



# Volunteering for all

## April 2024



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"Seamless Community Services, Enabling Healthy Lives"

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**6** Volunteering is for everyone. Supporting people with a disability to volunteer, reducing and overcoming barriers to make it accessible is key. It's important to remember to include the wider team, increasing their knowledge about specific conditions and how they can help someone to become a part of the team. I would urge all employers to sign up to being a disability confident employer. It supports organisations and businesses to tap into a huge pool of talent and you can play your part in ensuring that disabled people have opportunities to fulfil their potential and increase their aspirations through volunteering.

Dawn Wood, Head of Support Services at Mencap in Kirklees



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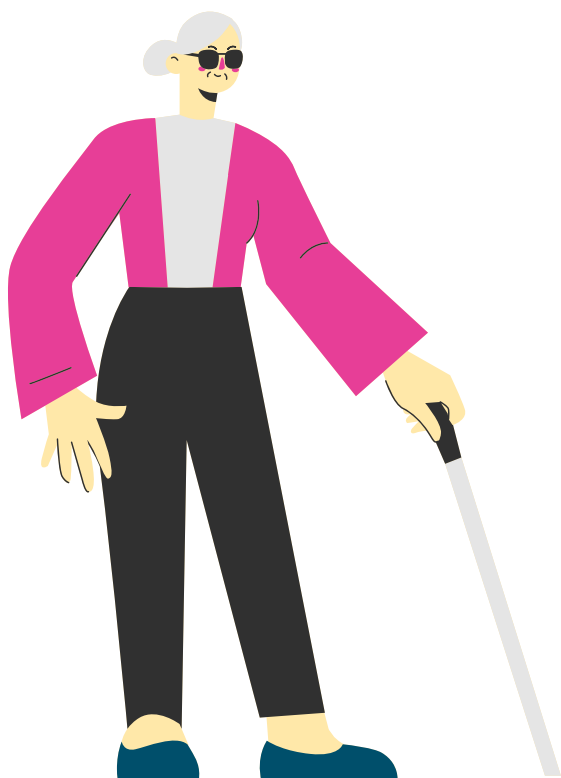
## Why have we focused on this issue?

The Calderdale Health and Wellbeing Strategy (2022-27) focuses on local residents developing, living, and working well. We believe that to develop, live, and work well, people need opportunities to:

- Meet others and connect;
- Build confidence, social skills, and self-esteem;
- Give back to their communities;
- Use and develop their skills;

Employment and volunteering can bring these benefits for those who are able to take part. But not everyone can participate equally. In our society at present, we have not yet achieved equality for disabled people and we know this contributes to poorer life outcomes. Disabled people are still more likely to live;

- in poverty
- with inadequate access to mental health care
- with poor support in terms of transport and housing
- with lower paid employment rates than the general population. 54.2% paid employment rate for people with disabilities compared to 82% for non-disabled people (Powell, 2024).
- with a lack of opportunities to gain qualifications and further develop their skills
- with barriers around systems, services, environment, and attitudes



Disabled people have also told us that they experience loneliness, isolation and feel they have little purpose and do not feel valued for their contributions. We wanted to work with disabled people to improve this situation. We listened to the views of disabled people in the local community and organisations to find out what works for them in terms of volunteering, and what the barriers are. We also wanted to look at what improvements could be made to volunteering opportunities. This was a one-year project from March 2023 to March 2024.

## Project aims

- To amplify the voices of disabled people, listening to their lived experience of volunteering
- To celebrate the positive impact volunteering has on disabled people's lives
- To establish a clear and comprehensive understanding of what works well and what good looks like in terms of volunteering
- To understand and describe the barriers to volunteering that many disabled people encounter
- To demonstrate the benefits of having disabled volunteers from an organisational perspective
- To demonstrate the benefits of an inclusive and accessible approach to volunteering



## Partners

Healthwatch Calderdale and Accessible Calderdale would like to thank the following people and partners who worked enthusiastically with them on this project:

- All the volunteers who gave their time and supported this project
- Overgate Hospice
- Locala Health and Wellbeing
- Calderdale and Huddersfield NHS Foundation Trust

We also had conversations with Calderdale Council, the Colt Project and Phoenix Radio.

