



Building a more inclusive space for volunteers

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The importance of an inclusive volunteer programme

It is the responsibility of every charity and organisation to work towards building an inclusive volunteer programme, which reflects the diverse range of people and causes that make up the voluntary sector. Focusing on inclusivity within all aspects of your organisation, including volunteers, will allow you to better reflect the communities you serve, making better and more effective strategic decisions.

What does inclusive volunteering mean?

Inclusion is the act of welcoming diversity and creating an environment where all different kinds of people can thrive and succeed. These diverse individual characteristics include:

Occupation	Physical appearance	Gender	Ethnicity
Age	Socio-economic background	Sexuality	Culture
Disability	Education	Immigration	Religion

While you may not be actively denying certain people access to opportunities within your organisation, upon closer inspection you may start to spot hidden barriers that inadvertently do so.

Inclusive volunteering is the process of ensuring volunteering is accessible for everyone

Barriers to inclusive volunteering

Many potential volunteers, especially those who require additional support, are being excluded from participating in volunteering due to barriers of access.

From the **individual's perspective**, barriers to volunteering include:

- Lack of awareness about what volunteering is and what positions are available.
- Fear of not being welcomed in an organisation due to prejudice or lack of confidence.
- Time commitments, especially in relation to fluctuating health conditions, work commitments (e.g. shift work), caring commitments, and childcare.

- Perception of volunteering as an activity for certain groups of people only.
- Misconceptions about volunteering and welfare benefits or immigration status.
- Turned off by a long or inaccessible recruitment process (application form, references, DBS).
- Physical, cultural, and communication barriers especially in relation to language and accessibility.
- Lack of understanding around reimbursement of expenses while volunteering.
- Volunteer roles advertised exclusively online exclude individuals with limited digital skills or online access.

From an **organisation's perspective**, some of the barriers to inclusive volunteering include:

- Lack of prior experience of working with a specific group and consequently being fearful of involving them in volunteering.
- Concern that the management of these volunteers will be more difficult and time consuming.
- Perception that there is a significant financial cost of developing an inclusive volunteer programme.
- Limited knowledge of which volunteer positions would be suitable for volunteers and hesitancy to ask individuals about what might work for them.
- Unsure about legality of involving volunteers. For example, a common misconception is that asylum seekers cannot volunteer, when in fact this is actively encouraged by the UK government.
- Stereotypes and prejudices that exist within society, the organisation or individuals.

Benefits of inclusive volunteering

Making volunteer opportunities available to a diverse range of people can create significant benefits for your organisation:

- Expand your organisations understanding of inclusion and better reflect the views and experiences the people you serve.
- Provides more opportunities to build long-lasting community partnerships and engagement.

- Bringing together people with different skills, experiences and perspectives helps to spark creative thinking and bring fresh ideas.
- Having people from different backgrounds, or with access requirements, work alongside each other can increase mutual understanding and strengthen communities.
- Builds legitimacy and support by reflecting the diversity of the community the organisation supports.

For the individuals, being welcomed and encouraged to participate in volunteering can lead to new friendships, the development of new skills and improved confidence.

How to build an inclusive space for volunteers

Overcome the barriers

Only by removing the barriers mentioned above will your organisation be able to create an inclusive volunteer programme, making volunteer opportunities available and accessible to a diverse range of people.

It could be worth thinking about joining or, if one doesn't already exist, creating a network of organisations in your community, where you can exchange knowledge, ideas, and resources and address your fears of working with under-represented groups.

Shift your language

The term 'volunteering' isn't always universally understood. Other words such as 'help', 'give', 'support', or the term 'active citizen' may resonate more strongly and sit more comfortably with more diverse communities. It is also important to ensure plain English and volunteer-friendly language is used instead of overly-technical or formal terms. If technical information needs to be included, ensure this is presented in a visual and accessible way. This shift in language applies to all of your communications, especially during the recruitment stage of the volunteering process.

Review your marketing materials

Consider what your current marketing materials look like. Do they use inclusive language? Do the images used represent a variety of demographics, reflecting the diversity of the communities you serve? If not, then it may be time to update your marketing and communication materials – including brochures, e-bulletins and the charity website.

- Promotional material used for advertising volunteering opportunities should be made accessible to all and produced in a range of alternative formats.
- Ensure all documents (including the role description, application form, volunteer handbook and induction materials) are accessible by having arrangements in place to provide audio, braille or large print versions for individuals with visual impairments, hearing or learning difficulties.

