



Toolkit for involving older disabled volunteers

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Active Volunteering by Disabled People for VITA

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Introduction

This good practice guide is aimed at organisations working to involve older disabled volunteers in the delivery of their services. It offers guidance and encouragement to help with their recruitment.

This guide is split into the following sections;

1. Understanding disability

Defining impairment and disability

2. Before you start

Training

Language

3. Recruiting

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4. Supporting volunteers

5. Information relating to specific impairments

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1. UNDERSTANDING DISABILITY

Here are some examples of why older disabled people can be a wonderful resource to any organisation;

- Volunteers can offer attention to important tasks that may require more time than is available to paid staff, for example, dealing with telephone enquiries, filing, organising meetings or events etc. All of which can increase the quality of your organisations services.
- Volunteers have a wealth of experience and specialised skills that they can offer organisations to improve their services, for example, improve report writing, expertise in computing, financial management etc.
- Increase and strengthen community support through illustrating the promotion, understanding and acknowledgement of older disabled volunteers as having an important and active role within the community.

Not only do organisations benefit from volunteers but they can also offer older disabled volunteers wonderful opportunities that bring about the following benefits;

- increased self-esteem and personal development
- increased skills
- community worth
- build new relationships through meeting new people
- feel a sense of purpose
- improved health.

Older volunteers are often able to offer more time and are more loyal and committed to volunteering. There is no reason why older volunteers with impairments would not also bring these qualities to their volunteering for the benefit of your organisation.

Defining impairment and disability

The social model of disability is a new approach which has been developed by disabled people. It highlights that social and structural barriers disable people and more needs to be done to make society accessible to everyone. Previously the medical model of disability used connotations that referred to disability with sympathy, abnormality and negativity. This new thinking around disability offers disabled people a voice to express themselves and highlight how disability should be understood. For instance, inaccessible transport, environment, information and discrimination in employment all act to disable those who have impairments. Understanding disability through the social model of disability demonstrates more needs to be done in society to eradicate prejudice and de-valuing against disabled people.

It is important that organisations understand that impairments affect people in many different ways; for example, deterioration of hearing would affect a person differently to someone who has sudden and significant loss of hearing in a short period of time.

Some older people experience disability at a later stage in life, when they find their health is deteriorating. Thus, it is important to try to understand that some older disabled people may find it challenging to accept that big changes are taking place in their life. Volunteering can offer them a positive stepping-stone.

2. BEFORE YOU START

There are policies that the organisation can write and implement before volunteers are recruited that will be useful to structure the volunteer programme.¹ These could be;

- goodwill agreement
- equal opportunities policy
- health and safety policy
- volunteer policy (which includes volunteer's expenses and insurance)
- grievance and discipline policy.

Organisations should not have a retirement age that they impose on their volunteers as this is discriminatory. Instead they should think about how they will manage volunteers as they grow older and implement a 'fitness for role' policy instead.

Any application form should offer volunteers an option to state whether or not they consider themselves disabled. This can lead onto prompting them to highlight any specific support needs or arrangements that the organisation needs to make. Once the volunteer has been recruited, it might be beneficial to devise a 'goodwill agreement' for the volunteers to agree to and sign. The agreement should highlight that sensitive information or conversations with fellow colleagues be kept private and confidential and not used negatively against the organisation in any capacity.

Organisations must examine how enabling or disabling their buildings are to volunteers by asking some simple questions;

- Is there an accessible toilet?
- Is there a lifts or/and ramps?
- Are the doors easy to open?
- Are signposts clear and visible?
- Are the telecom systems the only method to allow people access? as this would disable volunteers with hearing impairments.

Equipment that helps to make it easier for volunteers to carry out their tasks also needs to be considered. Talk this through with the volunteer first to find out what they would need (remember the experience of the same impairment affects everyone differently). Organisations may be eligible for a grant from their local disability advice centre to pay for equipment that they need in order to accommodate the volunteer.²

¹ Sample policies are available from Volunteering England at www.volunteering.org.uk/goodpractice

² Further grant information is available from local disability charities, social services, community care grants, RNID and RNIB

Also, making information accessible in different formats is worthwhile and not costly. Ideas include;

- large print formats, anything larger than size 14 point font is acceptable, for volunteers whose sight is deteriorating
- communication aids such as text phones and hearing loops for volunteers with hearing impairments
- a laptop might be a better option for a volunteer finding it challenging using a mouse to navigate
- an adjustable chair to make sitting comfortable and not restrictive.

Be clear you know why you want to recruit older volunteers with disabilities – and convey this in literature about your organisation so that you are sending out the right messages. And practice what you preach – words with no actions are no good.

Training

There are training courses that offer valuable information regarding disability awareness; it may be effective to invite a trainer to your organisation to deliver the course so that the organisation as a whole has an up to date knowledge on issues surrounding disability and it gives staff the opportunity to ask questions and clarify things.

