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Guidelines for Reducing and Removing Digital Barriers for Disabled Volunteers

Alternative formats: If you require these guidelines in alternative formats, please contact us via email: d.kamerade2@salford.ac.uk

Feedback: We invite you to share your experiences with us as you use these guidelines. Your feedback is invaluable, it will contribute to the continuous improvement of these guidelines, ensuring they meet the needs of all users. We appreciate your time and look forward to hearing from you.

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We recognise the challenge of presenting these guidelines from a research team to voluntary groups and organisations that have practical experience with digital inclusion of disabled volunteers. We hope these guidelines—developed from research evidence, our expertise in digital engagement, vocational rehabilitation, and occupational therapy, and in consultation with disabled experts by experience—will complement existing practices to make volunteering more digitally accessible to disabled adults and to support a more inclusive environment.

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Structure of the guidelines

These guidelines are organised into four main stages of the volunteering process. They highlight digital challenges and offer potential solutions to overcome these barriers. Additional details and a Glossary of Terms are available in the Appendix.

The literature and additional resources used in developing these guidelines are listed in the Bibliography. Weblinks to supporting information and tools are included, though they were accurate as of 2024. Please note that weblinks may become outdated if online resources are updated or reorganised.

The document's accessibility was improved using the Microsoft Word accessibility checker function.

Introduction

Why have these guidelines been developed?

The purpose of these guidelines is to support and promote digital inclusion for disabled adults volunteering within voluntary sector organisations, recognising a wide range of impairments, including physical, mental, intellectual, and sensory disabilities.

Research has identified that voluntary work is becoming more interlinked with the digital world both through access to volunteering as well as online volunteering tasks. More than half of volunteers report that their work involves a mix of online and offline tasks, and they highlight that volunteering online offers disabled people an opportunity to get involved where accessibility was previously a challenge for them.

However, whilst digital platforms and technology can help facilitate volunteering, their success does depend on their availability and accessibility, and on the digital skills of potential volunteers. Identifying and overcoming digital barriers are therefore essential for disabled adults to engage fully in volunteering activities.

Key to increasing digital inclusivity is understanding the different forms of and influencing factors in the digital divide - a concept defined as the gap that exists between people who have access to modern information and communication technology and those who lack access or for whom digital tools are not made accessible.

Three levels of digital divide are identified: -

- **Level 1 Access Divide:** This level includes the lack of infrastructure, such as broadband, and/or unaffordability of devices and internet services. For disabled adults, it also includes the accessibility of software, websites, devices, and other digital tools.
- **Level 2 Skills and Competencies Divide:** variations in ability to use digital tools and navigate the internet and digital technologies effectively
- **Level 3 Usage Divide:** variations in how people use the internet and digital technologies (e.g. information seeking, social media) and the quality of the experience (e.g. effortless and pleasant experience)

Research indicates that the digital divide is significantly influenced by sociodemographic and economic factors, exacerbating disadvantages for certain groups. Disabled and non-disabled adults who are older, from lower-income households, recipients of social or disability-related benefits, renters from local authorities or housing associations,

those with lower education levels, and those living alone are at a higher risk of digital exclusion.

Hence, creating a digitally inclusive environment is not just about accommodating the identified needs of disabled volunteers or workers. Digital divide exists across populations and digital inclusivity is important to everyone in the organisation and the broader society.

Who are the guidelines for?

The guidelines are intended for organisations that engage disabled adults in volunteering but are uncertain about how to provide support or resources for the digital aspects of the role.

The guidelines may also be relevant to disabled adults who are considering or are already volunteering but are unsure about how to manage with the digital aspects of their volunteer role.

A broader range of key stakeholders who will find these guidelines useful includes informal and formal supporters and advocates of disabled adults who want to or are already volunteering.

While voluntary work is the primary emphasis, insights gained will also contribute to an understanding of disabled adults' inclusion in paid employment as many of the challenges related to digital inclusion of disabled adults in voluntary work are likely to be the same as those encountered in paid work.

How to use them?

The guidelines cover different stages of their volunteer journey. Some organisations may already have many of these strategies in place, reflecting their efforts to enhance digital inclusion. Other organisations may be at the beginning of this journey. It is not realistic to expect that all organisations will implement every strategy from the outset. Each organisation should assess what is feasible and reasonable for their context. They may have already identified priority areas and adopted some of these strategies and will determine their starting points accordingly. The key is to begin; even small steps can lead to significant change.

Scope, definitions and principles underpinning the guidelines

A note on scope and definitions

Volunteering. These guidelines focus on formal volunteering which is defined as giving unpaid help or working as a volunteer for any type of local, national or international organisation or charity.

