



navca
local focus national voice

Inclusive Volunteering: Advice and guidance from local infrastructure

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About NAVCA and our members

About NAVCA

NAVCA (National Association for Voluntary and Community Action) is the national membership body for local voluntary and community sector (VCS) infrastructure organisations in England. Our vision is that every local area has a thriving voluntary and community sector, and strong social action to drive justice and active citizenship. NAVCA is also a partner in the Vision for Volunteering, collaborative project designed to create a better future for volunteering. [Find out more about NAVCA here.](#)

About NAVCA members

NAVCA members are local infrastructure organisations, and support over 165,000 local charities and voluntary groups across the country, helping them to thrive and deliver essential services within their communities. They work with and support their local voluntary sectors in many ways, and are a catalyst for change to enable communities to flourish. Local infrastructure organisations encourage and nurture volunteering opportunities, so that people can build connections and work together on things they care about, driving positive change locally. [Find out more about NAVCA members here.](#)



THANK
YOU

Thank you to all NAVCA members and partners who contributed to this guide: Sandwell CVO, Community Action Network (CAN), Cambridge CVS, Voluntary Action Leicestershire, Volunteer Centre Newcastle, Thurrock CVS, VAST, Dudley CVS, Voluntary Action Leeds, and Clinks.

Why inclusive volunteering?



Volunteering is essential to thriving communities, where everyone can take action on the things that matter to them, health and wellbeing improves, and communities become more connected and more resilient. When volunteering is as accessible and inclusive as it can be, we ensure that people from all backgrounds are equally able to contribute to their local communities.

NAVCA members, local infrastructure organisations, are at the heart of volunteering in their local areas. They nurture an environment where volunteering can grow, support small charities and community groups to host volunteers, provide resources and training on effective volunteer management, and promote local volunteering opportunities.

We asked volunteer involving organisations what they find most difficult when it comes to enabling inclusive volunteering, where everyone can access volunteering opportunities, and are appreciated, celebrated, and nurtured equally. In this guide, we share the experience and expertise of NAVCA members in inclusive volunteering, so that you can be inspired and empowered to make your own volunteering practice more inclusive.

About the Vision for Volunteering

Volunteering is a powerful force for change in the world, but we know that currently it isn't equally accessible or enjoyable for everyone. There have been huge changes in the way that people volunteer – who, how and in what roles – because of national challenges such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis, the rise in loneliness and a decline in public trust. Volunteering needs to adapt to remain relevant, strong and attractive.



The [Vision for Volunteering](#) is a framework for improving the volunteering landscape through exploring five different themes: **Awareness and appreciation; Power; Equity and inclusion; Collaboration; and Experimentation.** Many NAVCA members have designed local volunteering strategies informed by the Vision.

It is a collaborative project to create a diverse, innovative, ambitious, equitable and person-centred future for volunteering. It sets out positive a view of what volunteering needs to look like, and how this will make volunteers feel about their roles, by 2032.

We work with our members and the other Vision for Volunteering partners (NCVO, Volunteering Matters, Association of Volunteer Managers and Sport England, Muslim Charities Forum and DCMS) to bring the Vision to life locally, focusing on collaboration and coproduction.



Diversity in volunteering

"My organisation knows it needs a more diverse volunteer base, particularly young people, people from Black and racially minoritised communities, and disabled people. What can we do to get started with promoting our volunteering directly to these communities?"



"I think we can all be guilty of not taking a bird's eye view from time to time, and only focusing on what's going on inside our own organisation. We've found that **by 'zooming out', we can make exciting new partnerships** that really support those aims of diversity in volunteering. For example, we host the Sandwell Volunteer Managers' Network – a peer support group for anyone who recruits, trains, manages and supports volunteers. We encourage members of the network to talk about their work and make sure everyone really understands the services/activities they offer. Our 'mantra' is that **one group's client could well be another group's volunteer**, and vice-versa."

– Kim Fuller, Growing Participation and Volunteering Mentor, Sandwell CVO

"A good starting point is to review how your volunteering opportunities are presented – especially on your **website, which acts as the front door to your charity**. Ask whether the language and imagery you use feel welcoming and inclusive to people from diverse backgrounds. Consider **whether your promotional materials are accessible**, such as offering them in large print, Easy Read, or community languages. Using plain English and ensuring clarity in your messaging will also help reach people with English as a second language."

– Amy Collins, Head of VCS Development, Community Action Network (CAN)



"Ask your current volunteers what they get out of volunteering. Try to find something unique about your organisation and then make sure you mention it prominently in your recruitment publicity drive. It's also worth **looking at what other organisations are doing**, particularly those looking to recruit similar types of volunteers."

