Volunteering for nature: Let’s make it accessible!

**A toolkit for nature-based volunteer organisations.**

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# Introduction

One fifth of the Australian population live with a disability**1**. Within this broad and varied demographic of more than 5.5 million people, there are many enthusiastic and passionate individuals who want to volunteer their time, effort, skills and knowledge for nature, but are unable to find accessible opportunities to get involved.

At the same time, volunteer numbers are declining nationally2, and many volunteer-based nature groups struggle to attract and keep volunteers3 to support their activities, at great detriment to the millions of hectares of public and private land cared for and protected by volunteer organisations.

Bridging the gap between people who want to volunteer, and groups desperate for volunteers makes clear logical sense, but the benefits to increasing accessibility and inclusivity have wide and far-reaching benefits beyond mobilising more Australians to act for nature through formal volunteering.

For example, people living with disability report high levels of loneliness and isolation4. Providing more opportunities to take part in environmental volunteering gives people an avenue to pursue their interests, spend time with other people and give back to their community.

Creating accessible opportunities and an inclusive culture helps community organisations strengthen their support base through increased recruitment and retention of volunteers. Diversified memberships bring new ideas and ways of working, and by valuing all contributions groups can gain access to the full wealth of knowledge and experience in the wider community.

In this resource, we’ll explain the key barriers to accessible volunteering and introduce practical solutions to help nature-based volunteer organisations welcome and support volunteers living with disability into their communities, programs and events.

# Barriers to participation

When we spoke to people living with disability about why they weren't currently volunteering for nature, many communicated a desire to join in, but spoke of three main barriers excluding them from participation. Overwhelmingly, negative attitudes, assumptions and misconceptions were the major barrier. Then, there was a general lack of accessible opportunities and cultures, as well as a lack of knowledge of where opportunities existed.

## 1 - Attitudes, assumptions and misconceptions

People living with disability face discrimination every day, both overt and passive. Other people make quick and uninformed assumptions about what they can and can’t do, their intelligence and even their value.

In the environmental space, these assumptions can result in willing and skilled individuals being excluded or overlooked. Internalised biases and misconceptions can lead volunteer managers to underestimate a candidate’s capabilities, or presume that expensive modifications or equipment is needed to facilitate their involvement. Or they might feel uncomfortable broaching the topic of an applicant’s limitations or support needs.

Though sometimes these assumptions lead to unwillingness or even disinterest in engaging with disabled persons, more often, they result in well-meaning organisations putting accessibility concerns in the ‘too-hard’ basket.

Almost always, negative assumptions, biases and misconceptions stem from a low understanding of disability and a lack of exposure to people living with a disability, whether actual or perceived. Public awareness about disability is improving, but many adults carry unconscious biases and beliefs about disability, absorbed from the people around them, their culture and exposure to negative or incorrect portrayals of disability in the media.

This is despite one fifth of the Australian population living with disability**1**, suggesting it is likely that almost all Australians have someone living with disability within their immediate circle of family and friends. It is up to all of us to actively identify and challenge our own biases through education and connection.

## 2 - Lack of opportunities

The prevalence of biases within the environmental community, leads to both conscious and subconscious discrimination when organising activities and recruiting volunteers.

This might look like:

* Requiring a particular level of fitness for membership, regardless of the activities to be undertaken, or types of roles on offer
* Rigid rules around volunteer hours, days, times and/or locations
* Activities that are not accessible by public transport
* Activity locations with physical access issues (rough terrain, steps, lack of accessible facilities)
* An unwillingness to discuss role, activity or location supports, flexibility or modifications
* Providing a narrow array of ways to volunteer

## 3 - Difficulty finding opportunities

Where accessible activities exist, advertising may not specifically say activities are accessible, or advertising may be too narrow to reach the target audience. Or, advertising may not include enough appropriate information for a prospective volunteer to determine whether it will be safe, comfortable and enjoyable for them to attend. This is usually an inadvertent oversight by well-meaning organisations putting on such events. Nonetheless it makes it difficult for prospective volunteers to find accessible or inclusive opportunities in their local community.

