

Promoting Equality and Diversity in Volunteering



A Guide for Volunteer Involving Organisations

Equality Commission

FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

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Content

	Page
What do we mean by equality of opportunity and diversity?	3
Why is promoting equality and diversity important?	4
What do we mean by discrimination?	5
Can volunteers expect protection from discrimination?	7
How do organisations promote equality in volunteering?	9
The eight equality standards	10
Equality action indicators	11
Appendix 1: Equality and Diversity Commitments to Volunteers	16



Introduction

This guide has been developed by Volunteer Now and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland to assist organisations to promote equality of opportunity and diversity in volunteering.

The guidance set out in this publication complements the framework used in **Investing in Volunteers**¹ (the UK Quality Standard for volunteer management) and will reflect the indicators outlined in the standard that would relate to the promotion of equality and diversity. It also reflects best practice recommendations made by the Equality Commission in relation to paid employment.

What Do We Mean By Equality Of Opportunity And Diversity?

Equality is simply about making sure that people are treated fairly and given equal access to opportunities and resources. Equality is not about treating everyone in the same way, it is about treating everyone fairly, with respect and recognises that people from different backgrounds may have needs that are met in different ways.

Diversity is about valuing individual difference. Diversity challenges us to recognise and value all sorts of differences that exist when people work together in order to build stronger communities and harmonious environments for the benefit of all.

People come from a wide variety of backgrounds and we can be different from one another in many different ways. These can include differences that are highlighted in current equality legislation such as race, religion and sex but also include things like our personality, personal interests and lifestyle choices, such as being a vegetarian or a smoker.

¹ www.investinginvolunteers.org.uk | UK Quality Standard

Why Is Promoting Equality And Diversity Important?

Equality and diversity are becoming more important in all aspects of our lives for a number of reasons.

- We live in an increasingly diverse society and need to be able to understand and respect diversity and respond appropriately and sensitively to difference in others.
- Volunteers and the people who benefit from their work will reflect this diversity in many ways including ethnic and community background, gender, religion, political opinion, disability, sexuality and age.
- The successful implementation of equality and diversity standards in all aspects of volunteering will help to provide a good and harmonious environment for all. It will also ensure that volunteers, employees and service users are all valued, respected, motivated and treated fairly.
- We all have the right to be protected from discrimination and harassment. We also have a responsibility not to discriminate against others.



What Do We Mean By Discrimination?

Essentially we mean treating someone unfairly in some way because of their background but this can happen in different ways and for different reasons.

In Northern Ireland we have an equality and human rights legal framework which covers things like employment, housing, education and service delivery. It provides protection for everyone based on a specific list of equality grounds:

- **Equality Grounds:** gender; gender reassignment; being married or in a civil partnership; pregnancy or maternity leave; religious belief and / or political opinion; race, colour, nationality, ethnic or national origins, being an Irish Traveller; disability; sexual orientation; age.

Equality legislation also identifies a number of types of discrimination that people need protection from:

- **Direct discrimination** occurs where a person is treated less favourably than other persons and where the only reason for the treatment is on one or more of the equality grounds.
- **Indirect discrimination** occurs where a provision, criterion or practice is applied equally to everyone but puts people from a particular background at a disadvantage compared to others; and which is not a reasonable and proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim.
- **Disability discrimination:** One of the most notable features of the disability discrimination legislation is that in prescribed circumstances it imposes a duty on employers and service providers to make **reasonable adjustments** in order to remove or reduce disadvantages suffered by disabled people in those circumstances.

The duty to make reasonable adjustments may require that policies, practices and procedures are modified or waived; or that certain physical features of premises are removed, altered or avoided; or that auxiliary aids or services are provided. A failure to comply with the duty, when it arises, is a form of disability discrimination.

- **Harassment** is unwanted conduct which is related to any of the equality grounds and which has the purpose or effect of violating a person's dignity or of creating an intimidating, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for that person. Many forms of behaviour can constitute harassment including physical assault, using derogatory language and visual or written material containing derogatory words or images.

