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# Consultation Response

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## Jeremy Balfour MSP Consultation: Disability Commissioner

August 2022



## **About Us**

Volunteer Scotland is Scotland's National Centre for Volunteering. We believe that volunteering should be an enjoyable, rewarding and fulfilling experience for the volunteer; that volunteers have the right to be safe and protected in delivering their volunteering roles; and that to derive health and well-being benefits from volunteering requires regular and meaningful contributions of time.

Should any queries arise from our response, please contact our Policy Officer by emailing **[sarah.latto@volunteerscotland.org.uk](mailto:sarah.latto@volunteerscotland.org.uk)**

## Introduction

Volunteer Scotland is fully supportive of Jeremy Balfour MSP's proposal to establish a Disability Commissioner. Volunteering can bring significant benefits to the health and wellbeing of those who participate and should be open to all. However, people with disabilities experience significant barriers to participation, particularly coming out of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Scotland's Volunteering Action Plan was published in June this year and provides a blueprint for increasing participation in volunteering over the next 10 years. A central theme running through the Action Plan is inclusion. We believe that a Disability Commissioner would be able to consult with stakeholders on barriers experienced by disabled people and work within the framework of the Action Plan to promote best practice in addressing these barriers.

It is important to recognise, however, the significant financial strain faced by many volunteer involving organisations in the voluntary and public sectors. Truly inclusive volunteering requires dedicated resource and it is vital that any new Disability Commissioner works with the sector to understand these pressures and use their influence to help leverage the resource required to support disabled people to volunteer.

## Response

### Policy Context

Volunteer Scotland is fully supportive of the proposed bill and the need for a Disability Commissioner, covering all disabilities. We are supportive of this bill because volunteering offers significant benefits for people who have disabilities but too few are currently accessing these benefits. A Disability Commissioner could advocate for a policy framework which promotes the inclusive participation of disabled people in volunteering, coinciding with the implementation of the new Volunteering Action Plan. They could also work closely with the volunteering sector to advocate for volunteer involving organisations to have the information and resources required to provide inclusive opportunities.

In looking at the role of other existing commissioners, this seems like a realistic prospect. The role and remit of the Scottish Veterans Commissioner, for example, includes to 'provide leadership and challenge' and 'work to align effort on the delivery of priority outcomes'.<sup>1</sup> To reinforce this in a volunteering context, a 2020 publication by the Scottish Veterans Commissioner exploring the needs of veterans to successfully transition from the Armed Forces into civilian life highlights the role of volunteering for veterans to integrate into their community.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://scottishveteranscommissioner.org/role-and-remit/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://scottishveteranscommissioner.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Scottish-Veterans-Commissioner-Positive-Futures-Employment-Skills-and-Learning-2020-Online-1.pdf>

Scotland’s new Volunteering Action Plan builds on the Scottish Government’s existing commitment to inclusive volunteering. The Government’s Programme for Scotland in 2017–2018 made a specific commitment to support a more inclusive volunteering outcome, including for disabled people:

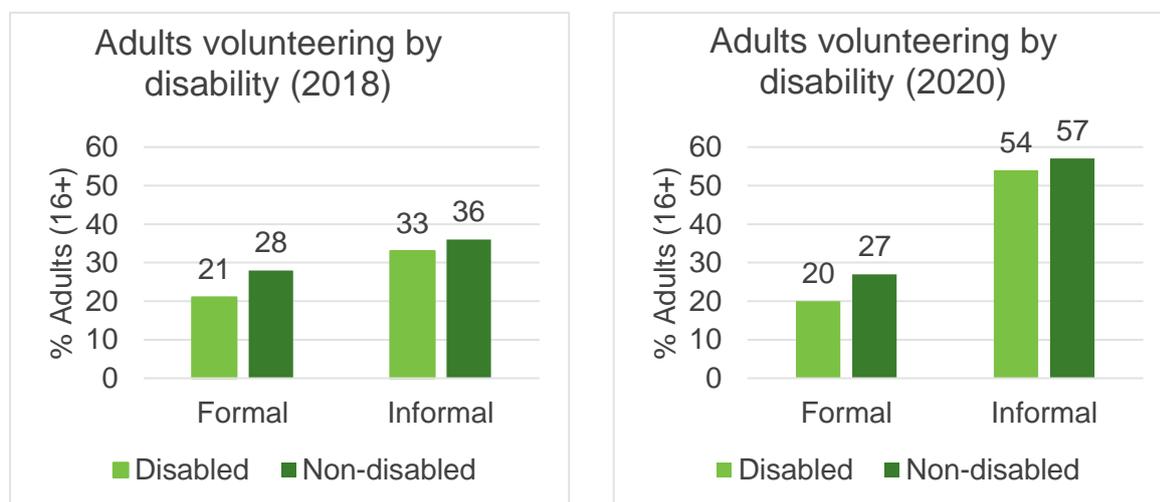
*“We will do more to support groups currently facing barriers to engaging in their communities, including disabled people, older people and people out of work.”<sup>3</sup>*