# What we did to investigate

We collected insights in a number of ways:

## Focus group

We held a focus group with disabled people to listen to their experiences of volunteering. This was held online to maximise accessibility.

## Events

In June 2023 and January 2024, we held face-to-face events with disabled volunteers from Accessible Calderdale Disability Access Forum. We asked about their experiences of volunteering.

In March 2024, we hosted an online event with our partners and disabled volunteers at which disabled people had the opportunity to provide feedback on the volunteer recruitment processes of our partner organisations.

## One-to-one interviews and conversations

We interviewed several disabled volunteers and their experience is included in some of the case studies included in this project.

We spoke to young people who were part of DFN Project Search, who are partnered with Calderdale and Huddersfield NHS Foundation Trust. This project is a one-year transition-to-work programme for young adults with a learning disability or autistic spectrum conditions. It is a nationwide project established by city financier David Forbes Nixon, who has a son with a learning disability. The project aims to challenge and change cultures, demonstrating how young disabled people can enrich the workforce, bring incredible skills and talents, and encourage greater diversity. Since its introduction in Calderdale in 2017, approximately 50 young people have completed the programme and 19 have gained full-time paid employment (over 16 hours per week).

We also spoke to staff who supported volunteers at Calderdale and Huddersfield NHS Foundation Trust, Locala Health and Wellbeing CIC, Overgate Hospice and Calderdale Council.

## Survey

We used a survey to collect feedback from disabled people who had experience of volunteering. It was promoted on social media, e-newsletters, closed Facebook groups, and through local partners.

In total, we obtained feedback from 45 survey participants, of whom 93% were volunteering and 6% wanted to volunteer but had not found placements that were accessible to them.

## Total number of respondents

We communicated with 53 disabled people via focus groups, one-to-one interviews and surveys. We spoke to disabled people who had:

- Learning disabilities
- Physical disabilities
- Long-term conditions
- Mental health conditions
- Sensory impairments

## Findings

### Life impact of volunteering

Disabled people indicated to us that they did not feel included in society. They said they needed more choice in terms of volunteering.

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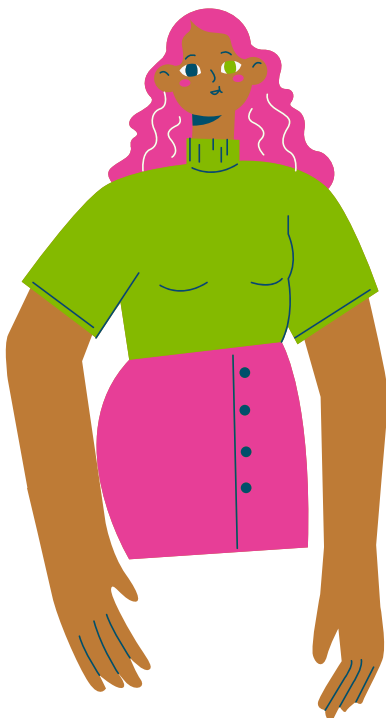
*We need more choice*

*We want things to do*

*Getting out of the front door is like getting out of prison. We feel alone. We need something to do. It keeps our minds focused. The benefits are huge*

”

Some of the comments people made indicated that they felt overlooked and unseen.



