

**SHAPING**  
the future with  
**VOLUNTEERING**

# **Volunteering and Disability: the contribution of national voluntary organisations**

**Summary Report**  
July 2024

# INTRODUCTION

**The “Shaping the Future with Volunteering: Disability Report” is a comprehensive analysis of the contributions and challenges faced by disabled volunteers in the UK.**

Distilled from extensive research and case studies, this report provides valuable insights into the barriers and opportunities within the volunteering sector. It highlights the need for inclusive policies, a better understanding of disabilities, and practical support to enhance the volunteering experience for disabled individuals.

An outcomes framework has been developed and reviewed by disabled volunteers and service delivery teams across the STFWV charities to ensure the suggested outcomes support the effective implementation of the report’s recommendations.

This framework serves as a **structured reference tool**, enabling organisations to measure the impact of their efforts and track progress over time.

By focusing on specific outcomes, organisations can identify areas for improvement, make data-driven decisions, and foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for all volunteers. The outcomes framework not only supports the practical application of the report’s recommendations but also strengthens volunteer management practices, ensuring that the contributions of disabled volunteers are recognised and valued.

# 1. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

**As part of the Shaping the Future with Volunteering (STFWV) programme, CEOs agreed in 2022 to review volunteering and disability, informed by case studies from their charities.**

A roundtable discussion was also convened, and discussions included the findings from a research report by Spirit of 2012 Trust.

**It is estimated that there are over 3.6 million disabled volunteers in the UK**

The STFWV Volunteer Managers' group decided a user-friendly, distilled version of the report was required for internal distribution to volunteer managers and teams in the STFWV network. Further, it was decided that an outcomes framework would support implementation of the recommendations and that the original report would benefit from increased 'lived experience' to inform the final recommendations. This short paper aims to realise these objectives.

Disabled adults are just as likely to volunteer as non-disabled adults but the more impairments one has and the more severe the disability, the less likely they are to volunteer. Disabled volunteers tend to be worse off financially and more likely to be retired but they also volunteer more frequently, contribute more time than non-disabled volunteers and are generally more civic minded. It is estimated that there are over 3.6 million disabled volunteers in the UK. Disabled volunteers are predominantly positive about their volunteering experience, especially if they feel supported, useful, and connected, however, they encounter significant challenges. Practical barriers relate to accessing volunteering opportunities and accessibility more broadly, transport is a disproportionate barrier and there are further barriers related to application processes, digital exclusion, and welfare benefits. There are also challenges for disabled volunteers to do with attitudinal barriers from the public, organisations, staff, and other volunteers.

## 2. CURRENT INSIGHTS

**This section presents an analysis of research insights, case studies from member organisations and the roundtable discussion. The findings are grouped thematically in seven sections.**

### A. Knowledge and awareness

Within organisations there is a poor understanding of disability, diversity of impairments, intersectionality and of the **social model of disability** and how this links to volunteer management practice. Although organisational perspectives and approaches to inclusion are evolving, there is a need for comprehensive training that includes practical implementation of the social model of disability, how to support disabled volunteers and how to make it easy for disabled volunteers to start volunteering. There is a need to acknowledge that volunteers are part of and impacted by organisational culture, so if that culture is not welcoming and inclusive, this trickles down to volunteers and can become a barrier. Research shows that some disabled volunteers still experience direct discrimination, stereotyping and bias from the public, staff, and fellow volunteers.

### B. Policies and procedures

Some organisations haven't reviewed their policies and procedures for a long time, so they may not reflect best practice, especially in relation to inclusion. Not only should policies be reviewed regularly, but they need to be examined through an equalities lens so that barriers for disabled people are reduced or removed.

**Creating inclusive policies and procedures is important, but it's also crucial to implement them effectively and use them in daily activities.**

One procedural challenge for disabled volunteers is expenses, particularly relating to transport, which for many disabled volunteers is their number one barrier to volunteering. Sometimes there is a culture in organisations that discourages volunteers from claiming expenses and this disproportionately impacts disabled volunteers. Other examples include how organisations support volunteers who help remotely, for example with data or IT equipment.