Disability. Language regarding disability is continually evolving and debated. There is no universal agreement on terms and definitions, so we were based our decisions about the language and definitions on the input from the people with lived experience of disability, current best practices and the definition of disability used in Equality Act 2010. These guidelines are based on the social model of disability, which asserts that while people have impairments, the exclusion and discrimination that they experience are not due to their impairments themselves but because society is not organised to accommodate impairments and their needs. This negatively impacts disabled people's independence, choice, and control. By removing barriers, creating inclusive environments, and fostering social capital, society can promote equal opportunity and enhance participation for disabled people.

According to this model, impairments are disabling primarily due to societal barriers that exclude and discriminate against disabled people. Following the social model of disability, we refer to individuals with impairments as disabled adults or disabled volunteers. A disabled adult is anyone with a long-term mental or physical impairment, illness, or disability that significantly impacts daily activities. This definition aligns with the Equality Act 2010.

Disability and intersectionality. There is considerable diversity among disabled adults in terms of their impairments, needs, and personal identities. Each person's experiences and characteristics interact in complex ways, leading to different kinds of both digital and non-digital discrimination and exclusion. This diversity affects how disabled people should be supported when it comes to digital inclusion in volunteering. It is important to remember that a one-size-fits-all approach is inadequate, particularly in digital inclusion.

These guidelines were collaboratively produced utilizing: -

- Using the results from the Ditgitvol research project
- published literature/evidence
- experts-by-experience (disabled adults who were interviewed as part of the research project)
- disability advocates and practitioners in vocational rehabilitation and case management (from the research team and project partners)

- experts in digital engagement (from the research team)

The fundamental premise of social capital is that social networks are valuable in creating an environment to support and promote digital inclusion for disabled persons volunteering. Social capital includes solidarity, comraderies, helpful behaviors resulting from trust, respect, support and friendship.

Access to social networks which foster positive social capital can shape an individual's experience and willingness to engage with digital technologies. These networks can provide disabled adults with an opportunity for peer learning and support with adoption and use of digital tools, knowledge sharing and access to volunteering opportunities, and shared experiences.

The Guidelines: key points

This summary presents a guideline framework designed to promote digital inclusion within the voluntary sector, with a particular focus on volunteering. The guidelines were developed through a literature review, survey data analysis, interviews with disabled adults, and contributions from experts by experience, vocational rehabilitation and occupational health and digital engagement experts. The framework emphasises the importance of social capital and adheres to the social model of disability.

Key Stages of the Volunteering Journal and Digital Inclusion Strategies

1. Prepare For Recruitment

- Use varied communication channels.
- Promote inclusivity in digital communications.
- Ensure recruitment platforms and resources are accessible.
- Clearly define role responsibilities and accommodations.
- Publish an accessibility statement.

2. Onboarding

- Adopt a person-centered approach.
- Integrate assistive technologies into the digital infrastructure.
- Consider intersectionality factors.
- Combine assistive technologies with other support forms.

3. Development and Training

- Establish regular feedback mechanisms.
- Offer tailored digital skills training.
- Provide training on assistive technologies to all volunteers.
- Facilitate ongoing development with periodic reviews.

4. Retention and Exit

- Implement diverse communication strategies.
- Offer networking and community-building opportunities online.
- Conduct exit interviews focusing on digital inclusion.

These guidelines aim to create a digitally inclusive environment and reduce digital barriers for disabled people, ensuring a supportive and accessible volunteering experience.

The Guidelines

Stage one: Prepare for Recruitment

Recruiters need to be able to attract potential disabled volunteers and ensure they can access relevant information to make informed decisions about volunteering opportunities. The recruitment process should address the specific digital challenges faced by aspiring disabled volunteers and seek to minimize these barriers, ensuring equal opportunity in finding and applying for a volunteer roles.