In 2019, the Government also published ‘Volunteering for All’, a national outcomes framework for volunteering with inclusive volunteering at its core.<sup>4</sup> Aileen Campbell MSP, then Cabinet Secretary for Local Government and Communities, stated in the foreword that:

*“volunteering is key to us achieving our shared ambition of a fairer and more prosperous country with equality of opportunity for all – a country where everyone has the chance to participate and make a difference.”*

## Barriers Experienced by Disabled People

The Scottish Household surveys in 2018 and 2020 found that participation rates for disabled people in formal volunteering are 21% and 20% respectively – 7% lower than the participation rate for non-disabled people in each year.<sup>5</sup> Informal volunteering appears to be more inclusive for disabled people. Informal volunteering rates increased by over 60% for both disabled and non-disabled people from 2018 to 2020, largely as a result of the community response to the Covid-19 pandemic, but the rate for disabled people remained 3% lower than the non-disabled participation rate year on year.



These figures are reflective of the significant barriers to volunteering, particularly in formal settings, that disabled people experience and therefore the challenges experienced by volunteer involving organisations in engaging volunteers with

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/nation-ambition-governments-programme-scotland-2017-18/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/volunteering-national-framework/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.volunteerscotland.net/for-organisations/research-and-evaluation/publications/covid-19-research/adult-volunteering-participation-in-2020/>

disabilities. In a series produced by Volunteer Scotland's national strategic group for inclusive volunteering, Glasgow Disability Alliance suggests a number of 'top tips' for recruiting and supporting disabled volunteers.<sup>6</sup> It suggests that volunteer involving organisations should consider disability equality training, ideally provided by disabled people, and should promote their willingness to provide any equipment and/or adjustments needed. It also states that difficulties with transport are a major barrier, and accessible transport is likely to come at additional cost.

The 'Time Well Spent' research published by NCVO in 2019 reinforces that disabled volunteers often have a less positive experience. It found that disabled people are more likely to report that their volunteering could be much better organised than non-disabled peers (38% vs 34%), and that their volunteering is too bureaucratic (29% vs 22%).<sup>7</sup> The report also found that disabled volunteers are more likely to feel that they have more skills and experience to offer that are not currently being utilised (18% vs 14%) and are more likely to report tensions and conflict (32% vs 26%).

Interestingly, evidence does suggest that young disabled volunteers do not experience the same challenges to volunteering. In fact, the Time Well Spent Research would suggest that young disabled people (aged 18-34) are actually more likely to volunteer than non-disabled people in the same age bracket. Similarly, a Volunteer Scotland survey of 11-18 year olds in 2019 found that formal volunteering is actually highest amongst those with a physical or mental health condition, with 55% of this demographic group volunteering compared with 50% of their peers with no reported health conditions. We believe this is likely in part due to the increased levels of support young disabled people receive during this life stage, either from educational establishments or through youth work provision. It could also be reflective of the better digital literacy of young people and their ability to volunteer online.

