

Only 6% of disabled people are working as volunteers, despite the fact that disabled people of working age now make up one fifth of the population. Volunteering can be a valuable route into paid employment for disabled people and disabled people as volunteers are a relatively untapped resource, enhancing the working capacity of organisations with their time and skills.

We are often asked about guidelines and good practice relating to disabled volunteers. This can be a complex area and unfortunately the majority of volunteers are not covered by the Equality Act. A big barrier is that volunteers are not usually eligible for assistance through government schemes such as Access to Work either, although it is worth bearing in mind that many adjustments cost nothing, or very small amounts. In addition, any adjustments made may benefit a wider range of employees and users of services than the person the adjustment was originally made for.

Organisations need to consider how they can attract disabled people to volunteer and to avoid making stereotypical assumptions about disabled people's capabilities and requirements. Ask potential volunteers what their requirements are, they are the experts. More often than not it is a case of doing things a bit differently and thinking laterally about the role, rather than buying lots of expensive equipment. Recruitment and publicity materials should be available in a variety of formats and channelled through organisations of disabled people, disability press and employment support organisations. These organisations (such as Breakthrough UK Ltd), often support disabled people into volunteering placements and can offer support and guidance to the placement provider to ensure that the experience is beneficial to both parties. If you have a budget for training, consideration should also be given to providing disability action training to all staff and existing volunteers. This may help to dispel any unhelpful attitudes, remove barriers and ensure that disabled people are treated with equal respect by all.

An area of concern for many disabled people is that many volunteering opportunities are available through organisations which have traditionally held paternalistic and patronising views towards disabled people, buying into the notion that disabled people need charity and have to be helped by non-disabled people in order to lead fulfilling lives. If your organisation can show that this is not the case then this will help you to attract more disabled people as volunteers.

The Disability Rights Commission wrote guidance for volunteer opportunity providers which looked at how to treat disabled volunteers fairly. This document can be found at the following web address but note that some of the legal content no longer stands:



[http://www.disabilityfwd.co.uk/uploads/File/Guidance for Volunteer Opportunity Providers Apr07.doc](http://www.disabilityfwd.co.uk/uploads/File/Guidance%20for%20Volunteer%20Opportunity%20Providers%20Apr07.doc)

The Equality and Human Rights Commission took over the responsibilities of the Disability Rights Commission in October 2007.

There have been calls for disabled people working as volunteers to be included in future civil rights legislation. In the meantime, it is suggested that organisations follow good practice and aim for volunteers to have the same rights and access to reasonable adjustments as employees wherever possible. Breakthrough UK has run a thriving disabled people's volunteer project, with volunteers working both within Breakthrough and on external placements throughout Greater Manchester. Breakthrough has recently adopted a volunteer's policy to ensure that all volunteering by disabled people within the company is actively supported, and that best practice is always applied.

Voluntary and Community Sector organisations must ensure that their volunteers not subjected to unlawful discrimination – they may well come under the services provisions of the Equality Act. The Equality and Human Rights Commission Helpline can offer advice on this. They can be contacted on telephone number 0845 604 6610 and text phone number 0845 604 6620. There is a web enquiry form that can be accessed from their website.

Currently working as an unpaid volunteer should not affect benefits in most circumstances, but disabled people in receipt of benefits may be expected to declare the fact that they are volunteering to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). If you get any out of pocket expenses such as travel money you may be asked to provide receipts. For more details see the DWP's guidance on volunteering whilst claiming benefits at: [www.volunteering.org.uk/NR/rdonlyres/D1C7064B-561C-4057-84ED-77AF8CEEDA93/0/VG12006.pdf](http://www.volunteering.org.uk/NR/rdonlyres/D1C7064B-561C-4057-84ED-77AF8CEEDA93/0/VG12006.pdf)

It is good practice to provide out of pocket expenses. The Department for Work and Pensions have recently clarified that volunteers on benefits do not have to declare 'reasonable meal expenses'.

For further advice, Volunteering England has a wealth of information on good practice in volunteering at [www.volunteering.org.uk](http://www.volunteering.org.uk)

Call their information line on: 0800 028 3304 (Freephone / text phone)

Email: [information@volunteeringengland.org](mailto:information@volunteeringengland.org)

For more information on any of the above, contact us on:

Tel: **0161 273 5412**, Answerphone Text Phone: **0161 273 5727**

Email: [advocacy@breakthrough-uk.co.uk](mailto:advocacy@breakthrough-uk.co.uk).

Further good practice information is available online at  
[www.breakthrough-uk.co.uk](http://www.breakthrough-uk.co.uk).