Challenge:	Removing barriers:
How will they find out about your volunteering opportunities?	<p>Communicate with potential volunteers using varied means and channels.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remember that disabled adults are more likely to be digitally excluded from various common Internet uses, many of which are important digital skills relevant to off and online volunteering activities e.g., browsing websites, checking emails, using social media, online banking, and streaming videos or music. • Collaborate with disability organizations, support groups, and advocacy groups to reach potential disabled volunteers • Use multiple communication methods, including online (social media platforms, online networks and websites) and offline (e.g. word of mouth through existing volunteers, community champions and organizations, public libraries) • Where possible, make the information available in different formats (e.g. text, audio, video) • Offer extended deadlines for responses to emails and ensure that online content is accessible to those with different levels of digital proficiency and internet use.
Will they feel wanted and included?	<p>Promote inclusivity in all digital communication:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indicate that the role is open to disabled people • Include images and testimonials of disabled volunteers in communications, including promotional materials

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adopt organizational policies that promote accessibility in all areas of the organization and promote a culture of continuous learning and adaptation to new accessibility needs.
<p>Can disabled people access details about your volunteering opportunities?</p>	<p>Ensure accessibility of recruitment platforms and resources for disabled people to ensure a fair and equitable recruitment process.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider the usability and utility of the user interfaces to ensure a more equitable and effective user experience. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Usability assesses how easy user interfaces are to use. Can they find information quickly and easily? ○ Utility assesses functionality of the interface i.e., whether it does what the user needs it to do. • People with sensory impairments, such as vision or hearing, have lower access to and usage of digital devices and the internet, and the more severe the impairments the more likely they are to be digitally excluded. • The following accessibility practices would ensure that the platforms and digital resources are optimized for different assistive tools: - <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ providing descriptive alternative text for images and multimedia content ○ ensure high contrast for text to enhance readability ○ use semantic markup, e.g. use 'h1' tag for page headings and the 'p' tag for paragraphs ○ Provide subtitle and transcripts with your video content ○ Use software that supports accessibility features, such as captions and keyboard navigation. ○ Include a search feature ○ Structure pages logically ○ Publish an accessibility statement to explain the level of accessibility, the existing issues and plans to address ○ If you're building a new platform, you may choose software and processes that build accessibility into what you do. ○ Where appropriate, opt for a website instead of a native mobile app. In longer terms it is more effective to update it. ○ Specific tools exist to check accessibility

<p>Do potential volunteers understand what will be expected of them?</p>	<p>Clearly outline the role responsibilities, digital implications and accommodations available in your marketing material: -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use plain language and list specific tasks and time commitment required • Specify any digital technologies or platforms the volunteer will need to use (e.g., email, word processing, project management software, social media). • Include any necessary digital skills or competencies. • Provide details of available training and the support you will provide to disabled volunteers. • Support can involve a range of accommodations which may include (but is not limited to) assistive technologies, flexible schedules, modified tasks, and physical adjustments.
<p>Do I have to have everything in place at once?</p>	<p>Publish an accessibility statement to explain the level of accessibility, the existing issues and plans to address</p> <p>See relevant standards and legal requirements in Appendix 1 for more detailed guidelines.</p>

Stage two: Onboarding

For the recruiter, this is about welcoming people into the organisation and setting them up to be able to volunteer effectively. It involves working with the volunteer to identify and remove barriers that might prevent them doing what they need or want to, and identifying how they may be supported in their ongoing learning and development to meet the requirements of their volunteer role.

Challenge	Removing barriers:
One size does not fit all!	<p>Adopt a person-centered approach to ‘find a way of catering for everybody’ because treating people equally does not mean treating people identically:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask every volunteer what support with digital skills and access they might need, even if they have not disclosed an impairment • Remember, you don’t need to know what their specific impairment is. Instead, you need to know what barriers they might face and what support they need to overcome them. • Conduct an assessment to understand the unique needs, preferences, and goals of the individual. • Involve disabled people in decisions about their support and allow them to make informed choices about the support received. • Find out what digital technology the individual volunteer already uses and what they use it for, what are they confident with, what are they concerned about, what support might they need to develop skills • Think broadly; consider digital technology that is not just task/role specific – e.g., digital apps required to pay for parking on your site • Support and assistive technologies need to be context and person specific. But they might cost a little more. • Develop and agree a tailored induction plan, including channels and processes for communicating digital difficulties or changing needs

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regularly review and update these assessments and plans, to adapt to changing needs and to check whether previously agreed support is working. • Consider transforming the onboarding plan into a ‘digital accessibility passport’ that people can use and take away in future roles. <p>Longer term, a digital accessibility passport can enable more disabled people to engage in volunteering roles.</p>
<p>How can you make it easy for disabled volunteers to use the technologies quickly and easily when they start?</p>	<p>Work with IT to integrate assistive technologies into your existing digital infrastructure.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where possible and necessary, provide volunteers with their own devices, pre-configured with necessary accessibility features like screen readers, voice recognition, and customizable display settings. This will ensure immediate usability and reduce technical difficulties that might impact their confidence • If volunteers are using personal devices, ensure that these are going to be compatible with any organisational devices and assistive technology
<p>Can all disabled volunteers access the assistive technologies you have in place all the time?</p>	<p>Consider the impact of intersectionality factors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be aware of the broader socio-demographic features that might make it more challenging for a disabled volunteer to engage with the digital aspects of their role: - <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Those from lower-income households, recipients of social and disability-related benefits, renters from local authorities or housing associations, those with lower education levels, and individuals living alone, are significantly less likely to have digital devices, less likely to use them and less likely to have access to the Internet and more likely have difficulties using it. ○ Disability may be an additional factor for some people. ○ Assistive technologies can be a ‘double-edged sword’. They can significantly help disabled people communicate and connect with others so long as they work, but they can also further exclude them if they can’t access them regularly or reliably.