Examples Of How People Might Experience Different Types Of Discrimination In Volunteering Settings

1. **Direct discrimination:** A volunteer project rejects a volunteer applicant simply because of their religion or racial background.
2. **Indirect discrimination:** A volunteer project only promotes new opportunities by word of mouth, the majority of current volunteers are female and this practice results in mostly females seeking to volunteer with them. The practice has unintentionally disadvantaged males who might have considered volunteering.
3. **Failure to make a reasonable adjustment:** A volunteer with a visual impairment needs to use a computer to complete a task. A computer with the software to make the computer fully accessible is available in the volunteer centre. There is no cost involved in changing the settings on the computer but for convenience the volunteer involving organisation asks someone else to undertake the task.
4. **Harassment:** A lesbian woman decides to leave a two week volunteer camp early because a number of other volunteers repeatedly make homophobic, sexist and racist jokes even after they have been told to stop.

Can Volunteers Expect Protection From Discrimination?

Yes they can, however this is mostly promoted and protected by a moral responsibility that should be acknowledged by all volunteer involving organisations rather than a legal responsibility placed on them by current equality legislation.

In Northern Ireland we have an equality and human rights legal framework which protects people in (or seeking) paid employment from discrimination². However as volunteers are not deemed to be employees, in most situations volunteers will not have legal protection under this framework³. This is because there are a number of fundamental and important things that make volunteers stand out from paid employees. Firstly they provide their services for free, without an expectation of a salary or wage and secondly they cannot normally be compelled to provide these services and may withdraw them at any time.

Consequently this places the emphasis on the need for organisations who involve volunteers to acknowledge a moral responsibility to protect them from discrimination. This is necessary to develop and promote a fair and harmonious environment for volunteering. It will also ensure that the organisation's engagement with volunteers complements other aspects of their work such as employment, service and housing provision where they will have legal responsibilities.

This can be done through the development of a **statement of commitment** to equality. To assist with this Volunteer Now and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland have developed an example statement (see Appendix 1).

² For further information go to www.equalityni.org | [Unified Guide to Promoting Equality](#)

³ For further information go to www.volunteering-ni.org | [Volunteers & the Law](#)

Organisations should also seek to benchmark their current practice against the equality standard action indicators outlined on the following pages to ensure that they are taking appropriate action to promote equality and diversity in volunteering.



How Do Organisations Promote Equality In Volunteering?

Volunteer Now recognises the importance of taking a lead in communicating the importance and benefits of promoting equality and diversity matters in volunteering. It has worked with the Equality Commission to establish **Eight Equality Standards**. These can assist all volunteer involving organisations seeking to promote equality of opportunity and diversity in volunteering and communicate their commitment to doing so.

Each equality standard is accompanied by a set of measurable actions that can be taken to meet the overall aim of that standard. Examples would include developing a written statement on promoting equality or including a section on personal expectations and commitments when inducting volunteers.

In identifying these actions Volunteer Now and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland has attempted to complement two important best practice guidelines that relate to paid and unpaid work respectively. Firstly the eight standards complement the framework used in **Investing in Volunteers** (the UK Quality Standard for volunteer management) and will reflect the indicators outlined in the standard that would relate to the promotion of equality and diversity.

Secondly we have benchmarked the eight equality standards against the Equality Commission's current best practice recommendations for paid employment as outlined in the **Unified Guide to Promoting Equality of Opportunity in Employment**.

Volunteer Now and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland would both recommend that volunteer involving organisations should seek to promote a fair and harmonious environment for all volunteering. They should also seek to communicate this commitment to all stakeholders.

The Eight Equality Standards

The Eight Equality Standards for promoting equality of opportunity and diversity in volunteering are outlined below. The tables on the following pages then outline measurable equality action indicators for each standard.

