Supporting disabled volunteers

What’s this guide about?

It’s to help you recruit and retain volunteers who have disabilities and health conditions.

Disability and health problems can make any of us feel less than confident. This guide provides some pointers but you can get in touch with head office any time if you have further questions.

The benefits of volunteering include a sense of purpose and achievement, social interaction and relevant experience for paid work. Volunteering itself, as well as a love of science, interests many people.

In Britain, around 17% of working-age people and 45% of those over retirement age meet the definition of being “disabled” for the purposes of the Equality Act 2010. Many of these people won’t talk about themselves as being “disabled” and many, perhaps most, will not need any extra or different arrangements or support to volunteer, but some will.

Defining disability

The relevant law on disability is the Equality Act 2010. It applies in England, Scotland and Wales. In Northern Ireland, the Disability Discrimination Act makes similar provisions.

Both Acts define a disabled person as anyone “with a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect upon their ability to carry out normal day to day activities”.

This is broad and covers as many as one in five people in the population. It can be helpful to think about disability in this way, particularly as many types of “impairment” are not immediately visible or apparent:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of impairment</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical impairment</td>
<td>Difficulty in moving parts of the body;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>experiences of pain or fatigue</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sensory impairments</td>
<td>Limitations of hearing and/or sight</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communication difficulties</td>
<td>Speech impairments; autism-related conditions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning difficulties and disabilities</td>
<td>Dyslexia; Down’s syndrome</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mental health conditions</td>
<td>Depression, anxiety, schizophrenia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Long-term health conditions</td>
<td>Epilepsy, diabetes, heart or lung conditions</td>
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A key aspect of the Equality Act is the idea of “reasonable adjustments” — anticipating and tackling barriers to participation that may affect people with different types of impairment and making specific adjustments for individuals where it is reasonable to do so.

**Good practice**

**An inclusive environment**

Make sure that your volunteers are aware of their responsibility to provide an open and welcoming environment. These days, most people understand the need to consider physical access – say to buildings and restrooms – and sensory access – making sure that text is legible, and rooms have good acoustics, for example.

However, there are areas where many people feel less confident – imagine someone approaches you to volunteer and they have a learning disability, mental health condition or autism-spectrum condition. If you are approached by a volunteer with these disabilities, don't panic! There are easy things you can do to encourage an inclusive environment.

**Attracting and recruiting disabled volunteers**

There are many ways you can engage with disabled volunteers. The approach is likely to vary from group to group. This could include:

- a casual approach, where all volunteers are welcomed and included in the organisation where possible
- actively recruiting disabled volunteers to perform specific tasks
- a structured programme incorporating disabled volunteers for a period

When recruiting disabled volunteers, barriers may arise at various stages. With a little thought many of these can be tackled.

Being proactive is key to effective recruitment of volunteers. This will mean using different approaches to reach out to new individuals. You could consider:

- asking existing staff / volunteers to spread the word
- telling local organisations of and for disabled people about volunteer opportunities
- using roadshows or stands at exhibitions
- seeking publicity via local radio, magazines and free newspapers
- posting fliers in a local volunteer centre, GP surgeries, libraries, Jobcentres, hospitals.

**Defining and adapting roles**
You'll most certainly already know that an ingredient of successful volunteer management is ensuring that people know their role and function, showing a volunteer that they are a valuable team member who can contribute fully to group activities.

The most unsatisfactory experiences for disabled volunteers happen when they don’t have specific tasks and responsibilities or are asked to do things that they can’t do or struggle with, without any discussion – or they are made to feel they are there as an act of charity or to fill a quota.

You might not usually give each volunteer in your organisation a specific role. Some volunteers have roles such as looking after your social media, but often you might find that other volunteers don’t have specific roles and will complete tasks as and when needed. A key change to consider with disabled volunteers is to have specific tasks.

The induction process will be particularly important. For volunteers with disabilities, you can help by:

- outlining exactly what tasks you’d like the volunteer to perform within the organisation or for an activity
- ensuring the volunteer is clear about what is expected of them, and what they can expect from their fellow volunteers
- ensuring they are introduced to everyone and know who’s who.

It might be necessary to adapt roles to ensure they are suited to each individual volunteer. Sometimes, to capitalise on the knowledge, skills and experience of a volunteer, it may be necessary to carve out aspects of a role at which they could excel – while reallocating more challenging tasks to others.

Digital technology now enables a far wider range of people to engage with volunteering, where personal mobility issues, lack of transport or even lack of time have traditionally been a barrier to participation. A volunteer may not be able to do physical tasks such as moving furniture or leafleting but they could do online research, manage a Twitter feed, create graphic designs or do database work from home. Make sure you aren’t missing out on the expertise and time of potential volunteers because you are concerned about meeting their needs.