Language

Training courses often cover language. They can offer support to help individuals become aware that use of certain words maybe regarded as offensive. Here is a list of words that have negative connotations and suitable alternatives;

Unacceptable	Acceptable
Wheelchair bound	Wheelchair user
The disabled, invalid	People with disabilities or an impairment
Spastic	A person who has cerebral palsy
Handicapped	A person with disabilities
Sufferer	Someone who has ‘x’ condition/impairment
Special needs	Support needs
Mental patient	Someone with mental health issues
Deaf and dumb	Someone with a hearing and speaking impairment
Retarded	Someone with learning difficulties

3. RECRUITING

Networking is the key to attracting volunteers. Find out about local organisations and go to them. Tell them about your organisation and the kinds of volunteering roles you have to offer and that you are keen to involve older volunteers with disabilities. They may have service users who would benefit from the opportunity to volunteer, or they may have networks they could use to send out information. Have information about your organisation ready to leave behind.

Possible places to look for are;

- job centres
- libraries
- volunteer centres
- MENCAP
- MIND
- Multiple Sclerosis Society
- local projects
- local authority
- doctor's surgeries and hospitals
- supermarket notice boards.

Try to organise a meeting with representatives from the above to find out if they have anyone who may be suitable as a volunteer. Then talk about opportunities available, that you want to involve older people with disabilities and the support you can offer. Current volunteers could also act as ambassadors who could network and attract potential volunteers by demonstrating the positive factors of volunteering.

Organisations wanting to produce leaflets to attract older disabled volunteers should consider using simple eye catching information with pictures of disabled people looking able and independent. Make it clear that you want to involve people with disabilities, and why they should come and volunteer with you – highlight the benefits they will gain from being involved such as having fun, making new friends, giving something back to their community etc. It may also be useful to produce some simple posters that can be put up on notice boards in libraries and volunteer centres.

First contact

When recruiting volunteers who are disabled, first and foremost it is important to take into consideration that a particular impairment affects people in different ways, therefore it is always key to approach older disabled volunteers with an open mind and to be as flexible as possible.

- First, arrange an informal meeting with the potential volunteer
- If the volunteer has an impairment that provokes memory loss will they need a letter with a time and date?
- Is the location of your organisation easy to find and get to? If not, then you may need to produce maps with transport information.

Before you meet it would be beneficial to firstly write down what you would like to gain from the informal meeting. This will form a framework that you will be able to work within when meeting other potential volunteers. During the informal meeting, it is important to find out as much as possible about your volunteer, making a master list of questions could help direct the informal meeting and ensure you are extracting all the information you require from the conversation. Some things to consider include;

- How many hours would the volunteer want to offer in a week? The volunteer may want to offer a lot of time, however it may be more practical to start with the minimum number of hours a week and to increase the hours in small quantities.
- What day(s) of the week is the volunteer available? Routine can be very important for older disabled volunteers and they may have other commitments. If this is the case, keep the time and date consistent on a weekly basis so that they can easily fit around their day to day activities.
- What skills the volunteer has and the types of volunteering activities they may have an interest in.
- Will the volunteer need any support to better carry out their tasks? For example a mentor or escort.
- It is vital that the volunteer's abilities are matched with the tasks in hand. It is also important to identify if they have any support needs to aid their volunteering and so that you are able to match the task to the volunteer successfully. An example of this, a volunteer with rheumatoid arthritis may need tasks that require no/minimal physical activity.
- Be prepared to accept that volunteers may not always be able to volunteer for long periods of time due to health or age relating conditions. For example volunteers with multiple sclerosis may find it difficult to tolerate the heat and/or offer long hours of work thus needing time away to rest. One suggestion for an organisation to manage this is to have a rota with people who are only called in occasionally.
- Some volunteers may find it hard to learn new things, so do not overload the volunteer with too much information. An example of this could be asking a volunteer who has learning difficulties to use a new application on a computer.

You may wish to consider the following questions to find out more about the volunteer;

- Are there any particular situations that make you feel stressed?
- How are you able to cope with different amounts of stress?
- Is there anything you would like to share that will help us make your volunteering more enjoyable?

Volunteer requirements may not match up with opportunities available within your organisation, if this happens, then it is always good practice to have contact information of volunteer centres or other organisations that the volunteer can be referred to. Explain clearly to the volunteer why you are unable to offer them an opportunity at this time, but they could contact you again, or refer to a volunteer centre or other organisations that may have different roles available. Don't feel you

have to accept them just because they have come to see you. It is important that they will be happy in their role and it is a suitable match.

Aim to acquire two referee contact names and addresses. You may want to devise a form that you can send to the referees explaining the role that the volunteer is interested in and requesting them to tell you if they feel the volunteer is suitable to carry out that role, more about the volunteer and their relationship with the volunteer.

