

Flagship workfare scheme launch is delayed again following widespread voluntary sector opposition

Today, 2 June, is the deadline by which Community Work Placements – the flagship policy announcement at last year’s Conservative Party conference – were required by contract to be up and running [2]. But Keep Volunteering Voluntary, which represents the hundreds of voluntary sector organisations who have pledged not to take part in the scheme, points out that its campaign is paying off as Community Work Placements appear unable to get off the ground.

Community Work Placements are six month forced unpaid work placements for unemployed people which require local council and charity participation. However 350 voluntary sector organisations have signed the Keep Volunteering Voluntary agreement not to take part since the campaign launched a month ago. The list includes household names Shelter, Oxfam, Crisis, Scope and many others. These organisations point to the impact of benefit sanctions on food poverty and homelessness and believe mandatory work undermines the value of freely given volunteering. [3] Over 15 councils have also pledged not to take part, many through signing Unite the Union’s new pledge. [4]

The widespread opposition to the scheme appears to be taking its toll, as an initial launch date of 28 April was replaced by “late May”, and there are indications this date has again been postponed. [5] Voluntary sector opposition is likely to be the key factor in delaying a scheme which even during its pilot failed to find placements for 37% of participants. [6] Others have speculated that the timetable has also been delayed because the government needed to wait until G4S was no longer barred from bidding before it could be awarded the lion’s share of Community Work Placement contracts. [7]

Andy Benson of National Coalition for Independent Action commented:

“More evidence that this punitive, botched and poor thought out scheme is heading for the rubbish bin of history. Hundreds of voluntary groups have now said they will have nothing to do with it and the number is rising by the day. The government should immediately call a halt to this programme and save wasting £237M of the tax payer’s money”.

Charity participation in workfare schemes will be further jeopardised if the DWP lose their appeal at the Upper Tier information tribunal on 12 June and are forced to reveal the list of organisations hosting placements. [8]

ENDS

Notes to editors:

[1] Keep Volunteering Voluntary is a joint campaign initiative by voluntary sector organisations, which launched on 28 April to coincide with the launch of punitive Community Work Placements. The campaign invites voluntary sector organisations to commit not to participate in workfare schemes.

The current list of nearly 350 signatories can be found here:keepvolunteeringvoluntary.net

[2] The Community Work Placement (CWP) scheme, part of a set of measures branded “Help to Work”, was **announced by Chancellor of the Exchequer** George Osborne at Conservative Party conference in 2013. Help to Work was costed at **£300 million and aimed**

at 200,000 Jobseekers Allowance claimants, and was scheduled to begin on 28 April 2014(See 1.22 and 1.23 here). The government's own description of the scheme can be found here.

[3] Benefit stoppages (sanctions), which can now leave people without a subsistence income for up to three years, are seen by experts as one of the key reasons for the soaring rise in use of foodbanks.

[4] There are over 11 signatories to Unite's pledge for councils not to take part, plus Liverpool, Newcastle & Scarborough who have policy against workfare:<http://www.unitetheunion.org/campaigning/workfare>.

[5] Along with help to Work's other punitive measures, CWP was scheduled to start on 28 April, but contractors could negotiate a later starting date in "very exceptional circumstances" up to 2nd June. See 1.22 and 1.23 here. But this DWP newsletter reveals that the start date was delayed until the end of May: "The first claimants will be referred to Community Work Placements from the end of May 2014". There are indications that this date has now been further delayed.

[6] The Community Action Programme pilot – a similar workfare scheme to Community Work Placements – was found to have no effect on helping people find employment. 71% of people sanctioned on the scheme reported going without food; half went into debt. The pilot found that placements could only be found for 63% of participants.

[7] See *Private Eye* on G4S's bid for CWP contracts here: http://www.private-eye.co.uk/sections.php?section_link=news&issue=1366.

[8] The Government is refusing to reveal the list of organisations using workfare. As they put it to the Information Commissioner: "Put simply, disclosure [of names] would have been likely to have led to the collapse of the MWA [Mandatory Work Activity] scheme". The date for the Upper Tribunal hearing on getting the DWP to reveal which organisations use workfare is 12 June. The FoI correspondence for it can be found here.