“

*I want to be listened to and not be a tick box*

”



People's reasons for volunteering differed; for some volunteering provided the opportunity to engage in activities that made a positive difference to the communities in which they live, and for others, it was about spending time productively, giving purpose to their lives, and meeting new people:

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*Nice having something to do and having a place to be and having something that is helpful to others and having a purpose in life*

*...And to make new friends as I find it hard to meet people*

*I have a sense of purpose and belonging, that I'm doing something that people appreciate and they value my contribution*

*Like meeting and talking to new people. I like having something to do and keeping busy*

*I do it to help people and support my local community*

*Given me purpose, gives me something to get up for in the morning*

*I have made new friends*

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Volunteering also had the positive secondary outcome of improving people's confidence and self-esteem and contributing positively to good mental health:

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*[Volunteering] made me happier and confident. I am better at introducing myself to new people and saying hello too*

*It has brought a bit of my old self back that I had lost with what I'd gone through. It can be hard at times with my conditions, but it gives me some confidence*

*[Volunteering] keeps me from depression*

*It [volunteering] also makes me feel less stressed and my anxiety levels go down*



*It has made a great difference in my life as I have gained confidence*

*Volunteering keeps me mentally sane and happy*

*It made me feel more confident and helped me know more about myself*

*I feel valued, it has improved my confidence*

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People also said that volunteering helped them to develop new skills; for some these were life skills and for others volunteering was a way to enhance their skills formally in the hope of obtaining paid employment later.

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*Good to get experience for your CV to take to employers. It is good to volunteer in a variety of different places to get lots of different experiences so I know what job I want in the future*

*[Volunteering] has helped me develop new skills*

*I have learnt about other people's nationalities and dietary requirements. I have learnt how to count change, which I couldn't do before. I used to struggle with my money but now I am better at sorting out my own money*

*To get a paid job so I can help my mum to pay rent*

*It has opened a lot of knowledge for me which has helped so I can help other people in different situations*

*To gain experience for getting a paid work. Everyone in my family has a real job and I want one as well. I want to have my own money*

*To gain new experience that I can add to my CV so I can get paid work*

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## Barriers to volunteering

People shared with us the barriers they faced to volunteering. These included:

- Negative attitudes towards disability
- The locations in which the volunteering opportunities were located were not accessible
- Cost of travelling to volunteering – the difficulty of having the funds available upfront to pay for travelling and then claiming expenses retrospectively.
- Lack of accessible transport to travel to volunteering venues
- No support from carers allocated to allow for support whilst volunteering
- Concerns about volunteering negatively impacting on welfare benefits

The barriers that people mostly talked about were structural and cultural (stigma, discrimination, stereotyping) factors. These barriers often made it impossible for disabled people to participate and volunteer. Often more than one barrier was present at a time.

People spoke of organisations not being aware of the extent of the challenges some disabled people face in travelling to a place or getting into or around a building. Others spoke about negative attitudes relating to disability and felt frustrated that the focus was on what the person could not do rather than the lived experience and unique set of skills disabled people bring to organisations.



*It depends on the attitudes of others which has to be positive and the confidence of the disabled person. If there is a good attitude and good people then it will work*

*You get a feeling about attitudes whether it is through body language or tone of voice*

*I did not like the way they were treating me. They didn't understand me or my disability. They didn't take it in*



One person stated that they had been refused volunteering opportunities due to their disability.

People (volunteers and staff) said some disabled people needed support to help them volunteer but that this was not available and therefore volunteering was not accessible.

The disabled people we talked to had a wide variety of skills, which they felt were under-used. They were keen to use their skills and wanted opportunities to do this.



*We are an untapped resources, especially to other disabled people*



*I want to be taken seriously, experts by experience*

*I want to use my knowledge and lived experience*

One person expressed an interest in mentoring and supporting newly disabled people. Their skills included:

- Networking
- IT
- Blog writing
- Signposting
- Teamwork and collaboration
- Information advice and guidance
- Knowledge of local areas and services
- Supporting peers
- Design
- Mentoring
- System navigation (e.g. welfare benefits, social care, NHS)

For many people, lived experience of disability had honed their other skills, making them excel in certain areas:

