**Top Tips for engaging disabled volunteers**

**This is a ‘How-to’ guide for anyone who wants to recruit disabled people as volunteers. It aims to make it as easy as possible for disabled people to volunteer with your organisation.**

**Why is it important to engage disabled people to volunteer?**

All organisations should be looking to have a diverse workforce as different people bring different, unique perspectives and new ways to problem solve. Disabled people have often overcome barriers and challenges and have valuable skills and experiences as a result. Some people may also feel more resilient because they have overcome these challenges. The skills and lived experience they bring enriches staff and volunteering teams.

**Inclusion** is all about making services available to everyone. Rather than having a ‘special’ arrangement for disabled people with a separate set of instructions or way of accessing something, we always suggest having one clear way of doing things, but making it available and open to everyone.

Power isn’t held equally in society. Disabled people experience barriers to healthcare, education and jobs. This means they are less likely to be in full time employment or study and less likely to be in paid work as a result. Disabled people are also more likely to be living in poverty than non-disabled people. (Office for National Statistics, 2011)

**“Even though many volunteers express interest, they may still need motivation and encouragement as many will not have had the opportunity to volunteer before an due to the lack of opportunities” (Provider)**

**Volunteering can be a lifeline, reducing isolation, building confidence and acting as a stepping stone to paid work and other opportunities.**

**“Since I started volunteering, I’ve learnt new arts skills, made new friends. I’m more independent and actually happier” (Volunteer)**

**What do we mean by inclusive volunteering?**

This means volunteering opportunities are accessible to all, regardless of ability or type of impairment. It’s not about treating everyone the same, it’s about offering support to the person as an individual in a way that suits them. The way to do this is to understand the barriers people might be experiencing and provide support to remove them. This allows them to participate.

**“Engaging disabled people is very much dependent on the individual- what their support needs are and their interests” (Provider)**

**Understanding motivations**

Take time get to know the volunteer, their skills and understand the reasons why they are volunteering and what they hope to achieve. Do they want to gain new skills to get back to work or meet new people and feel less isolated? This can help you to give tasks that are meaningful and will inspire the volunteer.

**“Matching people to tasks that interest them and allow them to work well is really important” (Volunteer)**

**“Always focus on what a volunteer can do rather than what they can’t. Be flexible about what you can offer them.” (Provider)**

**What stops people volunteering?**

A barrier is anything that stops someone from accessing something. From a wheelchair user not being able to access a GP surgery because of a huge flight of steps and no ramp; to someone with a learning disability not being able to fill in a benefits form because of complicated language and unclear explanations. In the same way, there are barriers that stop people from volunteering.

**Understanding barriers**

Broadly speaking, barriers can split into:

**Physical**– e.g. lack of ramps, lots of steps in the physical environment that mean people can’t physically get in to or around a building.

**Attitudinal** – e.g. negative attitudes about disability, staff lacking disability awareness training, being treated differently because of a disability.

**Information**: e.g. printed information being in small fonts and use of complicated language that means a person with learning difficulties can’t follow.

**Policy** – e.g. inflexible working policies such as no time off for hospital appointments, offering a range of opportunities for people with work or family commitments or recruitment policies that discriminate against disabled people.

**Let’s talk about Confidence**

There are also barriers that come from volunteers themselves. The biggest one is low confidence. Research from the EFDS (English Federation of Disability Sport) found that psychological barriers play the biggest part in preventing disabled people from taking part in sport and physical activity. Negative perceptions may come from others but also a negative perception about what they themselves think they can and can’t do.

**“Many disabled people who want to volunteer have been told for so long that they will not be able to achieve anything. Sadly, they believe this, so self-esteem and confidence is often very low. It’s about finding the things they can do.” (Volunteer provider)**

Showing understanding and committing to giving someone support can both help to build someone’s confidence.

**“Most barriers can be overcome be getting to know the individuals, building trust and a working relationship and taking things at a pace that suits the individual” (Volunteer)**

Organisations that offer volunteering opportunities are expected to take steps to understand and remove these barriers. It’s not about making big, drastic changes to your organisation, any steps you take should be reasonable. It’s about engaging directly with the individual, finding solutions together, being creative and making small adjustments that can make huge difference.

