Inclusive Volunteering: From Evidence to Impact

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This research was funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR). The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care.

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Acknowledgements

A huge **THANK YOU** to:

- Volunteers and staff at Ripon Museum Trust and other participants
- Our collaborators:
  - Annette Bauer, London School of Economics and Political Science
  - Stephanie Tierney, University of Oxford
- Leo Lion Foundation, for supporting the inclusive volunteering programme at the Ripon Museum Trust
- NIHR Three Schools Mental Health Programme, for funding the research

Background

- Volunteers make a real difference to communities and wider society
- People volunteer for different reasons eg. gain new skills, retain a meaningful role in retirement (Turk et al, 2022)
- Important for mental wellbeing and making social connections (Filges et al, 2020; Williams et al, 2025)
- Mental health problems may make volunteering difficult for some people – low confidence, stigma, lack of workplace experience
- Inclusive volunteering is a way for people who need extra support to access volunteering opportunities (Miller et al, 2002)
- Inclusive volunteering more common in health and care settings – considered ‘a good thing’ but limited evidence base

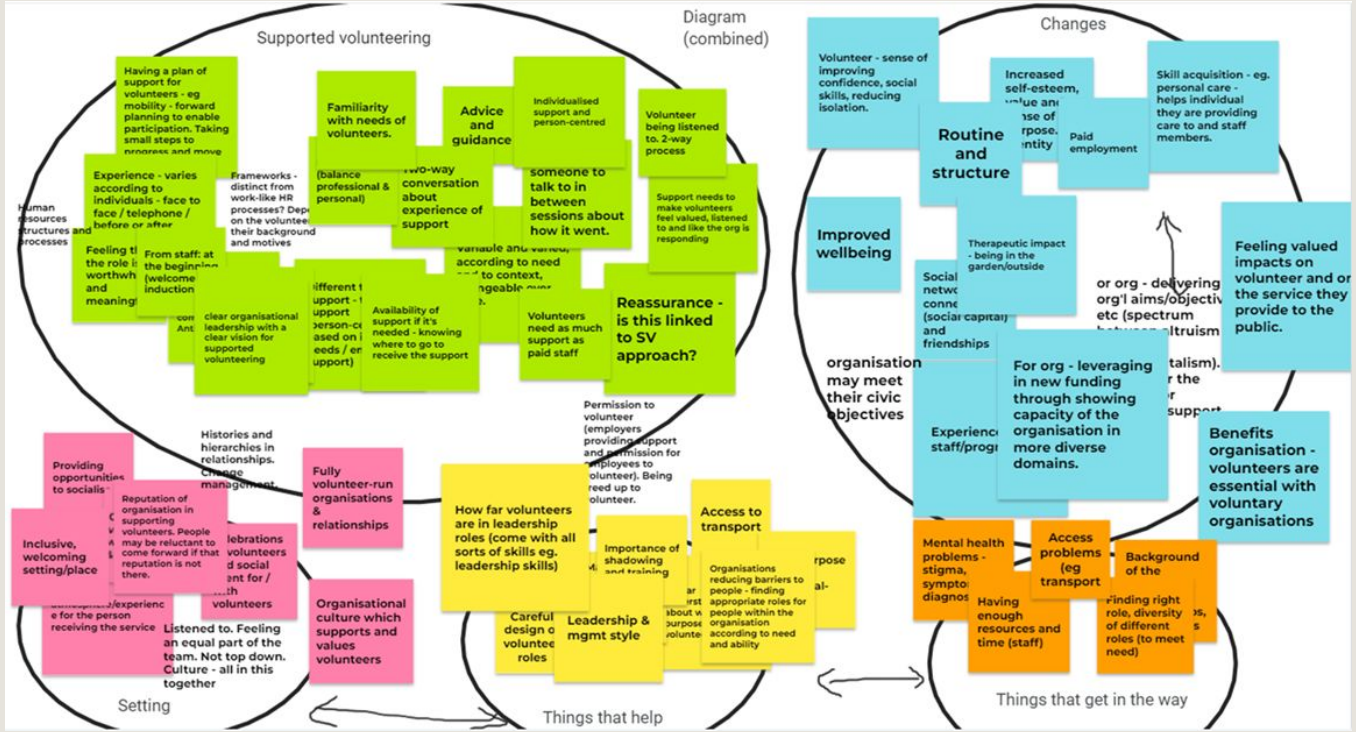
Previous study - aims

- To explore how and why inclusive volunteering works and develop a guide to share this with others
- To explore outcomes for people receiving inclusive volunteering and the organisation providing it
- To assess costs and potential economic consequences of inclusive volunteering