– Christine Trevorrow, Senior Development Worker, Cambridge CVS

Volunteer Centre Newcastle (Volunteering Matters) provide lots of useful resources around volunteer recruitment, including '10 top tips for engaging young volunteers', '**Writing an advert for volunteers**', and much more. [Check out the full list of resources here.](#)



Voluntary Action Leicestershire also have a useful **checklist of things to include in a volunteer advert**. [View the full list here.](#)

NAVCA member Thurrock CVS **worked directly with young people with special educational needs to co-create more inclusive volunteering**. Partnering with alternative education provider TCHC Group, they listened first – hosting informal conversations, then an interactive session, which evolved into a student-led research project. The **young people explored why volunteering didn't feel accessible** (finding reasons such as stigma, lack of knowledge, and a fear of not fitting in) and came up with solutions, such as **one-off roles, youth-led events, and flexible options**. Their ideas are already shaping future recruitment fairs and have sparked new volunteer placements at Thurrock CVS. This is a great example of how you can work directly with a group to shape volunteering to suit their needs.

Top tips

- **Zoom out and build partnerships:** Look beyond your own organisation. Collaborate with other groups to reach wider audiences. Remember, one group's client could be another's volunteer.
- **Review how you present your roles:** Your website is your front door – is it welcoming? Use inclusive language and imagery, and ensure your promotional materials are accessible (e.g. large print, Easy Read, community languages).
- **Speak to your current volunteers:** Find out what they enjoy and why they stay – and use their stories to promote volunteering authentically. Highlight what makes your organisation unique.
- **Learn from others:** Use existing resources to strengthen your approach. Organisations like Volunteering Matters and Voluntary Action Leicestershire have practical tips and templates to get you started.
- **Co-create with underrepresented communities:** Follow the example of Thurrock CVS and involve people directly in designing inclusive roles. Listen first, and let their ideas guide your recruitment efforts.



Image: Thurrock CVS



"We manage to attract volunteers, but we sometimes find that they lose interest at the application stage. Is there something we can change about this process to ensure we're getting all the information that we need, whilst ensuring that potential new volunteers aren't put off?"

"To make volunteering genuinely inclusive, it's important to offer **flexible and accessible application processes**. Instead of requiring a detailed written application, allow people to express interest via a short video or informal conversation. **Building relationships** with local community groups, youth organisations, and disability networks can also help you better understand the barriers some people face and allow you to reach potential volunteers more effectively. Most importantly, ensure that your roles are adaptable, your environment is welcoming, and that volunteers from all backgrounds feel valued and supported. **Inclusion should be embedded not just in how you recruit, but in how you retain and celebrate your volunteers.**"

– Amy Collins, Head of VCS Development, Community Action Network (CAN)

NAVCA member Cambridge CVS also spoke directly to a volunteer about potential barriers to applying. Here's what they said: "The **potential volunteer may find the application process difficult**, for example, if it has to be done online and they don't have access to the internet. Some find reading and writing challenging, and others understand pictures better than words. There may sometimes be a language barrier. If references are needed, then some people may find these difficult to obtain, particularly if they have never worked before, so you need to explain that they could be character references from people who they know."

– Amy, Volunteer, Cambridge CVS

Top tips

– **Make the application process flexible and accessible:** Offer alternatives to written forms, like short videos or informal chats. Be mindful of digital exclusion, literacy barriers, and language needs. Clearly explain things like reference requirements to remove unnecessary hurdles.

– **Build inclusive relationships from the start:** Work with local groups to better understand the barriers some people face. Design adaptable roles and create a welcoming environment where all volunteers feel valued and supported.

Supporting volunteers with additional needs



"Our organisation knows it's important to enable volunteering from people that may need additional support, for example people with disabilities or mental health difficulties. We don't have a lot of resource. How can we start to be more adaptable?"



"Inclusive volunteering is the process of recruiting and managing volunteers from across our community, with **particular emphasis on those members of the community who may be effectively excluded through issues such as disability, culture or poverty.** We like to use the **social model of disability** to help us approach supporting volunteers with additional needs."

– Christine Trevorrow, Senior Development Worker, Cambridge CVS

- Vast Services (Voluntary Action Stoke on Trent) run an Inclusive **Volunteer Buddy scheme**. Volunteer Buddies work in partnership with Project Officers who specialise in volunteering to identify supportive placements; support, listen to, and encourage individuals who lack confidence to recognise their own potential; complete logs of interactions with volunteers or sessions with voluntary sector organisations. [Read Johura's story here.](#)

Volunteer Centre Newcastle have developed a **Volunteer Inclusion Plan (ViP)** to help volunteers with additional needs.