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*She is very good at reading people, she once told me 'because I am deaf I see everything' and that has stuck with me. We miss things but she doesn't, we take for granted our hearing but she is so observant, not just about physical things but emotions and body language*

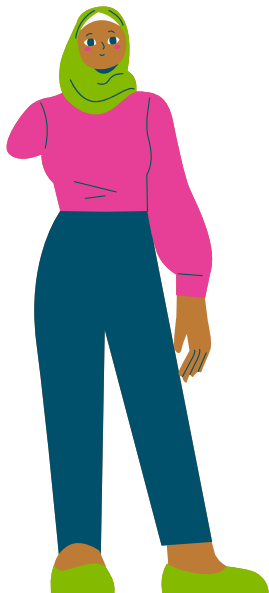
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In terms of their character, many of the people we talked to showed qualities such as kindness, patience, optimism, altruism, curiosity, problem-solving and perseverance.

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*I am an understanding, respectful and thoughtful person, who is good at listening and can give impartial advice*

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Levels of education varied amongst participants. What was very clear was that many people lacked opportunity due to societal barriers but given the chance to increase their skills, they were very keen to learn and participate.

It was clear that many disabled people were struggling with their confidence and that this was a barrier to volunteering for many. If however, they could overcome this, many stated that volunteering improved their self-confidence.

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*Put yourself out there, which is not easy especially in the beginning*

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Some people stated that their current health would not permit volunteering. Others did not know where they may be able to volunteer. One person wanted to volunteer locally but could find no accessible volunteering opportunities despite a thorough search. This person ended up volunteering outside Calderdale as that was the only accessible opportunity they could find.

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*We don't know who to communicate with [about volunteering]*

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*It is really confusing to know where to start with volunteering*

*Who is running volunteering programs that are inclusive?*

Another person stated that they had not had enough to do whilst on their volunteering placement:

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*Placements running out of things for me to do so would end the placement early*

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## How to make volunteering more accessible for disabled people

We asked people for their ideas about how to make the following more accessible for disabled people:

- Volunteer recruitment process
- Volunteering opportunities

### Recruitment

It is important that all stages of the recruitment process are accessible and inclusive from the moment people see the advert to when they go through the recruitment process.

Some people did not consider themselves disabled and would not describe themselves in this way even though they fitted the description of disability under the Equality Act 2010:

*“You’re disabled under the Equality Act 2010 if you have a physical or mental impairment that has a ‘substantial’ and ‘long-term’ negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities”*

Some preferred to say that they had an ‘impairment’ or ‘long-term condition’. Language is important and to ensure that as diverse an audience is reached as possible, we would recommend using all three terms ‘impairment, ‘long-term condition, and ‘disability’.

### Adverts for volunteering opportunities

- Actively advertise volunteering opportunities for disabled people. Include a statement to indicate that you welcome disabled volunteers.
- Include information about access and state that you will make adjustments that a disabled person might need when volunteering opportunities are advertised:



*Make sure people know if you are accessible so have that on your information that goes out*



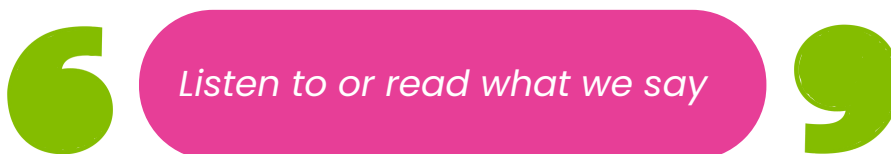
- Be as clear as possible as to what the role entails.
- Use accessible formats for example British Sign Language (BSL), large print, Easy Read, audio and video (with captions) to advertise the offer and describe the application process.
- Check the accessibility of your advert to ensure that it can be read by screen readers (Word documents, PDFs).