4. SUPPORTING VOLUNTEERS

Once an organisation and volunteer match has been made, you should offer the new volunteer a thorough induction. Here is a list of things to consider within the induction programme;

- Inform the volunteer of the volunteer expense policy; that all out of pocket expenses will be reimbursed, and how to claim. It is important for organisations to take into consideration that some volunteers may need taxis. Is the organisation able to reimburse these costs?
- Take the volunteer through all health and safety procedures.
- Assign them a buddy or mentor to help them in their first few days or weeks.
- Devise a volunteer grievance and discipline procedure, highlighting what will happen if either the volunteer or organisation feel the volunteering is not successful, and strategies to overcome any problems, such as the volunteer feeling unsupported by their supervisor.
- Devise an exit strategy and go through this with the volunteer keeping them informed of what would happen if they wanted to stop volunteering. It might be very worthwhile and important to find out;
 1. Why the volunteer is leaving the organisation
 2. Suggestions for the organisation to improve their system for volunteers
 3. What they have gained from volunteering with the organisation

5. INFORMATION RELATING TO SPECIFIC IMPAIRMENTS

The following are the most typical impairments to affect people as they grow older, however bear in mind that not all volunteers will fall into one of these categories. Disability is wide and varied and must be understood through the eyes of the volunteer. Here are some pointers about how to cater for older volunteers with specific impairments;

Loss of mobility

- Transport – how to get to and from the place of volunteering, thus considering the volunteer may need to take a taxi or require an escort to travel with them.
- Place of volunteering must be accessible – ie doors and corridors that are accessible to volunteers who are wheelchair users or have other physical impairments, a disabled access toilet, a lift and/or ramps instead of steps.

Once at the project is there a lot of walking? Is the volunteer expected to stand for long periods of time – how can this be made easier for the volunteer?

- Distance – how far can the volunteer travel to and from the place of volunteering. Ask the volunteer how far is a comfortable journey for them to make.

Sight loss

- Are leaflets, publications, newsletters available in large print and/or audio. The recommended minimum font size for any publication for older people is 14 point or larger.
- Health and safety and risk management considerations – policy that no one should leave bags/boxes on the floor, chairs out, drawers and cupboards open – as these are particular hazards for people who have loss of peripheral vision (tunnel vision), but potential hazards for everyone else too.
- Communication – you may need to keep in touch with some volunteers by telephone and not letter.

Hearing loss

- Hearing loops on the telephone systems.
- Hearing loss is very often about pitch/range rather than volume. So do not shout at someone with hearing loss – speak slowly and clearly.
- Ask the volunteers what method of communication they prefer, eg they may prefer things to be written down or to lip-read. If they lip-read, make sure you stand in front of the person and look at them whenever you speak to them.
- Make sure background noise is reduced to a minimum such as turning off or down radios.

Dementia

- Write down any appointments, events or arrangements for a volunteer with memory loss.
- Be prepared to telephone the volunteer regularly and remind them of any appointments.
- Regular, set times and days for volunteering and simple tasks may suit a volunteer with dementia better to maintain a routine in their life.

Arthritis

- People with arthritis may have good days and bad days as their condition fluctuates thus, be prepared to accept and understand that sometimes they may not be able to volunteer.
- Temperature and weather conditions can affect arthritis. Consider this when placing a volunteer in a suitable role. For example, volunteering for long periods of time in the outdoors during winter may not be appropriate for an older person with arthritis or positioning their desk to avoid draughts and air conditioning units may be important to them.

- Where possible offer equipment that can help an older volunteer with arthritis to be more comfortable, for example an adjustable chair.

The main thing to bear in mind is to ask the volunteer how they would like to be treated and what makes it harder or easier for them to volunteer. It will be different for each individual. Also remember to regularly ask the volunteer if they are still happy and comfortable in their role as their condition may change over time and they may need more or less support according to their condition.

6. AGEING

Ageing happens to us all, it shouldn't necessarily be seen as negative. On the contrary, aging in the workplace suggests that your organisation has a loyal and committed team and that you do not discriminate. If a volunteer's health deteriorates during their time with your organisation, it is important to understand how best you can help them continue their volunteering. Revising the question of support needs maybe useful. Keep revisiting this question with the volunteer, as his/her disability maybe turbulent at times thus it is important to accept that some tasks a volunteer could do before may not be suited to them anymore. This is not to be taken negatively, all it requires is that the volunteer's supervisor maintains close communication with the volunteer on how they themselves feel about their performance in completing tasks and together decide on making changes.

- It is vital that the supervisor does not make the volunteer feel unable to cope with the tasks in hand as the volunteer will know best how they are managing their workload.
- It maybe worthwhile to devise a simple performance form that can act as a review on how the volunteer feels, it also gives the supervisor the chance to draw attention to or address specific issues. Examples of supervisory issues could be time keeping, inability take instructions etc.
- It is vital that you offer support rather than criticise or impose. Remember it is the volunteer who will know how well they are feeling on a particular day and whether they complete tasks to the best of their ability.
- Is there another less demanding role you can offer them?
- They may feel that the organisation cannot cope if they leave – make sure they understand that if they want to continue volunteering you will support them to do so, but if they feel they can no longer volunteer you will accommodate this as well.

This guide was written by Jaya Gajparia of Active Volunteering by Disabled People for VITA

‘Active Volunteering by Disabled People’ is an example of a brokerage service to people with disabilities, providing them with volunteering opportunities. The project is based in the London Borough of Barnet and has two partners, a local borough disability advice centre called Disability Action in the Borough of Barnet and CSV’s Retired and Senior Volunteer Programme (RSVP). Both partners offer expertise in the areas of volunteering and disability that help make the project successful. In two years Active Volunteering by Disabled People has registered approximately 100 volunteers.



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