"The Volunteer Inclusion Plan is simple, focused, non-clinical and should be used in conjunction with your normal recruitment process. It is to be used when relevant to the role applied for and to **enable an open conversation about the volunteer's needs in order to begin their volunteering role.**

It allows the volunteer coordinator to agree "reasonable adjustments" to facilitate this. The ViP is not a static document and during support sessions it should be reviewed, updates recorded where necessary, and it should be **used to allow the volunteer to be valued and supported by the organisation.**" [Find out more about the ViP here.](#)



“Consider the inherent requirements of a role i.e. what must be done, then ask the applicant how they are able to achieve this – don’t make assumptions.

Disabled people are used to solving problems. It may be that the applicant can undertake the role in a different way or share the role with another volunteer with different skills.”

– Christine Trevorrow, Senior Development Worker, Cambridge CVS

Top tips

– **Start with open, supportive conversations:** Use tools like a Volunteer Inclusion Plan (ViP) to understand each volunteer’s needs and agree on reasonable adjustments from the outset. Keep it simple and person-centred.

– **Focus on what’s essential in the role:** Identify the core tasks of a volunteer role, then explore how someone might achieve them differently. Don’t assume limitations – ask the volunteer what works for them.

– **Build confidence through support:** Consider a buddy system or peer support model to help volunteers feel welcomed, encouraged, and empowered, especially if they’re new or lack confidence.

– **Apply the social model of disability:** Remove barriers in the environment, not the person. Think access, flexibility, and inclusion from the start, not just at the recruitment stage.



Image: Dudley CVS

“People want more flexible opportunities to get involved in their communities.

Dudley CVS’s new initiative, ‘Time to give where you live’ offers people the opportunity to try out helping out in their communities without having to make a long-term commitment. It lets people know what one-off help groups need. **People can choose which calls for help they want to respond to without any obligation.** ‘Time to give where you live’ offers a range of one-off chances to let people try out as many new activities as they like in a way that works for them and their schedules.”

– John Goodman, Group Development Officer for Dudley CVS

Supporting ex-offenders into volunteering

“My organisation might start offering volunteering opportunities to ex-offenders, but I’m worried about the risks – as a Volunteer Manager, what might I need to have in place before we try this out?”



NAVCA partner **Clinks** supports, promotes and advocates for the voluntary sector working with people in the criminal justice system and their families. Their vision is of a vibrant, independent and resilient voluntary sector that enables people to transform their lives. [Find out more here.](#)

Clinks partner **Step Together Volunteering** advise that “organisations should not routinely undertake DBS checks. Just because a volunteer is eligible for a DBS check, doesn’t mean you necessarily need to undertake one. **If the volunteer will not have unsupervised contact with vulnerable adults or young people a DBS check is unnecessary and potentially discriminatory.**” [Read the full blog here.](#)

“Welcoming ex-offenders as volunteers can be a valuable step toward inclusion, but it’s understandable to have concerns around managing risk. **The key is not to adopt a one-size-fits-all approach. Having a criminal conviction shouldn’t automatically exclude someone from volunteering**—instead, assess each application on a case-by-case basis. It’s important to be clear about which types of convictions may be incompatible with specific roles, especially those involving children or vulnerable adults, and ensure this is reflected in your role descriptions and risk assessments.

“Before offering these opportunities, your organisation should develop a clear and transparent policy on involving ex-offenders as volunteers. This policy should outline eligibility criteria, how disclosures will be assessed, and the reasoning behind any decisions made. It’s also vital to have an open and supportive application process where individuals can disclose convictions in a safe and confidential way before proceeding. Having this framework in place not only helps manage risk, but also shows a commitment to fairness, rehabilitation, and second chances.”

– Amy Collins, Head of VCS Development, Community Action Network

Changing organisational culture



"We've started to make real progress in attracting a more diverse group of volunteers, but some of the people that have been volunteering for ages seem 'set in their ways', like they don't want to change who they volunteer with? How can we get volunteers onboard with being more inclusive?"

"One way to encourage more inclusive attitudes is to **actively involve your experienced volunteers in the process of welcoming and supporting new people**. You could start with a simple, informal skills audit to understand what your existing volunteers enjoy and where their strengths lie. For those who are interested, offer them more responsibility – such as **becoming a buddy to a new volunteer, helping with inductions, or even leading parts of training sessions**."

– Amy Collins, Head of VCS Development, Community Action Network

Rich Warrington, NAVCA's Deputy CEO, shared his **top tips** for involving existing volunteers in recruiting new volunteers:

- Work closely with your volunteers in implementing change – some volunteers enjoy the **stability** of working with someone they've known for a long time.
- Make sure existing volunteers have a **voice** in the process, and that you implement change at their pace.
- Ensure that you **appreciate and celebrate** existing volunteers all year round.
- Include volunteers in **training around inclusion**.