- Use plain English – avoid jargon
- Provide support with the application process and multiple methods of communication (e.g. telephone, email) for applicants to find out more about the post before applying.
- Advertise the roles in different places such as on social media, Indeed, local radio, and schools (for school leavers). Work with healthcare professionals who work with disabled people to promote volunteering opportunities.
- Use brightly coloured posters with a QR code to advertise and include details of how the recruitment process will work and display these in bus stations, café’s, libraries, and community organisations.
- Have a local, specific website where all local volunteering opportunities/placements are listed.

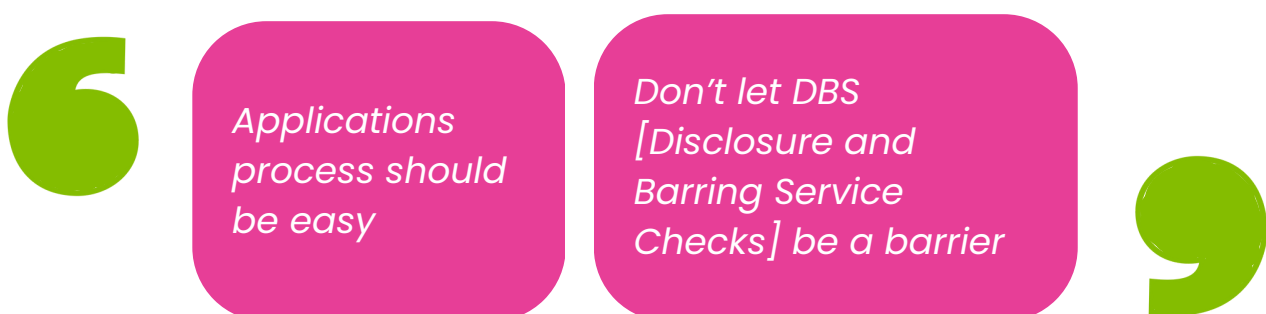
### **Application process**

- Simplify the process, avoid long forms, and allow verbal applications. Again, check that any forms can be read by screen readers. Use application forms that can be auto-filled.
- Ask for preferred methods of communication and respect them:



- Avoid unnecessary red tape.
- Provide different ways to apply for volunteering posts- for example in writing, via video, audio, etc.
- Train staff in the social model of disability.
- Consider attributes over experience and qualities to look for

These are some of the comments that people made about volunteering:



## Volunteering opportunities

Disabled people suggested that organisations work with the volunteer to understand their skills, interests, and any reasonable adjustments required and that they adjust the volunteering role accordingly so that it was a good match for the person rather than expecting a person to fit a role.



*Be flexible with your volunteering opportunities and fit in with the person rather than the other way round*



In terms of the volunteering role itself, the key themes were around:

- Supportive and understanding colleagues
- The option of being supported whilst volunteering. For some people, this might be for the first few sessions only or for training whilst others would need regular support, for example from a Personal Assistant
- Clear instructions/communication around tasks to be completed, breaking them down into manageable steps if necessary
- Flexible hours
- Work shadowing
- The ability to set your own work pace
- Having access to a support worker or mentor
- Rest breaks
- Wheelchair/mobility scooter friendly location
- Access to a seat in environments where people might be expected to be standing

People also told us they would like volunteering to be person-centred. They said they would like a one-to-one meeting to discuss what support or adjustments they may need. These are known under the Equality Act 2010 as reasonable adjustments but not all the people we talked to used this term. People told us that they would want to be reassured that any meeting about adjustments would be confidential. Some people told us that they did not need any support at all.