Review your recruitment process

The first step in creating an inclusive recruitment process is to advertise volunteer roles widely and in different mediums. As well as advertising online, think about advertising roles in other offline locations, such as job centres, local community centres, and churches using a leaflet or poster.

The next step is to make the application process as easy and accessible as possible. A complicated and/or formal recruitment process can become a barrier to people with additional needs, preventing them from applying.

Some ways to make your application process more accessible include:

- Gather initial information through an informal 'chat', rather than a formal interview and application form.
- Have an open discussion early on in the process to help identify any support needs of the individual, so you can plan for any reasonable adjustments in advance.
- For certain roles, a DBS check may not be required and can be removed from the process.
- If references are required for a role, be open to accepting references from people other than past employers, such as faith leaders, support workers, friends or family.
- Offer support to people who require assistance when completing an application form.
- Be transparent about costs of volunteering and openly state if expenses are provided.
- Involve the volunteer in the process; their opinion is vital.

Outreach & engagement with diverse communities

Creating a successful inclusive volunteering programme requires a commitment to actively cultivating relationships with diverse communities on an on-going basis. Some examples of practical ways you can engage with diverse local communities include:

- Build relationships with key contacts who have links into different communities, for example faith leaders, mental health advisors, social care workers, learning disability teachers, and ESOL (English Speakers of Other Languages) education teams.
- Show evidence of the work you carry out in an open and engaging way, as a means of gaining support.
- Take part in or host community events.
- Use case studies of already existing volunteers to show the benefits of volunteering.

- Take the time to understand the varied perspectives and motivations of these communities, finding common ground and mutual values.

Provide ongoing support

All volunteers require support, and for some people in particular a lack of support can be a significant barrier to volunteering.

- Volunteer managers play a crucial role in providing support to volunteers throughout the recruitment and induction process, helping to identify specific support needs.
- It is good practice to provide volunteers with a supervisor or single point of contact with whom they can discuss their needs, personal development and recognition of achievements during regular catch-ups.
- Think about creating a buddy system, pairing new volunteers with more experienced volunteers who can be a welcoming friend, providing the individual with additional support in their role.

Create inclusive volunteer roles

There are several other ways to make the volunteer roles you offer more inclusive:

- Flexibility – can a volunteer role be split into two roles, or spread across two shorter days instead of one full day to make it more accessible for people with other commitments?
- Ensure your premises are accessible.
- Reimburse expenses to volunteers.

Create an inclusive organisational culture

Ideally, the Board of Trustees, staff and volunteers in your organisation should be representative of the communities you operate in and serve. Creating an inclusive organisational culture needs to come from the top down, setting out what is and isn't acceptable within the charity.

- The first step is to have an open and honest conversation about inclusion within your organisation, considering how you can overcome any barriers to creating a diverse and inclusive volunteer programme.
- This begins at the Trustee level and filters down into your organisation's culture and values, so making an active effort to create an inclusive and diverse Board of Trustees is an important step.
- The board should regularly assesses the charity's equality, diversity and inclusion strategy, setting clear targets that underpin a strategic objective to create an environment that is supportive of individual needs and differences.

Education & training

Commit to educating and training everyone in the organisation around issues relating to diversity and inclusion, in order to help you understand how to create a more inclusive volunteering programme. Inclusive volunteering is much easier to achieve if everyone in the organisation is committed to it.

This can be as simple as reading up on resources and websites, to carrying out non-bias and diversity training. Education and training can help everyone in the organisation to understand the basics on volunteering and the law, become aware of their biases, and prevent them from making assumptions based on those biases.

[Click here](#) to access Community Southwark's equality, diversity and inclusion resources, which have been created to support long-term change in organisations by providing a range of materials to support understanding, education and most importantly action.

Once training has been undertaken, the next step is to set concrete actions to change the systems you have in place. The Charity Governance Code includes [recommended practice](#) about introducing systems that can help achieve change.

Resources

- Community Southwark – [Equality, diversity and inclusion resources](#)
- NCVO – [How to develop an inclusive supported volunteering scheme](#)
- NCVO – [The Equality Act: your legal duties](#)
- Charity Governance Code – [Equality, diversity and inclusion](#)