Non-inclusive communication of available opportunities might look like:

* Activities only being advertised on an organisation’s website
* A lack of detail about site accessibility and facilities in event advertising materials
* A lack of detail about what to expect from the event (including but not limited to format, schedule, group size and activities of the event)
* Lack of inclusive language and imagery on marketing materials
* Promotional materials that are not optimised for accessibility

# Finding solutions

These are serious barriers for the many nature-loving people who live with disability. However, they can be addressed with a little openness, creativity and dedication.

We recognise that volunteer-based organisations are time poor and resource-restricted, and that many volunteer managers and event organisers are also volunteers themselves.

There are small but effective changes that organisations can make to be more inclusive, accessible and welcoming. These changes benefit not only prospective volunteers but your organisation and community, with increased and more diversified volunteer recruitment and retention leading to more enriching human-human experiences and better outcomes for nature. In this toolkit, we tackle each barrier with practical solutions and general tips, templates and suggestions, links to further or more specific reading and draw it all together in an accessibility checklist for you and your team to work through.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Barrier | Solution |
| Attitudes, biases and misconceptions | 1. Understanding disability 2. Communication and relationships |
| Lack of opportunities | 1. Building an inclusive culture 2. Facilitating inclusive opportunities |
| Difficulty finding opportunities | 1. Optimising your communications |

# Solutions

## Understanding disability

### **A kaleidoscope of experience**

A disability is any physical, sensory, intellectual, cognitive or psychosocial impairment that affects a person’s ability to undertake everyday activities. Some people are born with a disability, others acquire disability through injury or illness. Disability can occur at any time of life, and can be temporary, episodic, or permanent. Not all disabilities are visible.

For some people, the nature of their disability remains stable throughout their life. For others, their disability may worsen over time. The effect of an individual’s disability on their everyday experience may change with different life stages, circumstances, and access to supportive resources.

Some people with disability may need a high level of support with everyday  
activities. Other people may have low or no support needs. Some people with disability may make use of supportive aids or equipment that make it easier for them to get around or complete tasks.

Many people with disability experience fear and anxiety when faced with a new situation or opportunity. Without knowing what to expect, they may fear that an environment or activity may not be safe, comfortable or enjoyable for them to navigate physically or emotionally. Fear can be a significant barrier to participation for people with disability, particularly for people with sensory differences or impairments, people who are neurodivergent, and people with mental health conditions.

Each person is an individual, and just because two people may have the same diagnosis, does not mean that they experience their disability or life in the same way. The broad definition of ‘disability’ encompasses a kaleidoscope of experience, and it is important not to make assumptions about how a person experiences disability, nor how disability affects a person’s capability to contribute to nature volunteering.

### **Relationships built on mutual respect**

Many negative attitudes towards disability stem from a medical interpretation of disability as an unfortunate deficit or defect that restricts a person’s life and should be cured or treated to achieve a ‘normal’ quality of life**5**.

Disability experts and organisations reject this limiting, disparaging model in favour of the social model, in which ‘disability’ is the result of an interaction between people living with impairments and an environment filled with physical, attitudinal, communication and social barriers**6**. This model places the onus on society to address barriers to enable people living with impairments to participate fully in society.

Individual conditions, diagnoses and impairments are just another expression of humanity’s diversity. People living with disability are not ‘victims’ or ‘sufferers’, and disability should not be viewed as a deficit or a negative aspect of a person’s life.

In reality, many people living with disability do not view their condition as an impairment to their life. For many people, their disability is integral to their sense of self. Other people can have quite complicated relationships with their disability. Importantly, not all people who have been diagnosed with a disability identify themselves as disabled.

Mutual respect and understanding of each other as humans is important for all relationships. See the person, not the disability.

