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Research  
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## Background

This study, carried out between 2004 and 2005, was undertaken by Volunteer Development Scotland with support from LEAD Scotland. Funded by Clydesdale Bank, the study was timed to co-incide with the implementation of Part 3 of the Disability Discrimination Act (1995).

This document provides a summary of the key findings; a full report is available from VDS in hard or electronic copy.

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## Main Findings

### Getting Involved

- The majority of respondents had become involved in volunteering through word of mouth.
- No one had become involved via the Internet.
- Some respondents had been introduced to the idea of volunteering by the Job Centre or Social Work.
- Some respondents became involved through having been a service user of an organisation which involved volunteers.

### Volunteering

- Disabled people are more likely than other volunteers to take on support and service provision roles.
- Some disabled people see volunteering as a way to gain skills that are useful when seeking employment or other opportunities.

### Barriers to Volunteering

- Barriers to volunteering encountered ranged from practical barriers such as physical access, to attitudinal barriers.
- Some disabled volunteers are concerned about being unreliable due to fluctuating levels of health.
- Confusion regarding welfare benefits regulations was off-putting for some prospective volunteers.

### The Organisational Experience

- Organisations and volunteers feel that disabled people are under-represented in volunteering.
- Organisations with a disability focus are more likely to have higher numbers of disabled volunteers than other volunteer involving organisations.
- Volunteer involving organisations tend to make adjustments when requested rather than being proactive.

## Getting Involved

Word of mouth is the main route into volunteering in Scotland (TNS, 2004). This is no different for disabled people and reflects network relations and the importance of these in getting involved. The lack of use of the Internet as a route into volunteering seems to be unique to disabled people as it is used by the general population. Statistics from the Scottish Executive indicate that this may be due to either a lack of access to technology, or to a lack of skills (Scottish Executive, 2003, 2004). The DRC suggests that there is a lack of accessible websites on the Internet (DRC, 2004). The role that some Job Centres and Social Work undertake in promoting volunteering as an alternative to or route to employment is positive in recognising that paid employment is not the only way in which individuals can contribute to society.

Moving from being a service user of an organisation to being a volunteer is another route into volunteering. A particular attraction of this is the familiar environment it provides, but also the chance to 'give something back':

"They helped me and I wanted to give something back to someone else"

Volunteers who took part in our research had mainly had positive experiences of volunteering and felt that they had gained a variety of skills and had increased self confidence as a result.

## Volunteering

Disabled people are more likely to undertake support and service provision roles, or committee roles when volunteering. This is different from more general volunteering, where helping to raise money is the most common role undertaken (TNS, 2004). Some disabled people view volunteering as a means of gaining skills that will be useful when seeking employment or other opportunities. Many volunteers felt that their self confidence had increased due to volunteering.

## Barriers to Volunteering

The barriers to volunteering encountered by disabled people range from inadequate physical access to the places where volunteering takes place (practical barriers), to a lack of understanding and awareness of disabled people and what they could contribute (attitudinal barriers) amongst some volunteer involving organisations.

"Yes, because I am unable to walk properly, organisers and members of the public do not think I should be attending the events that I do, even though the skills I have learned may save someone's life; they think that only fully fit people should be attending"

A further barrier encountered was volunteers worrying that their fluctuating levels of health made them unreliable as volunteers. It is important that organisations are flexible with their volunteers so that people do not feel under pressure at times of poor health.

In addition, confusion regarding welfare benefits regulations was putting some individuals off volunteering as they were afraid of being investigated. It is important that the correct information is easily available to everyone and that guidance staff are giving clients the information they need.

## **The Organisational Experience**

There is an opinion shared between organisations and volunteers that disabled people are under-represented in volunteering (68% and 63% respectively). It is important to note that this point of view will be based on the organisations previous experience with disabled volunteers.

Disability focussed organisations are more likely to have disabled volunteers. This may be attributable to people becoming involved with an organisation where they have previously been a service user. Alternatively, it may be a belief that disability focussed organisations are more likely to understand disability and make necessary adjustments accordingly. In some cases, individuals have an interest in being involved in a disability focussed organisation that provides support to disabled people.

Three quarters of organisations do not specifically target groups such as disabled people with volunteer recruitment. Most of these organisations stated that while they did not target, they had equal opportunities policies in place and would be open to everyone.

Also, one quarter of organisations had made no specific adjustments to involve disabled people. Of those who had, these focussed on the physical environment.

Some organisations stated that they would react to individual requests from volunteers and provide adjustments based on that. This reactive rather than proactive approach could prevent someone becoming a volunteer, as they might not like to request special arrangements.

## **Conclusions**

It is clear that disabled people are involved in volunteering throughout Scotland undertaking a range of opportunities. Signposting by organisations such as Job Centre Plus and Social Work plays a key role in introducing people to volunteering and helping individuals to see the benefits of being involved. It is also clear, however, that there is still some work to be done around the area of engaging people as volunteers; as we move into a digital age, organisations who wish to engage disabled volunteers must ensure that the information they provide is accessible. Organisations and individuals alike believe that disabled people are under-represented in volunteering yet some organisations do not play a proactive role in engaging disabled people, or making adjustments. It is important that individuals are welcomed into volunteering and do not feel that any requests for support are not an imposition.

## Definitions

### Disability

The definition of disability we have used follows the social model of disability. This model of disability makes a key distinction between 'impairment' and 'disability'.

Impairments are an injury, illness or congenital condition that causes, or is likely to cause a long-term effect on physical appearance and/or limitation of function within the individual that differs from the commonplace. This includes learning difficulties, visually impaired, partially sighted, deaf and hard of hearing, people with epilepsy, people with mental health impairments, physically disabled people, people with HIV, arthritis, cerebral palsy.

Disability is the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in society on an equal level with others due to social and environmental barriers. In this model, access issues arise, not due to impairments, but because society is organised in a way which does not take these impairments into account.

Individual volunteers who took part in the research defined themselves as disabled.

### Volunteering

"Volunteering is the giving of time and energy through a third party, which can bring measurable benefits to the volunteer, individual beneficiaries, groups and organisations, communities, environment and society at large. It is a choice undertaken of one's own free will, and is not motivated primarily for financial gain or for a wage or salary" (Scottish Executive, 2004)

## References

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