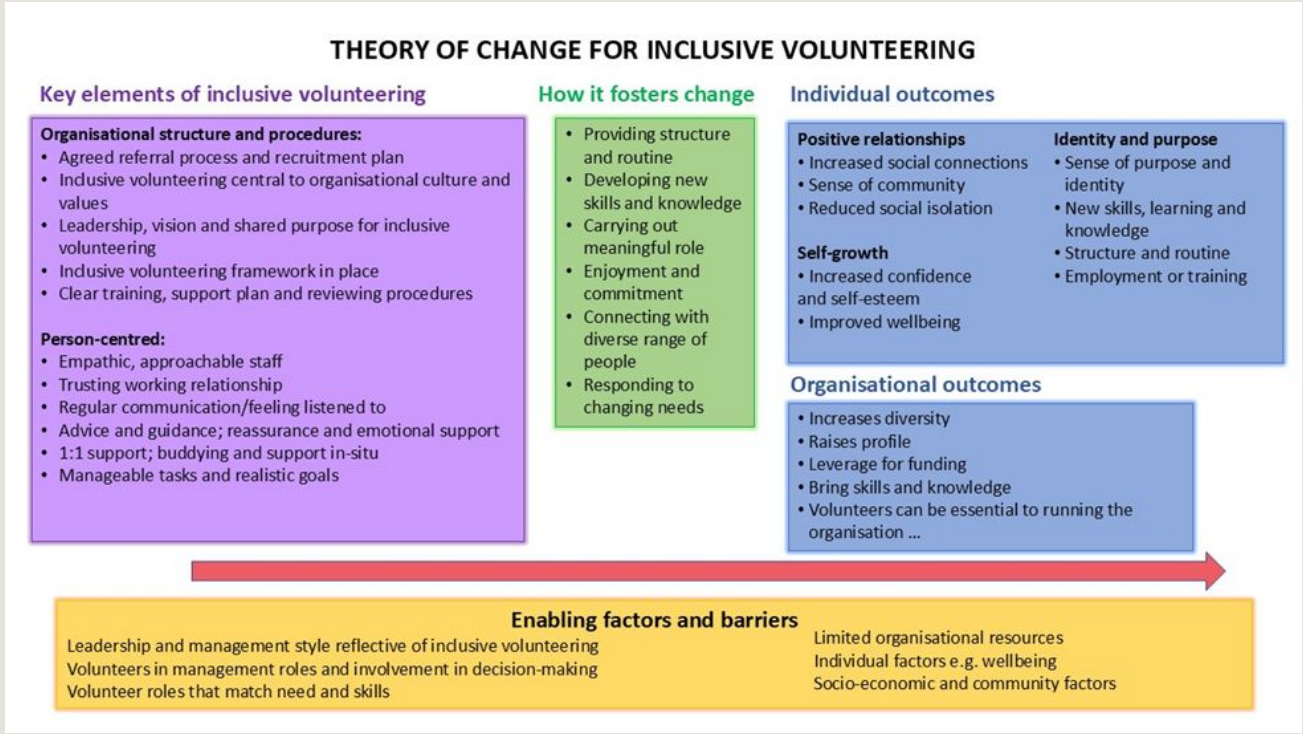
Previous study - methods

- Semi-structured interviews (7 volunteers & 8 staff)
- Reflective diary (3 volunteers)
- Observation of volunteers (15 days)
- Pre-post questionnaires - 3 & 6 month follow-up (8 volunteers)

Theory of Change



Theory of Change



Inclusive volunteering guide

Guide:

Case study #1

Background: Experiencing mental health issues and periods of social isolation; worried about stigma. Past experience of volunteering (impact of Covid). Wanted to work with people; interest in history and varied role. Some apprehension.

Support and training: Friendly, inclusive and understanding (duty manager); felt listened to; volunteers are taken seriously; good communication (open and honest); ongoing learning from others. Attended socials and attending staff meetings; mailing lists and updates – feeling part of a team/museum. Enjoyed the role and looked forward to it. Felt happy at the museum.

Outcomes:

- Increased knowledge (about history) – learning in spare time
- Meeting people and feeling less isolated – improved social skills. Feeling more connected
- Providing a structure (good balance)
- Change in attitude (joining in and enjoying social events) – feeling comfortable taking part
- Sense of purpose and achievement

Case study #2

Background: Made redundant; experiencing low confidence (impact of Covid lockdowns); some physical health issues. Completed recent training e.g. IT. Wanted to gain experience and increased confidence – aim of returning to paid work.