This evidence demonstrates that volunteer involving organisations are often struggling to meet the needs of disabled people and more recent research would indicate that this situation has worsened in recent years. Volunteer Scotland published research in 2021 exploring the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on volunteering in Scotland.<sup>8</sup> It found that volunteer involving organisations were increasingly concerned with supporting the health and wellbeing of volunteers during the pandemic but that strains on resource made it more challenging to provide inclusive volunteering opportunities. Sixteen percent of volunteer involving organisations found it a major challenge to ensure that volunteering is inclusive, and a further 31% said there was some challenge. One respondent to the survey said that:

*“those requiring large amounts of additional support to volunteer often couldn't be accommodated due to capacity issues.”*

Worryingly, the strain on resource within volunteer involving organisations reported during the pandemic does not appear to be easing. In the same research, we found

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<sup>6</sup> [https://www.volunteerscotland.net/media/1475556/glasgow\\_disability\\_alliance\\_-\\_inclusion\\_top\\_tips.pdf](https://www.volunteerscotland.net/media/1475556/glasgow_disability_alliance_-_inclusion_top_tips.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.ncvo.org.uk/images/documents/policy\\_and\\_research/volunteering/Volunteer-experience\\_Full-Report.pdf](https://www.ncvo.org.uk/images/documents/policy_and_research/volunteering/Volunteer-experience_Full-Report.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.volunteerscotland.net/media/1771556/road\\_to\\_recovery\\_-\\_full\\_report.pdf](https://www.volunteerscotland.net/media/1771556/road_to_recovery_-_full_report.pdf)

that funding to support volunteering was a key priority for long term recovery.<sup>9</sup> Anecdotal evidence from our networks in recent months would suggest that this is a growing concern, particularly with the rising cost of living. At the launch of the Volunteering Action Plan in June, many attendees raised funding as a major concern in discussion workshops.<sup>10</sup>

## Contribution of Disabled People through Volunteering

The contribution of disabled people to society through volunteering is significant, despite having lower participation rates than non-disabled people. Formal volunteers who have long-term health conditions contribute a greater number of hours per month compared to those who don't have a long-term health condition – 10.7 hours vs. 9.3 hours per volunteer per month.<sup>11</sup> So volunteers with disabilities contribute more hours per person than their non-disabled peers, despite less disabled people actually participating in volunteering overall.

The Scottish Household Survey data for volunteering participation in 2020 demonstrated that 29% of disabled people volunteered formally<sup>12</sup> with 'local community or neighbourhood' organisations compared with 24% of their non-disabled peers.<sup>13</sup> It also shows that 28% of disabled formal volunteers support organisations focused on 'health, disability and wellbeing', 13% higher than non-disabled volunteers.<sup>14</sup> Disabled people therefore have a clear specific role in ensuring that their local communities are resilient, and that issues in relation to health, disability and wellbeing are being addressed.

Derra Kew, a volunteer with Chest Heart and Stroke Scotland, epitomises this.<sup>15</sup> She found herself unable to continue her work as a carer following a brain injury which left her paralysed down her right side. Derra has been involved in a number of roles with the charity including working with a community friendship group, making weekly support calls during the pandemic, joining a walking group, supporting the hospital service and providing one-to-one support. Derra clearly volunteers a great deal of her time to the charity, and all of her roles are supporting people within their communities whilst promoting health and wellbeing. She states that:

*"It's funny how life works out. If my circumstances had been different, I don't know if I'd have become a volunteer. Now I can't imagine life without this."*

Clearly Derra's disability was a key motivation for her to start volunteering and even though she is now well enough to work she continues to contribute as a volunteer.

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<sup>9</sup> [https://www.volunteerscotland.net/media/1771556/road\\_to\\_recovery\\_-\\_full\\_report.pdf](https://www.volunteerscotland.net/media/1771556/road_to_recovery_-_full_report.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> 'VAP Launch Discussion Notes', Volunteer Scotland, 2022

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.volunteerscotland.net/media/1707411/who\\_contributes\\_the\\_most\\_to\\_scottish\\_volunteering\\_-\\_full\\_report.pdf](https://www.volunteerscotland.net/media/1707411/who_contributes_the_most_to_scottish_volunteering_-_full_report.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> Volunteering is often split into two categories – formal and informal. Formal volunteering describes the provision of unpaid help on behalf of a club, group or organisation whilst informal volunteering relates to unpaid help provided directly to an individual who is not a relative.