A volunteer involving organisation seeking to promote diversity and equality of opportunity will:

1. **Commit** to Promoting Equality and Diversity
2. **Allocate** Appropriate Resources
3. **Encourage** Fair Participation for All
4. **Develop** Inclusive and Diverse Volunteer Opportunities
5. **Protect** Volunteers from Harassment
6. **Promote** Fair and Transparent Recruitment
7. **Communicate** Clear and Fair Procedures
8. **Support** Diverse Individual Needs

Measurable Equality Actions

1. **Commit to Promoting Equality and Diversity** - There is an express commitment to the involvement of volunteers based on principles of equality and diversity.

Measurable Equality Actions

There is a written policy statement on the promotion of equality of opportunity in volunteering roles.

All related volunteer policies are assessed to promote equality and regularly reviewed.

All employees and volunteers within the organisation have a clear understanding of agreed equality expectations and commitments.

2. **Allocate Appropriate Resources** - The organisation has allocated appropriate resources to promoting equality for volunteers.

Measurable Equality Actions

Overall responsibility for promoting equality is designated to a specified individual or committee.

Volunteer co-ordinators have been trained in equality matters.

Equality promotion and practice are reviewed on a regular basis.



3. **Encourage Fair Participation for All** - The organisation seeks to involve volunteers from all sections of the community.

Measurable Equality Actions
Any restrictions will be set out clearly and objectively justified ⁵ .
Words and images reflect the diversity in the community.
Volunteering opportunities are promoted as widely as possible.
Equality monitoring and review mechanisms are established ⁶ .
Action is taken to address any under-representation identified.

4. **Develop Inclusive and Diverse Volunteering Opportunities** - The organisation develops appropriate roles for volunteers and considers the unique abilities and needs of each volunteer.

Measurable Equality Actions
Task descriptions are developed for volunteer roles.
Requirements for each role are clearly defined.
As far as possible roles are developed or adapted to meet individual needs, abilities and interests.

5. **Protect Volunteers from Harassment** - The organisation is committed to ensuring that volunteers are protected from harm.

Measurable Equality Actions
The organisation promotes fair and harmonious volunteering environments.
The organisation investigates any complaints of harassment quickly and thoroughly.
Volunteers from all backgrounds are treated with respect and information collected for monitoring purposes is kept confidential.

⁵ **Restrictions:** In a number of limited circumstances a volunteering opportunity might be restricted to individuals with specific characteristics. For example a project may be developed to specifically encourage people with learning disabilities to volunteer, or a specific role requires a man or a woman for reasons of decency.

⁶ For further information go to www.volunteering-ni.org | [Equality Monitoring & Volunteer Roles](#)

6. **Promote Fair and Transparent Recruitment** - The organisation is committed to using fair, efficient and consistent recruitment procedures for all potential volunteers.

Measurable Equality Actions
There is an accessible recruitment / information pack.
Consistent procedures and recording is in place.
Only appropriate applicant information is asked for.
A confidential monitoring mechanism has been established.
Feedback is given to unsuccessful applicants.
Consistent and considered approach is taken in relation to collecting references and conducting other pre-appointment checks.

7. **Communicate Clear and Fair Procedures** - Clear procedures are put into place to support volunteers in their role (induction etc).

Measurable Equality Actions
Volunteers receive a thorough induction and are provided with relevant guidelines and procedures.
Volunteers are made aware of the organisation's equality expectations and commitments.
Volunteers are clear on how to raise a complaint or concern if they feel they are not being afforded equality of opportunity.

8. **Support Diverse Individual Needs** - The organisation takes account of the diverse support needs of volunteers.

Measurable Equality Actions
The organisation will take into account the diverse needs of volunteers and seek to make opportunities as accessible as possible.
The organisation will take into account the unique needs of each individual volunteer and support them as far as practicable.
Volunteers have an opportunity to input into the ongoing process of promoting equality of opportunity.

What Next?

Further reading at www.volunteering-ni.org

- Volunteers & the Law
- Equality Monitoring Volunteer Projects
- Statement on Equality & Diversity Commitment to Volunteers

For further information and support on:

- **Volunteer issues**, including training and support for volunteer involving initiatives contact **Volunteer Now on 028 9023 6100**.
- **Equality legislation**, including training and guidance for employers and service providers contact the **Equality Commission for Northern Ireland on 028 9089 0890**.