Support and training: Staff are easy to talk to, open to new ideas and listen. Support is now less direct (but still getting some support). Given a choice over role. Volunteering not as stressful as paid work (own pace, no pressure)

Outcomes:

- A sense of purpose
- Feeling valuable and you are contributing
- Increasing in confidence when socialising with others (involved in events, e.g. wellbeing walks), but still a challenge
- Gaining and improving skills (in IT)

Pre-post evaluation

- Sample too small (n=8) for quantitative analysis
- At six months, there was little change in the outcomes measured (access to social capital, loneliness and mental wellbeing)
- 6/8 participants reported improvements in mental wellbeing at 3 months
- 1 participant obtained part-time employment during evaluation

Costs

- Annual productivity gain of supporting one person into employment is estimated at £19,923
- Cost of service use by participants (n=8) reduced by £5,852:
  - Baseline: £8,739
  - Follow-up: £2,887
- Based on supporting 12 new volunteers, annual cost of inclusive volunteering programme (staff time + resources): £51,838 pa
- Based on 12 volunteers volunteering for 4.5 hours per week, their contribution to the organisation equates to: £30,888 pa
- Net cost of inclusive volunteering to RMT: £20,950 pa

Current study

Funded by NIHR School for Social Care Research from Sept 2025 - May 2028

This study aims to evaluate:

- How inclusive volunteering can be established or enhanced in different heritage and nature-based organisations to support people with diverse additional needs to volunteer
- Outcomes for these individual volunteers and organisations

Study objectives are:

- Establish a community of practice of organisations interested in developing inclusive volunteering
- Use the community of practice to provide consultancy and support to organisations to achieve their own objectives around inclusive volunteering provision
- Use observations and interviews to evaluate how organisational contexts influence processes and

Current study

Study objectives (continued):

- Use structured measures to evaluate outcomes for volunteers
- Calculate costs of inclusive volunteering and economic consequences
- Refine the Theory of Change (programme theory) for inclusive volunteering and the guide produced from our earlier research

Current study

Participating organisations

- Imperial War Museum
- John Hall Wellness Garden
- London Zoo
- Beamish Museum
- Sedgwick Museum
- Forestry England

Community of Practice

- To support each organisation to undertake a specific project to develop or enhance their inclusive volunteering offer
- Monthly meetings from Sept 25 to Feb 26, every three months thereafter
- Initial meetings have explored the volunteer journey
- Projects start from March 26 for 12 months
- Ripon Museum Trust will provide independent consultancy, with support from the Guide and research team

Current study

Individual site plans

- **Imperial War Museum** - ensure IWM is as accessible and inclusive as possible for new and existing volunteers (inclusive culture and support systems).
- **John Hall Wellness Garden** - 1. employment opportunities for volunteers 2. develop the involvement of volunteers in service planning and decision making.
- **London Zoo** - TBC
- **Beamish Museum** - revise and standardise the process of inclusive volunteering; role profile (existing volunteers supporting those with additional needs)
- **Sedgwick Museum** - new initiative aimed at reducing barriers to volunteering, with a particular focus on engaging neurodiverse young people.
- **Forestry England** - work with existing volunteers to create a brand new volunteering role – the Feel Good in the Forest volunteer buddy

Current study

Data collection timeline

November 2025 - May 2026 and September 2026 - February 2027

Observations (4 site visits) and **semi-structured interviews** with staff, volunteers, referrers, family members, other stakeholders (n= 40). This information will help us to gain a better picture about how inclusive volunteering works.

November 2025 - February 2028

We will conduct **pre-post outcome interviews** with about 80 new volunteers (across the six sites) who have joined the new inclusive volunteering programmes, followed up at 3, 6 and 12 months

Economic evaluation to establish direct and indirect costs of inclusive volunteering and impact on service use and wider economic consequences

Current study

Outputs

- Research report with full **programme theory** summarising key findings, benefits and outcomes for individuals and the organisation combining data from all partner sites
- A revised **Inclusive Volunteering Guide** incorporating data and findings from all partner sites
- A tool to help organisations calculate the **costs and benefits** of developing an inclusive volunteering programme
- Other outputs will include conference papers, reports and academic papers.

Thank you!

Further information and to join our mailing list:

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