## C. Entry points

Unfortunately, many potential volunteers don't make it through the journey to become a volunteer. There are multiple practical barriers for disabled volunteers at this stage and this is important to consider for organisations who want to be inclusive. For some it will be a lack of accessibility (physically or virtually) and for others a barrier related to assumptions or bias about disability. Organisations should review and assess all potential 'front doors' to the organisation from a disabled volunteer point of view to remove accidental barriers and for those barriers that can't be made accessible, the organisation should be clear with potential volunteers about this. Necessary vetting processes need to be followed, but these should be conducted in a way that makes it easy for volunteers to start volunteering. This includes minimising lengthy or bureaucratic application processes and providing a point of contact who can support disabled potential volunteers.

## D. Data

Collecting data about volunteers is inextricable to supporting volunteers and being inclusive, yet many organisations know little about who their volunteers are and what they need in order to volunteer. If we don't ask volunteers if they have a long-term limiting illness or disability and if they need related adjustments, we can't expect volunteers to feel supported and satisfied in their role. Organisations should ask volunteers about their support needs regularly because needs change over time. Too often organisations collect data that is not used, used effectively, or updated. Volunteer managers should be able to utilise data collection systems and volunteers need to be confident that their information is safe and secure.

**Disabled volunteers could benefit from a volunteer passport, especially for DBS checks, which they can carry between organisations to make volunteering easier.**

It's unlikely volunteer passports for could be implemented soon, but it has potential in the longer term. In relation to DBS checks, organisations can currently share information or accept a DBS that a volunteer has for another role (if the volunteer registers with the update service). It may be helpful for organisations to do this to make it easier to volunteer.

## **E. Volunteer management**

The main conclusion about volunteer management is the need to be flexible and focus on volunteer support needs and adjustments, rather than specific impairments. Effective volunteer management is about engaging volunteers and creating trusted relationships and safe spaces for people to be themselves. Creating a safe space for volunteers to feel comfortable disclosing their needs is critical to being inclusive. For disabled volunteers, flexibility as to volunteer roles is key. For many disabled volunteers, not only does their situation evolve, but support needs change over time. Some have not been in paid work for a long time (or ever) and volunteering can be an alternative to work.

Disabled people have lower employment rates than non-disabled people in the UK and volunteering can be an important pathway to employment. Some organisations have also sought feedback from disabled volunteers and adjusted practice in response, as with Papworth Trust's Voluntary Scrutiny panel. Other charities have made adaptations based on the skills and experience of disabled volunteers and tailored roles to fit.

The role of technology can be an important enabler for disabled volunteers (but it can also be a barrier). Technology and online volunteering can remove the need for an accessible venue and the use of technology allows disabled volunteers to be involved in a way that suits their needs and can open new routes for volunteering. However, some volunteers may feel less connected this way.

Volunteers with greater resources (such as data, IT skills and computer equipment or specialist software) are more likely to experience technology as an enabler and those with fewer resources as a barrier.

## **F. Resources**

Making reasonable adjustments, and supporting disabled volunteers is not cost free and requires capacity from organisations. At the same time, the current economic environment means organisations are looking for ways to cut costs and some are experiencing reductions in funding. It is particularly important in this context to build inclusive practice into volunteering budgets and funding proposals. Organisations should make it clear to funders what it costs to make adjustments. Additionally, this group should consider how they might advocate to get Access to Volunteering reinstated to have a fund to support accessibility and adjustments.

## **G. Allies and partnerships**

Building good practice in inclusion for disabled volunteers is something we need to do as a sector. Sharing knowledge and resources will benefit all our organisations and if we are able to access training and guidance, we will all be better. There are many opportunities for partnership working in relation to disabled volunteers. There is a gap around referral pathways and building partnerships with the NHS, job centres and GP surgeries to refer disabled people into volunteering. There are opportunities to share knowledge and training and lessons learned so that all organisations can improve their volunteering offer to disabled people.