Don’t be afraid to ask people about how they would like to receive information – you can make emails and documents accessible and most people can advise about their own needs.

**Identifying and removing barriers**

A simple statement on a website can make it clear that an organisation has considered disabled volunteers (and other participants).
“We welcome anyone with the interest, time and motivation to volunteer. Wherever we reasonably can, we will accommodate the particular needs of volunteers with disabilities.”

Sometimes, a balance must be struck in terms of resources and facilities available to accommodate needs. For example, you may have a free venue for committee meetings or public events, but this may not be fully accessible. However, most of the time, flexibility and understanding are all that’s needed.

There are many activities that can build more positive attitudes towards disabled people. For example, using positive images and case studies. Being proactive in this area sends out positive messages and helps others understand what the organisation expects and wishes to achieve.

**Volunteer supervision and support**

Effective volunteer management can be beneficial to the success of your group, particularly when your group has volunteers with disabilities. You should make sure that everyone knows who in the organisation is supervising them and dealing with their day-to-day queries, as well as understanding the role head office plays in managing volunteers.

In your organisation, you might do this collectively, one of your committee members might do this, or you might even have a specific volunteer coordinator.

If this is your role in your organisation, think about a volunteer’s specific disability-related requirements.

**Talking about disability and health with volunteers**

We can all feel uncomfortable speaking with people about their personal lives and people with more obvious disabilities often get asked lots of intrusive questions. However, relevant and polite questions about what people might need to help them take part are useful.

If you are aware that a volunteer has a disability or health condition, let them know you are there for a conversation if needed. Discuss with them any adaptations you could make to ensure their role is enjoyable. Focus on their needs rather than any diagnosis they may have. For example, you could say: “Am I speaking clearly enough?” to open discussion with someone who you can see has a hearing aid and follow their lead if they begin to talk about what works for them.

You should never reveal or discuss information about a person’s health or disability without their consent.

For any volunteer, it can be useful to have a feedback process about their contribution. A regular ‘checking in’ provides opportunities to retain volunteers and to get the best out of
them. It also provides a useful framework for tackling any challenges that arise in an informal and more relaxed way.

Organisations will have their own methods to communicate to the volunteer about the role but here are a few things to consider:

- Exactly what role the volunteer might take on behalf of the organisation (though this may evolve and should be reviewed from time to time).
- What the volunteer is hoping to get out of giving their time and skills.
- What the key policies and expectations are (including the principles of inclusion underpinning this document).
- How the volunteer wants feedback given or any issues raised with them (e.g. some might prefer face to face, others might prefer a summary in an email).
- How the volunteer can raise any concerns that they have, and with whom.
- A brief note of these points, perhaps summarised in an email after induction and kept on file by the supervising volunteer, can form a useful agenda for any reviews.

Try to discuss any issues around time-keeping, reliability or behaviour as soon as they come up and in a constructive way. Disabled volunteers might occasionally face challenges that affect their volunteering, like anyone else. However, sometimes this can be due to a lack of adjustments being made, or adjustments made at the start of the volunteer activity but not maintained. It can also be because of poor communication by others. Occasionally people with particular disabilities may need direct (though sensitive) communication to understand what is being asked of them and what they might need to do differently – for example, people with learning disabilities or autism-related conditions.

Any arrangements for providing feedback need to be barrier free and adjustments might be needed, for example, to the language and approach used for a person with a learning disability.

Health and safety

You shouldn’t assume that a volunteer with a disability or health condition poses more risks than anyone else. Focus on risk assessing the environments in which activities are delivered, not the individual.

Try to plan for disabled volunteers and audience members with a range of impairments or long-term health conditions to be involved in all group activities, and then consider some general approaches to managing any identified risks.

For example, an organisation may be concerned about how a disabled person can be made aware of fire evacuation alarms, and how they can leave the building safely. You should remember that under the Fire Regulation Orders, it is their responsibility to plan for the safe evacuation of all users of their buildings, including disabled people. For example, there are flashing alarms or vibrating pagers for people with hearing and visual impairments.
Our top tips and resources provide some things to remember that can be shared with others within your organisation.
Resources

Action on Hearing Loss

National Autistic Society

Watch the NAS's film, starring Saskia, which shows her becoming increasingly anxious due to unexpected changes during her train journey.

Read about Kane, an autistic 19 year old, and his experiences of meltdowns, and how people can help.

Read NAT stories from autistic people who talk about how they deal with social anxiety.

Read stories from autistic people who talk about processing time.

Read stories from autistic people who talk about their experiences of sensory overload.

Do-it.org

Disability Rights UK

Epilepsy Action

Mencap

Mind

National Association for Voluntary and Community Action

Royal National Institute of Blind People

Scope

VolResource

Volunteering England

Volunteer Centres Northern Ireland

Volunteer Scotland

Volunteering Wales