*I want to be asked, even if I don't need support*

*I'd want this to be a personal, confidential conversation but it would need to feel genuine and supportive, not a tick box*



## Conclusion and recommendations

As well as being more likely to be unemployed, disabled people are more likely to be socially excluded and in poverty and these factors contribute to inequality and poorer health and well-being. If we really want to reduce inequality in Calderdale, then we need to provide more opportunities for disabled people to be included in society, to share their skills and to have an opportunity to gain new skills, whether these be skills for life or skills that may help them gain employment in the future. Our recommendations are as listed in the table below:

Recommendation	Who we are asking to lead on this	By when
<p>That the social value workstream and the inclusive economies board commit to improving the volunteering opportunities for disabled people and indicate how they will do this.</p>	<p>Social Value Workstream Inclusive Economies Board</p>	<p>December 2024</p>
<p>Improved strategic representation of disabled people in Calderdale – specifically the opportunity to feed directly into the Inclusive Economies Board, Public Health, the Health and Wellbeing Board, and Calderdale Cares Partnership Board. Commitment from these Boards/departments regarding the above and details as to how this will be achieved.</p>	<p>Public Health Inclusive Economies Board Health and Wellbeing Board Calderdale Cares Partnership Board</p>	<p>December 2024</p>

<p>That the organisational members of the Calderdale Cares Partnership Board commit to sharing training materials provided by Accessible Calderdale in the October 2024. Also, spread disability awareness with their organisations and explain how this material will be used to improve disability awareness.</p>	<p>Healthwatch Calderdale/Accessible Calderdale Members of Calderdale Cares Partnership board</p>	<p>December 2024</p>
<p>That Calderdale and Huddersfield NHS Foundation Trust, Locala Health and Wellbeing, Calderdale Council, Calderdale Local Medical Committee, Calderdale Voluntary and Community Sector work together with DFN Project Search, learning from the experience of CHFT to increase the number of DFN Project Search places available in Calderdale by the addition of at least one further host site.</p>	<p>The members of Calderdale Cares Partnership Board listed</p>	<p>December 2024</p>
<p>That volunteering opportunities provided by organisational members of the Calderdale Cares Partnership Board are shared with disabled people's organisations in Calderdale</p>	<p>Healthwatch Calderdale will link up organisational members of the Calderdale Cares Partnership with Board disability organisations</p>	<p>December 2024</p>

# Andrew's story

**Andrew has volunteered with organisations in Halifax and Bradford, including with the NHS. It led to employment and he has been an ambassador for improving the transition from childhood to adulthood.**

"I started with Project Search when I was at college after I had left school and during Covid. From then I went onto do a bit more volunteering to broaden my horizons. The Bradford charity has always been fantastic as they come from a disability and family background. They have no expectations of me and I feel that if I can do it I will step up and do it no problem. They have supported us as a family too for the last 10 years or so"

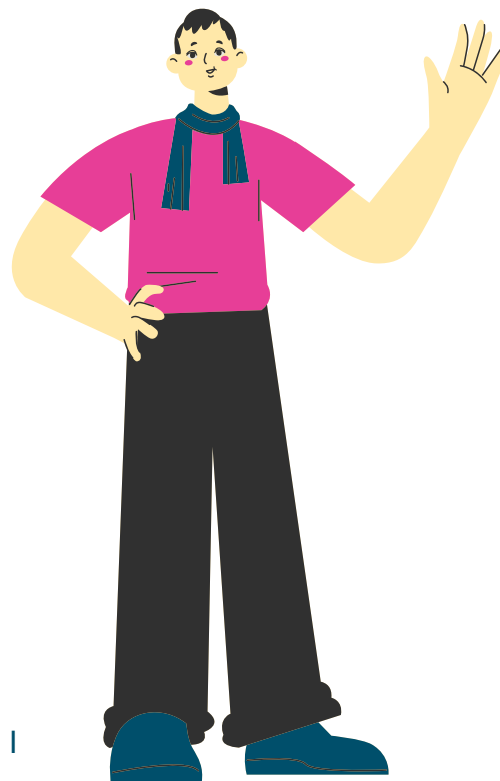
## **Understanding barriers**

The NHS have been fantastic too from the volunteering point of view. Some of the health care professionals have helped me. They understood about the different schemes to do with employment and Access to Work. They didn't know what Access to Work was but after I discussed it with my manager they looked into the alternative support. They have helped with getting me the right equipment. Even now they make sure that everything is fine. I am really grateful for their understanding of what goes on.