<sup>13</sup> 'SHS 2022 results volunteering tables', Volunteer Scotland, <https://www.volunteerscotland.net/about-us/news-blog/news/scottish-household-survey-2020-results/>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> 'Case Study - Derra Kew', Chest Heart and Stroke Scotland, 2022

Finally, we know from research that disabled volunteers have a significant presence in digital volunteering roles – an area of significant growth. NCVO’s Time Well Spent research highlighted that disabled people are more likely to be volunteering online than non-disabled volunteers.<sup>16</sup> The rate of disabled people volunteering exclusively online is more than double the rate of non-disabled volunteers, with rates of 10% and 4% respectively.

## Benefits of Volunteering for Disabled People

Evidence also suggests that participating in voluntary activity can have significant personal impacts on health and wellbeing. In a report published by Volunteer Scotland in December 2018 we found that regular volunteering can alleviate depression, anxiety and stress, reduce loneliness and social isolation, and support the management of more serious mental health conditions such as schizophrenia.<sup>17</sup> Volunteering can also have a significant impact on physical health by promoting healthy behaviours, helping to maintain a level of physical activity that promotes independence and improving volunteers’ ability to cope with illness.<sup>18</sup>

This same research also found that the health and wellbeing benefits of volunteering were more pronounced for those experiencing significant disadvantage.<sup>19</sup> In particular, it found that volunteering can help to alleviate the symptoms of those experiencing mental and physical health problems or help them to cope with symptoms more effectively. The implication is that those with disabilities are more likely to benefit from the effects of volunteering on their health and wellbeing.

There is also evidence that there can be ‘therapeutic’ value in volunteering for an organisation that supports people experiencing similar issues. The Scottish Volunteering Forum spoke about this in a discussion exploring volunteer motivations and barriers in 2019.<sup>20</sup> Two member organisations shared that their service users regularly request to volunteer and described it as a ‘win-win’. The volunteers benefit from the ongoing input from the organisation, and their lived experience is valuable for their volunteering.

This is certainly the case for Simon who volunteers for LEAD.<sup>21</sup> Simon had been out of work for over a year following redundancy and a life changing injury when he began volunteering with LEAD. He discussed his experience volunteering on an Award course:

*“It was a small group and that allowed me the opportunity to enjoy the experience - and to contribute - almost as though I were a participant as well as a volunteer.”*

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<sup>16</sup> [https://www.ncvo.org.uk/images/documents/policy\\_and\\_research/volunteering/Volunteer-experience-Full-Report.pdf](https://www.ncvo.org.uk/images/documents/policy_and_research/volunteering/Volunteer-experience-Full-Report.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.volunteerscotland.net/media/1436178/volunteering\\_health\\_wellbeing\\_full\\_report.pdf](https://www.volunteerscotland.net/media/1436178/volunteering_health_wellbeing_full_report.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> <https://scottishvolunteeringforum.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/svf-volunteer-motivations-and-barriers-summary-report-1.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.lead.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Lead-Scotland-Annual-Report-20-21.pdf>

Simon has also since used his experience volunteering, and the training he received from LEAD, to embark on a new career path. He stated that:

*“During the time that the course was being run I realised that 'helping' people was what I wished to do going forward, as I saw the change in confidence exhibited by the participants.”<sup>22</sup>*

This further highlights the therapeutic value of volunteering, and indeed the additional benefits for employability.

## **Conclusion**

The evidence is clear that disabled people face significant barriers to volunteering, despite the fact that their participation in voluntary activity is likely to be of considerable personal and societal benefit. Therefore, we believe there is a strong case for an independent Disability Commissioner. This position could provide independent scrutiny, holding the Scottish Government to account in its commitment to increase access to volunteering for disabled people.

Scotland's Volunteering Action Plan, detailing priorities to increase volunteering participation over the next ten years, is entering its implementation phase. A Disability Commissioner could be a key advocate in ensuring the rights and experiences of disabled people are central to this Plan. However, it is important that any new Disability Commissioner works collaboratively with the volunteering sector, acknowledging existing pressures and helping them to leverage the resource required to provide inclusive volunteering opportunities for disabled people.

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.lead.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Lead-Scotland-Annual-Report-20-21.pdf>



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