# 3. RECOMMENDATIONS

**The following recommendations are informed by the current insight outlined above and aim to focus energy for maximum impact.**

- 1** Develop and deliver training for organisations on the social model of disability, intersectionality, unconscious bias and how to make reasonable adjustments for volunteers.
- 2** Make it easy for disabled potential volunteers to enquire about and start volunteering by removing 'front door' barriers, having a point of contact, and accepting DBS checks from previous roles.
- 3** Collect data about who volunteers, disability and support needs regularly and act on information.
- 4** Have a clear expenses policy, making it easy for disabled volunteers to claim transport expenses. Review policies regularly with disabled volunteers in mind and link EDI and volunteering strategies.
- 5** Consider tech solutions for volunteer roles and look at where volunteer roles can be done remotely, digitally or via micro volunteering. Ensure support is in place if tech solutions are considered, including IT support internally, equipment, data and training for staff and volunteers.
- 6** Write support for adjustments and accessibility into funding bids and volunteering budgets.
- 7** Advocate as a sector to renew the Access to Volunteering scheme.
- 8** Create a forum for organisations to share information, knowledge, and resources related to supporting disabled volunteers.
- 9** Develop a quality mark (potentially related to ESG work) for organisations who are 'disability-friendly' and have removed barriers for disabled volunteers and who offer flexible roles.



## Recommendation

# 1

**Develop and deliver training for organisations (including staff who manage volunteers) on the social model of disability, intersectionality, unconscious bias and how to make reasonable adjustments for volunteers in practice.**

## Outcomes

1. Increased awareness and understanding of the barriers and challenges faced by disabled people, especially those who experience multiple forms of discrimination based on their gender, race, age, sexual orientation, etc.
2. Improved knowledge and skills on how to apply the social model of disability, which recognises that disability is not an individual problem but a social issue that can be addressed by removing environmental and attitudinal barriers.
3. Enhanced capacity and confidence to identify and implement reasonable adjustments for disabled volunteers, such as providing accessible facilities, equipment, communication, support and feedback.
4. Reduced implicit or unconscious bias towards disabled people and other marginalised groups, which can affect decision-making, behaviour and interactions.
5. Increased diversity and inclusion of disabled volunteers in the organisation's activities, programmes and services, leading to more effective and sustainable outcomes.



## Recommendation

# 2

**Make it easy for disabled potential volunteers to enquire about and start volunteering by removing 'front door' barriers and having a point of contact for enquiries and accept DBS checks from previous roles where possible.**

## Outcomes

1. Increase the diversity and inclusion of your volunteer workforce reaching out to disabled people who may face barriers to volunteering – Provide reasonable adjustments and easy read resources to make your volunteer roles and application process more accessible for people with learning disabilities.
2. Clarify the eligibility and level of DBS check required for each volunteer role and accept DBS checks from previous roles where possible.
3. Emphasise the benefits and rewards of volunteering, such as gaining new skills, meeting new people, and making a difference in the community.
4. Involve current or former disabled volunteers as advocates or champions to share their experiences and inspire others.

## Recommendation

# 3

**Collect data about who volunteers with you, ask about disability and support needs on a regular basis and act on the information appropriately. Understand who volunteers with you so that you can support volunteers appropriately.**

## Outcomes

1. By collecting and analysing data on volunteer activities, organisations will be able to monitor and evaluate their performance, identify gaps and challenges, and plan for future improvements. They will also be able to demonstrate their impact and achievements to their funders, partners and stakeholders using evidence-based reports.
2. By asking about disability and support needs, the volunteer programme will be able to provide better and more tailored support, training, and recognition for its volunteers. The programme will also be able to improve its communication and engagement with its volunteers, and to address any issues or concerns they may have in a timely and effective manner.
3. Acting on the information appropriately will support in removing barriers and create more accessible and flexible opportunities for disabled people to volunteer. Robust data will support organisations to promote their commitment to disability equality and to attract more disabled people to join your organisation.

## Recommendation

# 4

**Ensure all organisations have a clear volunteer expenses policy and make it easy for disabled volunteers to claim transport expenses in particular.**

## Outcomes

1. More disabled people will be encouraged and supported to volunteer for various organisations. This could have positive impacts on their well-being, skills, confidence, and social inclusion. It could also benefit the organisations by increasing the diversity and quality of their volunteer workforce.
2. Organisations will be able to demonstrate their commitment to equality and inclusion, and comply with the relevant laws and regulations regarding disability discrimination.
3. Volunteer expenses policy will be more transparent, fair and consistent across different organisations and sectors. This could reduce the confusion, frustration and inequality that some volunteers may face when claiming expenses.