## **Andrew's advice for organisations:**

- Understand the person and the challenges and barriers.
- Get to know the person.
- Ask what is going to work and what is not.
- Be flexible.
- Take into consideration any health appointments and stays in hospital – this is now under reasonable adjustments.

"I feel like I have grown up a little bit – I have matured. The goal was always to get a little bit of experience. My career path changed a lot but the ultimate goal was to get paid employment, Now I feel like that I am set and I am extremely happy. I have an amazing team that I am apart of and I feel extremely lucky."



### **Andrew's tips for disabled people:**

- Get yourself out there if you are confident enough.
- Look at your hobbies and interests to develop your confidence.
- Learn how to speak up as it is a challenge – it is a key skill that has to be worked on.
- Stand up for yourself!
- Put yourself out there which is not easy, especially in the beginning.
- When you get the confidence people can see the value.

## **Nadia's story**

**Nadia, 31, from Halifax, is an advocate for disability rights and volunteers with People First Keighley and Craven.**

Nadia has cerebral palsy, uses a wheelchair and is deaf. She uses an AAC machine<sup>[1]</sup> to aid her communication.



*“I am an Advocate for disability rights and support people to become self-advocates. I am understanding, respectful and thoughtful person, who is good at listening and can give impartial advice.”*

Nadia's volunteering has taken her further afield than West Yorkshire, visiting India and Dubai to share her experience of travel and disability. She has also written blogs and social media posts.

***“Because I am deaf I see everything”***

[1] An augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) device, is a tablet or laptop that helps someone with a speech or language impairment to communicate. The term AAC device is often used interchangeably with terms like speech-generating device (SGD) or assistive communication device or simply communication device.



## Barriers:

Most of Nadia's volunteering experiences have been positive, but she has encountered barriers.

Nadia explained that she had previously applied for a school volunteering project. She had discussed her needs with the coordinator and been assured that the opportunity was accessible. She was then invited for training but then access issues arose. "I was given details of the schools. I explained I would require BSL support, something we had talked about, and it went quiet"

When exploring another volunteering opportunity, she requested email communication due to her deafness, but the company called her after receiving her application. "I emailed to say I have BSL skills and explained what I had already told them, that I understand BSL but I struggle to sign myself. 2 of my emails were ignored too so I wrote to the chief executive who was apologetic and wanted to put it right, but my experience put me off so I left it."



Nadia hasn't let any negative experiences deter her: she works with health and social care students to share her experiences, she is exploring opportunities to get involved in Patient Participation Groups at Bradford and Huddersfield universities.

## Nadia's advice:

Her advice to organisations looking at improving volunteering: "Listen to or read what we say".

"Volunteers are experts of ourselves, include disabled people, we really can contribute and make a difference."

"Disabled people have lots of skills and lived experiences they can bring to the role with them."

Her Personal Assistants Charlotte and Carla describe Nadia as having "massive empathy for others, really understanding of emotions and feelings of other people".

# Alex's story

**Alex is 23, a history graduate from Calderdale. He has cerebral palsy.**

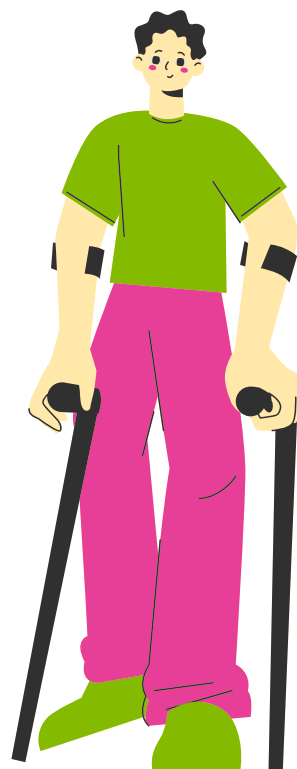
“See my qualities as a human rather than seeing the frame. I wonder if people see the frame and think I cannot do everything I can. See me for who I am and what I've achieved, rather than a barrier I may learn to get around with support. My disability has not held me back in terms of education or life experiences, it shouldn't in employment.”