**Top 10 Tips- How can you make inclusion a reality in your organisation?**

1. **Ask the expert:** Start from a place of understanding that disabled people are the ones who have experienced barriers and are best placed to make suggestions on how they can be removed.
2. **Listen:** try to act on what the person has told you, be clear about what your organisation can and can’t offer disabled volunteers.
3. **Communication is key:** Don’t be embarrassed to ask if something isn’t clear. If you encourage an open dialogue with the volunteer, asking for more detail about someone’s support needs, any issues are likely to be resolved openly and quickly.
4. **Don’t make assumptions**: the issues that one disabled person faces may be completely different to those of another. That’s why it’s important to ask and listen. Remember not all disabilities are visible and each person may have found different ways to overcome barriers. “Being non-judgemental is key, accept every person on their own merit and don’t stereotype or pre-judge” (Provider)
5. **It’s the person, not the impairment:** remember that the person is still an individual and just like all staff, will have a wealth of skills and experiences that can add value to your organisation. Diversity and a mix of experiences can lead to a healthy, balanced team.
6. **Understand barriers, make reasonable adjustments:** The different barriers people can experience are on Page 2. It’s best to speak to the person experiencing problems to identify and understand and find creative ways to remove them. Adjustments don’t need to be expensive or time consuming. They just need to remove the barrier that is preventing someone from taking part or accessing something just like everyone else can
7. **Access, access, access:** Is the start time right? Can people get in the building and use the facilities with ease? Think about where disabled people find out about opportunities and where information about volunteering is available. It’s not just in sports centres and GP surgeries but also Disabled People’s User Led Organisations (DPULO’s), the local Volunteer Centre, Community Voluntary Service, other grassroots organisations and word of mouth from peers- ask your local Volunteer Centre or DPULO how you can tap into this- could you post an advert for volunteers through them?
8. **Ask in advance:** Find out what people’s needs are (you might have to re-think the space and time e.g. of an event you are running), some people might need printed material in large print, a certain kind of chair or certain software. Allow time for these adjustments to be made.
9. **Make a plan but be flexible:** be clear about people’s roles and what’s expected from them- having a list of key duties can be helpful but know that things change, people’s conditions change. Be open to working with someone to find solutions to barriers. “Organisations not having a clear plan for volunteers can be a problem.” (Provider)
10. **The all-important welcome:** Making someone feel welcome is essential, whoever they are. An unpleasant first experience can prevent them from coming along to volunteer again. Ensure the first experience is enjoyable and they’re more likely to return again. **“Offer taster sessions for various volunteering activities, this is a good way to introduce people to volunteering. We found this helps people to find a placement/activity they enjoy” (Provider)**

**Involving disabled people**: some of the barriers above could be identified and dealt with quicker and more effectively if organisations meaningfully speak to and involve disabled people when they are writing policies or designing services e.g. a local charity is starting up a volunteer programme. They invite local disabled people in for an informal discussion about what this would look like, find out which barriers might stop the group taking part, how these can be removed and what a good volunteering experience would look like.

### “Health and conditions could be a barrier. People might want to volunteer consistently but health issues can sometimes limit participation” (Volunteer)

The principle of understanding barriers and taking steps to remove them can be applied to all aspects of your organisation from planning services, recruitment to more practical things like running a training session.

**Most areas have a Disabled Person’s User-Led Organisation (DPULO) -** an organisation run by and for disabled people. The majority of the staff and/ or trustees are disabled. They recognise that disabled people are the ones with a wealth of experience through their experience of disability. They offer support in areas like benefits/ rights advice, but also services for other organisations like disability awareness training. Check your local authority’s website for details of the organisation closest to you.

**“Every individual has something to give. Our volunteers are willing and motivated and very rarely take time off. They have a huge sense of pride in what they do and give generously.” (Provider)**

**Be open to change.** Engaging disabled people might require real changes to the way you recruit volunteers. Think the unthinkable about what you can do and ask the volunteer to do the same!

**“Every individual has something to give, no matter how small or insignificant it may appear. Our volunteers are willing and motivated and very rarely take time off. They have a huge sense of pride in what they do and give generously.” (Provider)**

**Checklist.** The below tips are about how to run an accessible volunteer training session but could apply to any event you run.