## Recommendation

# 5

**Review all policies regularly with disabled volunteers in mind and link your EDI strategy with your volunteering strategy.**

## Outcomes

1. Reviewing all policies regularly with disabled volunteers in mind could help to identify and remove any barriers or challenges that they may face in their volunteering roles. This could improve their satisfaction, retention and performance as volunteers. It could also ensure that the policies are compliant with the relevant laws and regulations regarding disability discrimination.
2. Linking EDI strategy with volunteering strategy could help to align organisational values and goals with volunteer management practices. This could foster a culture of inclusion and respect among staff and volunteers, and enhance organisations reputation as an equitable and diverse organisation.

## Recommendation

# 6

**Consider tech solutions for volunteer roles and look at where volunteer roles can be done remotely, digitally or via micro volunteering. Ensure there is support and resource in place if tech solutions are considered, including IT support internally, equipment, data and training for staff and volunteers.**

## Outcomes

1. By considering tech solutions for volunteer roles, you could expand your pool of potential volunteers and reach out to people who may not be able to volunteer in person due to disability, location, or other factors. Offer more flexible and diverse opportunities for volunteers to contribute their skills and time, such as remote, digital, or micro volunteering.
2. By ensuring there is support and resource in place if tech solutions are considered, the quality and efficiency of your volunteer management and service delivery can be improved. Provide IT support, equipment, data, and training for staff and volunteers to help them use the technology effectively and securely. Monitor and evaluate the impact of tech solutions on organisation and the communities we exist for.

## Recommendation

# 7

**Write support for adjustments and accessibility into funding bids and volunteering budgets.**

## Outcomes

1. Writing support for adjustments and accessibility into funding bids and volunteering budgets can increase chances of securing funding from donors and funders who value inclusion and diversity.
2. By providing support for adjustments and accessibility, the quality and impact of volunteering activities and services could be improved. Disabled volunteers will be enabled to participate fully and effectively in their roles, and provide accessible and inclusive services to disabled people.
3. By investing in support for adjustments and accessibility in Volunteer budgets, organisational reputation and learning can be enhanced. Showcase good practice and innovation in supporting disabled volunteers and the communities we exist for, and share learning and experience with other organisations.

<sup>1</sup> Similar to **Access to Work**, a government fund that provides people with specialist equipment that they need in order to work.

## Recommendation

# 8

**Advocate as a sector to renew the Access to Volunteering scheme.**

## Outcomes

1. By advocating as a sector to renew the Access to Volunteering scheme availability and accessibility of funding for organisations that support disabled volunteers could be increased.
2. By renewing the scheme, more organisations could be supported to overcome the financial barriers and challenges that they may face in supporting disabled volunteers.
3. By advocating as a sector to renew the Access to Volunteering scheme, we will demonstrate our leadership and collaboration in promoting disability equality and inclusion. We could influence the policy and decision makers to recognise and support the value and contribution of disabled volunteers. We could also raise awareness and share good practice among our peers and partners in the sector.

## Recommendation

# 9

**Create a forum for organisations to share information, knowledge, expertise and resources related to supporting disabled volunteers.**

## Outcomes

1. A forum could help organisations learn from each other and adopt best practices to make volunteering more accessible, fair and welcoming for disabled people.
2. A forum could help organisations provide better support, training and recognition for disabled volunteers, as well as increase their confidence, wellbeing and/or health.
3. A forum could help organisations understand their legal obligations and responsibilities under the Equality Act, and how to prevent or address any issues that may arise.

## Recommendation

# 10

**Develop a quality mark (potentially related to ESG work) for organisations who are 'disability-friendly' and have removed barriers for disabled volunteers and who offer flexible roles.**

## Outcomes

1. A quality mark could increase visibility and recognition of organisations who demonstrate commitments to disability inclusion and help organisations showcase their achievements and good practices, as well as attract more customers, investors and partners who value social responsibility and diversity.
2. A quality mark could help organisations set clear standards and goals, measure their progress, and impact, and learn from best practices and feedback from disabled people and other stakeholders.