To: [name of charity or trustees of charity]

A list of organisations that were involved in using workfare in 2011-12 was recently released by the Department for Work and Pensions after it lost a lengthy legal struggle, as has been widely reported.[1] It is clear from this list that your organisation has been – and perhaps still is – involved in using some form of workfare. In view of this fact, please could you take the time to respond to the questions below.

* As a charity that uses volunteers, how do you see the role of the forced ‘volunteers’ on workfare placements, where the threat of losing one's benefits is used to make people volunteer? How does this change the nature of what it is to be a volunteer at your organisation?
* What are the rights and responsibilities of these forced volunteers compared to genuine volunteers? Does this have any implications for your insurance cover?
* There are many reasons a person might refuse workfare or be unable to do it. These range from ethical objections to mental health issues, care requirements, and physical capabilities. Those who don’t or are unable to complete a workfare placement are sanctioned – their benefit payments are completely stopped for a period of at least four weeks. Considering the terrible consequences of benefit sanctions (loss of a person’s only income for food, bills, clothing) how do you feel this fits with your purpose of positive change in society?
* Do you think that a person who does not wish to volunteer at your organisation should be sanctioned?

Although some people on workfare find the experience useful, the vast majority are there under duress. Furthermore, in government-commissioned evaluations, workfare has repeatedly been shown to be ineffective in increasing the number of people in work.[2] Research commissioned by the DWP themselves in 2008 concluded that ‘there is little evidence that workfare increases the likelihood of finding work’ (p. 1).[3]

If your organisation that hosts unemployed people on workfare placements, then you are directly involved in the benefit sanctions regime. Reporting a workfare ‘volunteer’ for lateness (something workfare placement hosts are required to do) frequently results in them being sanctioned. People with dependents – mostly children – can also be sanctioned for not attending workfare. Delays and changes in benefits (including sanctions) accounted for 42% of all referrals to foodbanks in 2015-16.[4]

We know voluntary sector organisations have been misled by the organisations contracted by DWP to arrange workfare placements. Companies like Seetec and Pinnacle People and charities like Groundwork and the Salvation Army have told charities that they can provide them volunteers, without mentioning the coercive aspects of workfare. Over 600 voluntary sector organisations have already committed not to be involved with government workfare schemes by signing up to the Keep Volunteering Voluntary agreement not to participate in government workfare schemes.[5]

* If you no longer use workfare, or are going to pull out, then would you join these other organisations and commit to this agreement too?

Regarding the effects of benefit sanctions you may find these reports useful.

<http://www.socialpublishingproject.com/uploads/9/6/1/1/9611868/punishing_poverty_-_sanctions_and_their_impacts.pdf>

<http://www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/publications/Sanctions%20Report%202015_FINAL.pdf>

<http://www.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/site-attachments/A%20High%20Cost%20to%20Pay%20Sept%2013.pdf>

As an organisation with charitable status, you have certain responsibilities regarding transparency and public communication of your policies. Therefore I look forward to receiving a full response to these enquiries.

Yours faithfully,

[your name]

Notes.

[1] Jon Stone and Jess Staufenberg, ‘Revealed: The High Street firms that used benefit claimants for free labour’, *The Independent*, 30 July 2016 [<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/benefits-department-for-work-and-pensions-mandatory-work-activity-government-major-companies-free-a7163646.html>].

Dan Bloom, ‘DWP forced to reveal vast list of firms using benefit claimants for unpaid work after 4-year legal fight’, *The Mirror*, 29 July 2016 [<http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/dwp-forced-reveal-vast-list-8522078>].

Andy Ricketts, ‘Scores of charities provided 'workfare' placements, documents show’, *Third Sector*, 1 August 2016 [<http://www.thirdsector.co.uk/scores-charities-provided-workfare-placements-documents-show/management/article/1404147?bulletin=third-sector-daily&utm_medium=EMAIL&utm_campaign=eNews%20Bulletin&utm_source=20160801&utm_content=www_thirdsector_co_uk_article_>]

Graham Martin, ‘Scots charities named on workfare list’, *Third Force News*, 1 August 2016 [<http://thirdforcenews.org.uk/tfn-news/scots-charities-named-on-workfare-list?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social&utm_content=Oktopost-twitter-profile&utm_campaign=Oktopost-2016-08+General+Campaign>]

[2] Jonathan Portes, ‘DWP analysis shows mandatory work activity is largely ineffective. Government is therefore extending it.’, *National Institute of Economic and Social Research*, 12 June 2012 [<http://www.niesr.ac.uk/blog/dwp-analysis-shows-mandatory-work-activity-largely-ineffective-government-therefore-extending#.V6pgjldD1SV'>].

[3] Richard Crisp and Del Roy Fletcher, *A comparative review of workfare programmes in the United States, Canada and Australia*, Department for Work and Pensions Research Report No 533 (2008), p.1 [[webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130128102031/http://statistics.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rports2007-2008/rrep533.pdf](http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130128102031/http://statistics.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rports2007-2008/rrep533.pdf)].

[4] The Trussell Trust, *Foodbank use remains at record high*, 15 April 2016 [<https://www.trusselltrust.org/2016/04/15/foodbank-use-remains-record-high/>].

[5] The Keep Volunteering Voluntary Agreement [<http://www.keepvolunteeringvoluntary.net/content/keep-volunteering-voluntary-agreement>].