different sectors. We offer anyone wishing to volunteer support and advice in matching their motivations and aspirations to appropriate volunteering opportunities. This may include progression towards employment or in developing career options, but there are also many other motivations such as learning, keeping active or simply helping others.

Whatever the motivation, volunteering is a positive and informed choice. We use the following definition in our work:

Any activity that involves spending time, unpaid, doing something that aims to benefit the environment, individuals or groups other than, or in addition to, close relatives. It should be seen as distinct from mandated/required or contractual activity - which could include internships, work placements, student placements and people on other employment related schemes

(GM Vision for Volunteering 2013)

This definition is underpinned by a number of key principles:

- **Choice** – volunteering must be a choice freely made by each individual
- **Diversity** – volunteering should be open to all
- **Mutual Benefit** – both the volunteer and the organisation that the volunteer works with should benefit from the relationship
- **Recognition** – the contribution of the volunteer should be recognised

We recognise the value of programmes which provide good quality support in preparing for and finding employment. Activities in these schemes are sometimes confused with volunteering and we therefore set out below our position on these:

Activity which we do NOT consider to be “volunteering”:

- **Internships** A time limited placement that allows a person to gain practical experience by undertaking an activity that allows a person to gain on-the-job experience. If the intern is under contract (written or implied) and unpaid, but working for a charity, voluntary organisation, associated fund-raising body or statutory body, they are likely to be, in the eyes of the law, a ‘voluntary worker’. There is a ‘voluntary worker’ exemption from the National Minimum Wage regulations but this is to enable voluntary organisations to continue working with volunteers (i.e. those who wish to donate their time/experience for no reward) and where their role would have normally been seen as contractual and, therefore, subject to Minimum Wage.

We believe that internships are an important way for increasing access to the labour market. However, in practice, not everyone has the resources to undertake a full week’s work for no income and therefore unpaid internship opportunities are not open to all. We believe, as a matter of best practice, that interns should be paid *at least* the Living Wage.¹

- **Work experience** A planned period of work-based learning or experience with learning outcomes usually undertaken as part of a programme of university, college or school study, as a short placement, work taster, temporary work, or a period of supported employment as part of vocational training. The placement is usually sourced externally with an employer in any sector (private, statutory, voluntary). Although the person may sometimes source their own

¹ It is worth noting there are increasing examples of legal challenges to unpaid internships, for example <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/feb/17/unpaid-intern-alexander-mcqueen-court>

placement, they will normally be accountable to the original agency for carrying out the placement to certain standards over an agreed period of time. Work experience is typically not paid, not contracted and short-term. This is often where people, especially young people, are offered the opportunity of a taster of a particular job and given the chance to try various tasks or shadow a member of staff. This may be part of an educational course or 'into work' programme.

We believe that work experience is a valuable means of learning. It is distinct from internship in that it will usually take place in the context of wider study and generally be short term.

- **Mandatory Work Activity / Community Work Placements under the Help to Work Programme** These initiatives are not volunteering: the principle of freedom of choice to participate in them and will be faced with benefits sanctions if they do not engage in the compulsory placements. We note that the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) does not refer to these as "volunteering", but others are starting to and this is muddying the waters.

Note that voluntary and community organisations may choose to host placements but this is not the same as engaging volunteers. (We encourage organisations to consider carefully whether or not to be involved in this scheme as providers of placements. Trustees of voluntary and community sector groups need to consider whether they are willing to instruct their staff and volunteers to report someone to Job Centre Plus for not turning up or being late knowing that their benefits will then be stopped?)

We, the Volunteer Centres across Greater Manchester, will not be engaging with the Mandatory Work Activity process. We believe firmly that volunteering must always be about choice.

Volunteer Centres are **not** normally funded or contracted to provide support in finding unpaid roles for students/trainees to undertake as a component of their course of education or training nor unpaid roles for people as part of statutory or mandated work programmes. We are also mindful of the risks to our own sustainability of increasing requests to identify volunteering opportunities from providers who are contracted to do this as an integral part of a commissioned service (e.g. Work Programme).²

Following from the above, staff of Volunteer Centres will refuse third-party requests to confirm, or otherwise, attendance at the Volunteer Centre, neither will we sign documentation to this effect. We encourage volunteers to maintain their own record of hours spent volunteering and promote recognition of achievements by volunteer involving organisations. However, we must refuse third-party requests to verify or confirm hours worked or activities undertaken, neither will we sign documentation to this effect.

² In some cases, individual Centres may be able to develop services such as these but they would be on a charged-for, commercial basis. If, for example, Job Centre Plus or a Work Programme provider wishes to establish a referral partnership with the local Volunteer Centre, they will need to enter into a contractual arrangement covering charges for these services, particularly in relation to those clients who need additional support.

Supported by Volunteer Centres and Voluntary Sector Infrastructure Agencies across Greater Manchester



Manchester

Macc (incorporating Volunteer Centre Manchester)



Salford

Salford CVS (incorporating Volunteer Centre Salford)



Trafford

Voluntary & Community Action Trafford and Volunteer Centre Borough of Trafford



Bolton

Bolton CVS (incorporating Volunteer Centre Bolton)



Tameside

Community and Voluntary Action Tameside (incorporative Volunteer Centre Tameside)



Oldham

Voluntary Action Oldham (incorporating Volunteer Centre Oldham)



Wigan

Wigan and Leigh Council for Voluntary Service