Appendix 1: Equality and Diversity Commitments to Volunteers

This is a sample **Statement of Commitment to Equality** prepared by Volunteer Now and the Equality Commission. It would be recommended that this type of statement would be displayed prominently in all volunteer working environments (for example developed into an A3 size poster) and that every volunteer would also receive a summary of the statement in their information pack.

Our Commitment to our volunteers...

This organisation is **committed to providing equality of opportunity to all persons** when developing, co-ordinating and supporting volunteering. Although there is no statutory obligation under equality legislation we recognise a clear moral obligation to promote fairness and equality in volunteering and value all individuals and their diverse & unique identity and backgrounds. These include (but are not exclusive to) the established equality grounds of religious belief; political opinion; community background; ethnic and national origin; sex; sexual orientation; disability or age.

What you can expect from us...

We believe that all volunteers should reflect the diversity of communities they work in and have the right to work in an environment which is free from discrimination.

If you experience any form of discrimination or harassment while volunteering with us you have a right to raise a complaint with us through our grievance procedure. All complaints will be dealt with seriously, promptly and confidentially.

What we can expect from you...

When representing this organisation as a volunteer we expect you to support our commitment to promoting equality. You must treat others with dignity and respect and not seek to discriminate against others.

You are expected to discourage discrimination by making it clear that you find such behavior unacceptable and should alert a member of staff or management committee if an incident occurs to enable the organisation to deal with it.

The steps we will take to protect volunteers from discrimination...

This organisation will make every effort to ensure that discrimination and harassment does not occur. To do this we will:

- Ensure that all volunteers / employees / service users are given our statement on the organisation's commitment to equality in opportunity;
- Explain the statement to all volunteers / employees / service users;
- Ensure that all complaints of discrimination are dealt with promptly;
- Set a good example by treating all volunteers with fairness, dignity and respect;
- Be alert to unacceptable behaviour and take appropriate proactive action where necessary;
- Seek to meet the recommended best practice standards for promoting equality of opportunity.

What do we mean by discrimination?

Discrimination can occur when someone is treated less fairly than others simply because of their background e.g. rejecting a volunteer applicant because of their religion or racial background.

Sometimes a specific policy or practice can disadvantage people from a particular background even though it is applied equally to everyone e.g. a volunteer project only promotes new opportunities by word of mouth, the majority of current volunteers are female and this practice results in mostly females seeking to volunteer with them. This practice has resulted in **indirect discrimination** against males and would be unfair unless it could be shown that there was no other less discriminatory way of achieving the same aim.

Disability discrimination can occur due to a **failure to make reasonable adjustment(s)** which have been identified as a reasonable and effective way of removing disadvantages experienced by disabled people e.g. a volunteer with visual impairments needs to use a computer in their role, it would be reasonable for the volunteer involving organisation to adjust the accessibility settings on the computer to accommodate this. It would also be reasonable for a charity with poor access for wheelchair users to seek to identify sources of funding that could allow them to remove this disadvantage.

Harassment can be described as unwanted conduct which has the purpose or effect of violating a person's dignity or of creating an intimidating, humiliating or offensive environment for them. Many forms of behaviour can constitute harassment including physical assault, derogatory language (e.g. racist or sexist remarks) and visual or written material containing derogatory words or pictures (e.g. sectarian graffiti or homophobic emails).



Volunteer Now is a regional to local organisation that will work to promote, enhance and support volunteering across Northern Ireland. Volunteer Now is about building stronger communities, connecting with individuals and organisations and changing lives.

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W: www.volunteering-ni.org



The **Equality Commission Northern Ireland** aims to advance equality, promote equality of opportunity, encourage good relations and challenge discrimination through promotion, advice and enforcement.

T: 028 9089 0890 (enquiry line)

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W: www.equalityni.org