	<p>Work with the individual to understand any barriers they face and identify what is necessary.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The solution can be a sophisticated kit or a simple off-the-shelf tool (e.g., Google Home, Amazon Alexa). • Remember that sometimes the solution for digital access might not be digital; for example, an ergonomic chair that permits volunteering online for longer hours; regular breaks for someone who struggles with fatigue; individual lighting control for those who's sensory needs change throughout the shift; headphones with appropriate music for someone who needs help to focus when working in a busy environment. • Help your volunteers to understand how volunteering could affect their benefit claims and remind that Access to Work Scheme support currently does not apply to voluntary work.
<p>How should we facilitate ongoing digital problem-solving?</p>	<p>Integrate assistive technologies with other forms of support:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a mentorship or buddy system to provide ongoing support and guidance. • Ensure that they can easily and quickly access support if problems arise • In addition, social networks and peer support are fundamental to helping disabled people develop digital skills and navigate digital tools for volunteering • Signpost to relevant resources and support participants to access other available opportunities and schemes
<p>How will we know if people are struggling?</p>	<p>Introduce a regular feedback mechanism, using a variety of methods to enhance engagement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gather data on issues and suggestions related to the use of assistive devices and other supports. • Acting on feedback will enhance the overall accessibility of the volunteering place

Stage three: Development and Training

For the recruiter, this stage is about meeting the development needs of the individual at the same time as ensuring that the organisation is benefitting from their participation.

Learning and development strategies should align with what was promised in the earlier stages of their journey.

Challenge	Removing barriers:
What sort of training should we provide?	<p>Offer digital skills training tailored to the individual's needs.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This might include basic internet use, accessibility software, and specific task-related training. • Implement essential digital skills workshops and provide materials in accessible formats such as large print, Braille, and easy-read versions • Provide options catering for different learning styles, such as video tutorials with captions and written guides with clear instructions. • Provide bitesize training and include demonstrations and hands-on practice sessions tailored to individual needs. • Use various strategies including, for example, observation and shadowing for those who may need longer to assimilate their learning • Encourage and facilitate lifelong learning through online courses, workshops, and resources which can help individuals continually update their digital skills and adapt to new technologies.
Who might we provide training for?	<p>Offer training on assistive technologies for all volunteers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure everyone understands how to use these tools effectively and can help each other. • Consider how the technologies integrate with other support and work processes. • Include training in digital skills for carers where they might provide further ongoing support for a disabled volunteer in their use of digital technology e.g., in the case of learning disabilities.
How can we support ongoing development?	<p>Facilitate ongoing development with periodic reviews:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regularly review individual performance in a collaborative and constructive approach to identify support/training needs.

	<p>Review and explore their individual aspirations and how you might be able to support them</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• If an accessibility passport was developed earlier, it may be motivating for the individual to be able to update this as they continue developing their knowledge and skills and can boost confidence.• Conduct regular audits of digital tools and learning materials to ensure they meet accessibility standards. Establish feedback mechanisms to involve disabled users in the design and testing phases of digital tool development, ensuring their needs are continuously met.• Use the feedback mechanisms to inform training plans for all volunteers and share updates on these plans ('you said: we did').
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Stage four: Retention and Exit

For the recruiter, this stage is about ensuring that the disabled volunteer is integrated into the organisation, able to perform effectively in their role, and is achieving their own objectives and aspirations of volunteering. Should the time come for them to move on, it is important to ensure that their feedback is gathered to inform future practice.