"Creating **regular opportunities for volunteers to connect socially** – like informal get-togethers, team lunches, or celebration events – can help build relationships and encourage a stronger sense of community. **Mixing up volunteer shifts can also be effective, ensuring that newer volunteers work alongside more experienced ones**, promoting learning and collaboration. Crucially, involve all volunteers in shaping changes to the volunteer programme – ask for their input, listen to their concerns, and make them feel like a valued part of the team. **When people feel consulted and respected, they're much more likely to embrace inclusion and support the evolving culture of the organisation.**"

– Amy Collins, Head of VCS Development, Community Action Network

Enabling volunteers to develop their own projects



"I really like the idea in the [Vision for Volunteering](#) about enabling volunteers to develop their own projects. How can I get started with that?"

One Knowsley – a NAVCA member and VCQA (Volunteer Centre Quality Accreditation) holder – has shown how small pots of funding can spark big change. Through their Heritage Grants project, funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, they acted as a **trusted bridge between grassroots VCFSE groups and a major funder**. By piloting micro grants of £250 to £3,000, One Knowsley opened the door to heritage funding for local groups who had never accessed it before. From 'friends of' groups to volunteer-led initiatives, **this approach empowered communities to shape their own heritage activity**, build confidence and lay the foundations for future bids. It's a brilliant reminder that meaningful impact doesn't always require a big programme – sometimes, all it takes is listening to volunteers, backing their ideas, and giving just enough resource to help them make it happen.

Member story: Volunteers of Leeds

"Following the launch of the volunteering strategy in 2023, our attention was drawn to the need and desire to begin **raising the profile of the contributions people from diverse communities make to volunteering**. We understand that people from diverse backgrounds can often engage in informal volunteering and many wouldn't consider themselves as 'volunteers' at all. The concept of Volunteers of Leeds was developed as a way to meet this need.

The Volunteer Centre came across a **young woman who was looking for a short term project to do while she was home from university** during the summer, we described the Volunteer of Leeds project and she enthusiastically got on board. The volunteer reached out to organisations to ask if they knew of volunteers that would like to take part. They helped with the recruitment of volunteer photographers and arranged visits to photograph and interview a diverse range of volunteers.

Following the success of this project, a student from Leeds Arts University reached out to Voluntary Action Leeds. They were keen to pick up a project that would raise the profile of diverse volunteers. This was born from a sense of frustration that oil portraiture typically features white, wealthy men. This volunteer was determined to break the trend!

Another **volunteer that had called into the Volunteer Centre got on board too, he was seeking asylum in Leeds and worked at a university as an arts lecturer in his home country**. It was the perfect team.

We **asked the sector to nominate diverse volunteers to have their portraits painted** and the volunteers visited a range of charities to interview and photograph volunteers. The exhibition was held at Leeds City Museum who were very enthusiastic to showcase a volunteer led project that holds up people from diverse backgrounds.

Top tips

- Keep hold of the idea that volunteering is mostly available to people with privilege. We must continue to champion the investment of resources to **remove barriers** for people.
- Make a **list of creative projects that can hold up and celebrate people from diverse communities**. Then keep an eye out for volunteers that can lead the project. If you're running a Volunteer Centre then it's only a matter of time before the right person appears.
- Have a **clear idea of what you want to achieve** in relation to diversity in volunteering. This will help you to spot funding opportunities as they arise.
- **Make the best use of your Volunteer Centre**. People with amazing skills and ideas will visit, be open to designing projects that meet their skills and interest, particularly where that has a positive impact on inclusivity.
- **Reach out to your local authority to display art works or volunteer led projects**. They are keen to showcase community led activity and it has the bonus of making arts venues more accessible to people from diverse communities.

Challenges and learning points

- The age-old issue of **capacity** – volunteer led projects still require support and time from a dedicated volunteer coordinator. Creating equity in volunteering requires resourcing. Try not to let this put you off though, make projects smaller and more manageable rather than saying no.

To see our fabulous volunteers, visit [Volunteers of Leeds – Doing Good Leeds.](#)

– Andrina Dawson, Volunteering and Capacity Building Manager, Voluntary Action Leeds

Local VCS infrastructure organisations

For thriving communities, where people can take action on the things which matter to them.



Leadership and advocacy

Mobilising and encouraging community action, strengthening our sector's voice and influence on key decision-makers and funders.

Partnerships and collaboration

Creating opportunities and driving effective joint working by building networks of local organisations and strategic partners.



Capacity building

Providing practical support and development for local people and organisations, to nurture skills and build community resilience.

Volunteering

Building an environment in which volunteers and their communities thrive, by encouraging and nurturing volunteering opportunities.

