

DWP Central Freedom of Information Team

e-mail: freedom-of-information-rexxxxx@xxx.xxx.xxx.xx

Our Ref: VTR 675

13 March 2012

Dear Mr Taylor,

Thank you for your Freedom of Information request received on 15 February 2012. You asked:

It has been revealed that 24,010 jobseekers were referred to work for four weeks, for 30 hours a week, unpaid labour under the government's mandatory work activity (MWA) programme between May 2011 until November 2011.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2012/feb/15/thousands-unemployed-work-without-pay?newsfeed=true>

Under the scheme jobcentre managers have the power to make unemployed people undertake the unpaid work for high-street chains including Tesco, Sainsbury's, Argos, Asda, Maplin, TK Maxx, Matalan, Primark, Holland & Barrett, Boots, McDonald's, Burger King, Poundland and the Arcadia group which includes Miss Selfridge, Topshop, Burton, Dorothy Perkins. BHS, Evans, Topman, Wallis and Outfit.

Could you please inform me what checks are currently in place to ensure that jobcentre managers, and their family members, are not share-holders in any of the private companies benefiting from this free labour scheme. As the companies would obviously be put in a position of boosting their profits, due to the exploitation of these claimants, what requirements exist for jobcentre managers and other jobcentre/DWP employees to declare this conflict of interest.

As stated in your Freedom of Information request, statistics released on 15 February 2012 showed that 24,010 Jobseeker's Allowance claimants were referred to the Mandatory Work Activity scheme between May and November 2011.

However, the description in your Freedom of Information request does not correspond to the Mandatory Work Activity scheme, and sections appear to refer to the DWP's Work Experience scheme, for which statistics were released on the same day.

I have therefore provided information in regard to both schemes.

In relation to both schemes:

I can inform you that the Department has a Standards of Behaviour policy, which states that employees are responsible for ensuring that there is no conflict of interest between their interests outside of work and their role within the Department. The onus is on the employee to declare if there is a conflict.

In relation to Mandatory Work Activity:

Mandatory Work Activity gives extra support to a small number of Jobseeker's Allowance claimants who would benefit from a short period of activity. It will help them re-engage with the system, refocus their job search and gain valuable work-related disciplines, such as attending on time and regularly, carrying out specific tasks and working under supervision. This approach is part of the Department's plans to ensure claimants receive the personalised, responsive support that they need to find employment.

Mandatory Work Activity placements last for four weeks and for up to 30 hours a week, allowing claimants time to look for work while still providing them with the labour market disciplines associated with work. Jobcentre Plus advisers have the flexibility to use Mandatory Work Activity, where they feel it is appropriate, as part of a wider range of support options. Claimants who are participating in the Work Programme or other contracted provision are not be referred to Mandatory Work Activity.

Mandatory Work Activity is delivered by contracted providers who source the placements. So although Jobcentre Plus advisers make referrals to the scheme, they are not involved in sourcing or matching claimants to placements.

You should also note that the Department for Work and Pensions specifies that all placements under the Mandatory Work Activity scheme must be of benefit to the local community. Further information on this requirement can be found in Annex 2 to the Mandatory Work Activity Provider Guidance which can be viewed on the DWP website at <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/pg-part-p.pdf> Although the Department does not rule out the possibility that placements in the private sector could meet this requirement, it is likely that the majority of Mandatory Work Activity placements will be outside the private sector. The Department also sets out that placements must be in addition to any existing or expected vacancies.

In relation to Work Experience:

Work Experience is one of a series of Get Britain Working measures and is part of the Jobcentre Plus flexible menu of support to help claimants seek and obtain employment prior to their eligibility for referral to the Work Programme.

It is important to remember that many young people unemployed today have little or no experience in the work place. We know that an extended period of unemployment, if experienced at an early age, can affect future employment prospects and lead to disadvantages, such as ill health and poverty. It is vital that Government, business and voluntary community sector organisations work together to support young people, especially those struggling to make the transition from education to employment.

Work Experience placements last from between two weeks and eight weeks, and provide young people with learning and insight into every day working life by exposing them to a variety of work focussed tasks and experiences. Such experience enables the young person to develop interpersonal skills; improve their self confidence, and increase their employability and marketability to potential future employers, and crucially helps them get that vital first step on the ladder.

It is important to note that Work Experience is not work nor workfare; it is a supportive employment programme designed to help the young person who has little or no work experience develop work-related disciplines. Employers are not permitted to use Work Experience simply as a means of filling a vacancy and Jobcentre Plus has in place a robust process for tackling abuse of the programme, where it is identified. All host businesses must enter a service level agreement with Jobcentre Plus. If there is any suspicion that a host is not operating in the spirit of the placement then this will be fully investigated. If doubts remain about the host employer's integrity then the service level agreement will be withdrawn and the host notified accordingly.

If you have any queries about this letter please contact me quoting the reference number above.

Yours sincerely,

DWP Central Fol Team

Your right to complain under the Freedom of Information Act

If you are not happy with this response you may request an internal review by e-mailing freedom-of-information-request@dwpgsi.gov.uk or by writing to DWP, Central Fol Team, 5th Floor The Adelphi, 1-11, John Adam Street, London WC2N 6HT. Any review request should be submitted within two months of the date of this letter.

If you are not content with the outcome of the internal review you may apply directly to the Information Commissioner's Office for a decision. Generally the Commissioner cannot make a decision unless you have exhausted our own complaints procedure. The Information Commissioner can be contacted at: The Information Commissioner's Office, Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow Cheshire SK9 5AF www.ico.gov.uk