Challenge	Removing barriers:
<p>How do we optimise communication so that no one is excluded?</p>	<p>Implement diverse communication strategies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider alternative methods of communication and engagement to ensure inclusivity • Websites, applications and digital content should be optimised for smartphones as these are most used. • Knowing which devices your volunteers have access to will enable you to allocate resources more effectively • Prioritise the development of mobile-friendly interfaces and applications, which must be designed with accessibility considerations for disabled users, from the outset.
<p>How do we promote the development of social capital?</p>	<p>Provide opportunities for networking and community-building online.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These can lead to increased social inclusion and personal development for disabled volunteers. • Integration on social media can lead to improvements in digital inclusion. • Encourage disabled volunteers to participate in social activities wherever possible, using a range of different strategies both online and offline in order to create opportunities for all. • Encourage engagement in social media through an internal online platform or by engaging with mainstream social media pages. • Provide guidance and support for those who may feel/ be vulnerable online. • Develop guidance for carers and support networks to assist disabled volunteers.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement a one-to-one mentor system, fostering peer support and skill development
<p>What about when it's time to move on?</p>	<p>Conduct an exit interview about digital inclusion with everyone who is leaving the organisation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn from and capitalise on their feedback: these volunteers are experts by experience. • Support reflection on what has gone well, what could have been better during their time with you, and what could be done to improve digital inclusion in future. • Seek their recommendations for future volunteers who may be recruited • Provide feedback on what the volunteer has achieved whilst with your organisation, including any value they have added • Update their accessibility passport, if one was used • Support them in updating their CV if they have one

Top Tips: for disabled volunteers and aspiring disabled volunteers

<p>Prepare for the volunteering role</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Think about why you want to volunteer and what you want to get out of this experience from the outset. Is it about social connections, or about developing skills, or about using your talents? • Ensure that you have a clear understanding of what is involved in the volunteer role you are entering into and whether you are going to be able to get the experience or opportunities you were hoping for. • Consider the digital skills required in this role. Think about what you can already do and what you may need support in developing. • Does the marketing material or the role descriptor mention support and training for digital access? If it does not – you may want to prepare some questions to ask about that, particularly regarding the digital requirements of the role.
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Identify supportive networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Join groups or networks that can provide information and support about online and offline volunteer opportunities for disabled people • Consider your supporters and their training needs in terms of digital skills
Seek support from a mentor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If available, find a mentor within the organization or through disability networks who can offer guidance and support to navigate through the volunteering journey and digital access.
Communicate your needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss with organizations about the accessibility of their facilities, and assistive technology equipment. Ensure they can accommodate any specific needs you may have.
Platform is not accessible	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Step 1: raise an issue with the organization when an accessibility issue occurs. • Step 2: If a response is not provided within a reasonable period, contact Equality Advisory and Support Service (Gov.UK: EASS) in England and Wales and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland

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Appendix 1:

Glossary of Terms

Digital Technology	Encompasses all possible technologies that might be used in a volunteering context. This can include recruitment platforms (or websites used to identify and apply for opportunities); virtual meeting platforms (such as Zoom, Teams, Skype and WhatsApp); digital devices (such as laptops, tablets, smartphones, games consoles; MP3 players); social media platforms/apps (such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Youtube, Twitter, Instagram), software (such as Microsoft Word)
Platforms	Online websites, systems, organizational intranets and extranets, applications, app (e.g. a recruitment platform)
Assistive technologies	<p>Software/technologies used to enhance people's daily lives and overcome challenges in digital spaces (e.g access the recruitment platforms).</p> <p>May include (but not limited to): -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Voice and personal assistants: Siri, Google Assistant, Amazon Alexa and other embedded features • Text to speech software: Converts written words into speech. This feature is embedded in most browsers • Braille devices • Screen magnifiers • Smartwatches/devices
Digital resources	This includes all resources available in a digital format. The format can include text on a website or app, a PDF file available online, a video, podcasts, tweet, images, infographics
Web accessibility	Inclusive practice to minimise barriers that prevent interaction with, or access to, websites and online platforms
Assisted digital support	Support to users with low digital skills and capabilities or limited online access

Appendix 2:

Ethical and legal requirements:

Ethically, there is a fundamental duty to make websites accessible upholding the principles of equality and human dignity. Ensuring accessibility guarantees that everyone, including disabled people, has equal access to information and opportunities, removing physical and language barriers. This not only fulfills legal requirements but also demonstrates a genuine commitment to fair treatment of all individuals

All public platforms are required to comply with UK accessibility standards. This can include:

- Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) (No. 2) Accessibility Reg UK Digital Strategy
- The governmental approach to ensure that everyone can benefit from digital technologies Regulations 2018.

There is also a global focus on accessibility standards

- Digital Services Act (DSA) European Commission
- The EU strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities 2021-2030
- UNCRPD is an international human rights treaty adopted by the United Nations in 2006

The legal requirements are met if the platforms are compliant with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.2)