

Supporting volunteers with a physical disability

With the biggest group of people now volunteering being young people, it is important not to take for granted that the ‘traditional’ white middle class lady volunteer will always come forward. Organisations looking to recruit volunteers need to find innovative ways of capturing the interest of all groups in the community. Organisations can help redress the balance and be more representative of their local area partly by looking to the 20% of the working age population in the UK who have a disability or long term health condition. There is a vast pool of disabled people who might be interested in volunteering as long as they are helped to do so and made to feel welcome by the whole work force.

Organisations could be missing out on a largely untapped resource of skill and knowledge, because they hold misconceptions about the capabilities of disabled people.

It is important to remember that disabled people can be highly skilled and sometimes have worked in a wide range variety of fields and sectors, or may have been responsible for organising activities for others in their family or local community.

Having a statement ‘we welcome disabled people’ on your posters to advertise volunteering roles will certainly help disabled people feel more valued in their community by volunteering.

‘We strongly encourage applications from black and minority ethnic people, deaf and disabled people, and all members of the wider community’ is a complete equal opportunities statement.

Highlighting positive examples of volunteering by disabled people in the advertising of volunteer opportunities will ultimately attract others.

When recruiting volunteers, at the initial interview, the interviewer is interested in the strengths and skills the potential volunteer may wish to develop. Some volunteers may have disabilities, however, it is vital to look at the person’s **ability** first and the disability second

This is not only important for people with a disability, but also for anyone with any cultural, spiritual, or medical need. Make **‘seeing the person’** part of your standard good practice.

Supporting volunteers, including those with disabilities, is about listening to them and understanding their particular requirements. People often have a low expectation of having their needs met and may not let you know unless you **ask!**

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) introduced the concept of **‘reasonable adjustments’**. Essentially, this means that adjustments are made to the way people work or access goods, facilities and services or education in order to make them accessible. Such adjustments might be made by providing specialist equipment, e.g. an induction loop, or by changing the way things are produced, e.g. providing information in alternative formats.

It is not necessary to be concerned about whether a person’s condition is covered by the DDA; what is important is considering the impact of any condition on an individual basis. This means **not making assumptions** about conditions and how they affect people’s ability to volunteer.

Given the nature of the organisation-volunteer relationship, the law requiring such reasonable adjustments does not ordinarily apply to volunteers. However, it is good practice to adopt a similar approach especially when looking at the contribution which will be made by volunteers with specific requirements.

A lot of advice and guidance is available about making adjustments in order to overcome barriers faced by disabled people and those with long-term health conditions. Most disability or health condition websites provide specific information and guidance.

When considering and negotiating adjustments, **always consult with the individual** as they will know their own condition and what adjustments might be possible.

Not all adjustments cost money. Some organisations are able to fund any adjustments and plan for this by allocating budgets to support volunteer programmes. This is ideal if it is possible. Some local

organisations might be able to provide some practical assistance or point you in the right direction for further information.

There are many types of reasonable adjustments that can help disabled people participate in volunteering opportunities such as:

- **Disability awareness training** and briefing for staff and volunteer colleagues (often the biggest barrier)
- Think about getting another volunteer to act as a **'buddy'** or appointing a key member of staff with whom the volunteer can raise any questions. A good way of adding to the experience of your staff
- **Relocating the role** to make it more accessible (ground instead of first floor)
- Ensuring the **workstation is accessible** e.g. extra lighting or screen reading software
- **Using plain English** and designing clear information packs will be helpful to people with a visual impairment and anyone for whom English is a second language (including British Sign Language users) as well as people with a learning disability
- Offer **help to complete forms** or offer alternatives to paper based registration
- Agreeing a suitable **start time later in the morning** could be all that is needed (this may help overcome the side effects from medication or the time taken to attend to personal needs)
- **Sharing of a volunteer role** or **being flexible** about some of the duties
- Allowing **additional rest breaks**
- Consider **'virtual'** volunteering – if mobility or personal care issues prevent the person from leaving their home for reasonable periods of time

When recruiting, developing and retaining disabled volunteers, it is essential that they feel a valuable part of the team and able to fully contribute. An unsatisfactory experience such as being given ad hoc roles and tasks will ultimately lead to the volunteer not feeling supported and they will leave. A successful placement will always be a positive experience for everyone.

Useful local organisations:

Sutton Centre for Independent Living and Learning (SCILL)

3 Robin Hood Lane

Sutton

SM1 2SW

Telephone: 020 8770 4058

Fax: 020 8770 4041

SCILL Disability Information

Telephone: 020 8770 4065

Fax: 020 8770 4067

Textphone: 020 8770 4066

Sutton Association for the Blind (SAB)

First Floor

3 Robin Hood Lane

Sutton

SM1 2SW

Telephone: 020 8409 7166

Fax: 020 8409 7167

Email: contact@sab.gb.com

Web: www.sab.gb.com