The difference cerebral palsy makes to my life is its traits mean I face barriers other people don't. They are consistent, so they won't change much, but things other people take for granted I struggle with, like moving around as easily, getting dressed or having a shower or cooking. They are all things I can do, I just take a little longer or need some support or get tired quicker than other people would.

I feel like since I was 18 I have been able to speak up for myself more, I've experienced more so know how to identify what I need better and ask for it.

## **Education:**

I went to university when I was 18 to do a history degree, being there was proof enough that academically I was on a par with everyone else, I had the grades to be there like everyone else and my disability didn't affect how I was seen. I had a support worker to help me get around, about 6 months before I started I had a meeting with special educational needs (SEN) support which identified what I needed and everything was coordinated well. I graduated in July 2022 and after my graduation, I started my job search. I had done some volunteering and seasonal work but wanted something more regular.



## **Job search:**

There are a lot of metrics that go into looking for a job for me, a lot of employers are disability aware now and inclusive, so for me, I was looking at the accessibility – whether it was in a location I could get to; the practicalities of getting around when there. I applied for maybe 30 or so jobs, it was time-consuming and I had interviews. Some I ruled out myself as I reflected they would not be suitable for me, like a night shift job. I had an interview and it was online so that was good for me from a practical point of view.

I had a pre-interview, almost like a mock interview, where they asked what support I needed for the main interview and that was good as it meant I could explain myself.

### **Employment:**

I got the job which was full time hours. Before I started I'd already told them what sort of chair I would need, a suitable desk and keyboard and space around the workstation. It was all done by the time I started. I liked the job because I got to leave the house, meet new people and speak to them and help them.

### **Barriers:**

I was grateful for what they had done for me, but I realised quickly there were more things that didn't work so well. I needed a push button on the door to open it automatically but it would take 6 months and they were moving buildings so it would be pointless.

I also realised that working full time hours meant I experienced tiredness more. I wasn't able to work part time and I had to be there for 6 months to qualify for home working so I sadly left the job. I was a learning experience for me as it helped me identify what my own needs were and that full time was not right at that moment.



### **Ideas:**

My ideal role would be part time, local (Elland/Halifax) and office-based so I get out of the house and meet people, but with the ability to work from home so I can limit how tired I get from commuting. In terms of value I can bring, I have had to overcome a lot of hurdles and I've done it with resilience and determination. Unless you have been in my world it's hard to know what the experience is like, but I can see it through a unique perspective and I think that is a skill. I can easily see the weaknesses and strengths of buildings, services and so on from the point of view of people with disabilities.



### **Access to work:**

Before I started the full time job I looked at Access to Work but it was too slow to find out what I needed and get everything in place. My mum was on holiday when I was working full time, so she was able to take me in and pick me up, or my grandad could help, but that isn't a long-term solution. I feel it needs to be quicker to get the answers from Access to Work about what it can do to help me remain in a job.

### **Volunteering:**

I started volunteering, it wasn't something I set out to do but I was put in touch with Healthwatch and it has given me the chance to be involved, meet new people, share experiences and gain skills for my CV.

What I have valued about volunteering is the consistency in communications, I feel included in messages about volunteering opportunities.

It has been inclusive so I've not been left out of anything even if it's perhaps not suitable for me. I'm looking forward to doing some Outreach so I have the opportunity to speak to people and get out.

## **References**

<https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7540/CBP-7540.pdf>



# healthwatch

Healthwatch Calderdale  
[www.healthwatchcalderdale.co.uk](http://www.healthwatchcalderdale.co.uk)  
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