**✔ Have you asked about adjustments?** Have you asked all participants about any support needs they might have/adjustments you need to make for them to take part? Allow enough time for you to address these. Understand the barriers and look for creative ways to address them. This could mean printing slides in large font, booking a sign-language interpreter or making sure there is an accessible parking space available for a meeting.

**✔Are the printed materials accessible?** Try to go for minimum font 14, Arial. Use plain English- avoid using long or complicated words or jargon (special words or expressions usually for specialists that are difficult for others to understand.) Some people with dyslexia find certain colours of paper easier to read from.

**✔ Can everyone participate?** Everyone has different learning styles. Try to make the day as varied as possible with group discussion, small group activities, reflection activities to be completed alone and even drawing if appropriate as not everyone is comfortable writing!

**✔ Is the room accessible?** Can wheelchairs or people with limited mobility easily get in and out and move around the room independently?

**✔ Is the start time right?** Try to start after 10.30am and finish by 3 to allow people enough time to make morning care arrangements and to travel out of rush-hour. You might have to run an evening or a weekend meeting if people work.

**✔ Disability Confidence and a warm welcome?** Are people on the front desk aware that someone might need assistance? Have they received disability awareness training? The key is to put people at ease and encourage open communication.

**✔ Be open and flexible!** You might not get it all right straight away. Ask for feedback and suggestions from participants and try to act on it. Acknowledge if things don’t go well and be open to learning for the next one.

**One volunteer sums it up with:**

**“Be honest about what you can and can’t offer. Reach out to disability organisations and develop relationships with them. Know what is expected from you about reasonable adjustments. Support the volunteer, especially with travel costs and lunch. Expect sometimes the volunteer might be off sick or attending a hospital appointment. Take the risk, it will be worth it.”**

**“Get to know service users, build up trust and a working relationship. Don’t set people up to fail- know what people can and can’t do. Take things at a pace that suits everyone, let volunteers try new things. Support them at all stages, point out progress and anything positive- however small. Give choices, above all make it fun and enjoyable!”**

**Useful Resources- Organisations**

**Disability Rights UK and the Get Out Get Active (GOGA) Peer Support Project**

Disability Rights UK (DR UK) is a national organisation. We are disabled people leading change, working for participation for all. We run projects, produce factsheets and work with policy makers aiming to create equality of opportunity that means disabled people can access employment, education and can live independently. Disability Rights UK is a national partner of GOGA. We set up the GOGA Peer Support Project and engage local disabled people and DPULO’s to get involved and get more active. More information about current projects and campaigns is here:

[www.disabilityrightsuk.org](http://www.disabilityrightsuk.org)

**Volunteering Matters**

Volunteering Matters are a national charity who believe that everyone can play a role in their community and should have the chance to participate; they build projects and programmes to reflect this. They focus on the needs of four distinct communities; young people, disabled people, families and older people. You can search for volunteering opportunities on their website and access further information about their work:

<https://volunteeringmatters.org.uk>

**English Federation of Disability Sport (EFDS)**

The English Federation of Disability Sport (EFDS) works to make active lives possible by enabling organisations to support individual disabled people to be active and stay active for life. The national charity looks to a future where everyone can enjoy the opportunities available. EFDS has a vision that disabled people are active for life. Find statistics, research and factsheets here:

<http://www.efds.co.uk/>

**National Council Of Voluntary Organisations (NCVO)**

NCVO champion the voluntary sector by connecting, representing and supporting voluntary organisations. We work to help voluntary organisations and volunteers make the biggest difference they can. They connect organisations with the people, partners and resources they need to make the biggest difference.

[www.ncvo.org.uk](http://www.ncvo.org.uk)

**Finding volunteering opportunities**

<https://do-it.org/>

<https://volunteeringmatters.org.uk/>

<https://vinspired.com/>

**Resources**

**Top Tips for Involving Disabled People in Physical Activity and Sport-** a handy guide on how to meaningfully involve and consult with disabled people when designing services.

<http://www.getyourselfactive.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/DRUK_TopTips_v6_digital.pdf>