## Communication and relationships

Establish connection and respect early for productive conversations and relationships. Sometimes people who do not experience disability are uncomfortable conversing with people who do live with disability, because they are worried they will hurt or offend the person, or that they won’t be able to understand each other. This can be overcome by remembering that every day we interact with people who speak, think or experience life differently to us. At the shops, on the phone, at work, online, in the park - everywhere. Sometimes we do find it hard to understand each other, but we get by! The key is to be respectful, open, kind and patient with one another, and to adapt conversations as we go.

Here are some tips to make sure you are communicating clearly regardless of who you are talking to:

* Use simple, direct, clear language.
* Avoid ambiguous or non-literal language.
* Listen attentively and carefully.
* Ask for clarification when you need to. Don’t pretend to understand when you have not understood.
* Speak as you normally would. Do not slow your speech or raise your voice.
* Speak directly to the person, not to their carer, support person, friend or  
  family member.
* Make eye-contact as you normally would. But be aware that some people will be uncomfortable with direct eye contact and adapt as you go.
* Be patient and allow time for thinking and responding
* Be adaptive. If a person is having trouble understanding you or  
  communicating, ask them what would help them communicate (e.g. a  
  quieter setting, pen and paper)

The Australian Federation of Disability Organisations has a great resource for  
communicating with people with physical, sensory, cognitive or psychosocial  
disabilities [here](https://www.afdo.org.au/resource-communication-with-people-with-disabilities/).

### **Language has power**

Respectful language is important, and it is important to know which terms are respectful and which are derogatory. There are some useful rules to follow, but remember that every individual has their own preferences and it is polite to ask someone how they would like to be described, rather than assume.

#### **Person first vs Identity-first language**

Many people with disability prefer person-first language, in which a person is said to ‘have’ or ‘live with’ their impairment. For example, “John has cerebal palsy”, “Emma has low vision”, or “Jackson lives with a disability”, “Mohammed uses a wheelchair”. Person-first language places importance on the person, and reduces the focus on an individual's impairment.

However, some people prefer identity-first language, in which the disability is embraced as an identity. For example, “Cassia is disabled”, “Xavier is Deaf”, or “Jenny is Autistic”. The Deaf and Autistic communities are two groups that tend to prefer identity-first language, sometimes with capitalisation. But it is always best to ask the person in front of you.

#### **Respectful language**

It is vital to remember to use neutral, non-judgemental language. Do not refer to people as ‘sufferers’ or ‘victims’ of their disability, nor raise them up as inspirational for achieving ‘against the odds’. The euphemistic terms ‘handicapable’, ‘special needs’ or ‘differently-abled’ are considered condescending. Many historically used terms for disability are considered derogatory and hurtful. Please check out these great language guides on how to talk to and about people with disability, written by people with disability,

* [The Australian Federation of Disability Organisations guide](https://www.afdo.org.au/news/language-guide/)
* [People With Disability Australia guide](https://pwd.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/PWDA-Language-Guide-v2-2021.pdf)

### **Many different ways to sense, understand and communicate**

People experience the world in so many different ways. The way we sense and interpret the world affects how we relate to and interact with it and each other.

Some physical conditions affect a person’s senses. Senses include sight, hearing, smell, touch, taste, but also interoception (sensing internal signals from your body), proprioception (perception of your body in space, the location, movement and actions of your body) and vestibular (sense of balance and body position).

Additionally, people’s brains work in all manner of different ways due to neuro-developmental differences. This affects the way we interpret and respond to the sensory stimuli of our environment.

The term neurodiversity is often used to describe the vast diversity in human cognition. Neuro-developmental differences such as ADHD, people on the autism spectrum, and learning differences such as dyslexia and dyscalculia are considered neurodivergent. Neurodivergence does not correlate with low intelligence. There is no one right way of learning or thinking, behaving or communicating, but neurodivergent people – those who sense or interpret the world differently to the mainstream (AKA neurotypical) – often face difficulty with learning, completing tasks and communicating in mainstream settings.

#### **Creating sensory-safe environments**

Appreciating sensory differences is important for creating comfortable, accessible and safe environments and activities where everybody can work and communicate effectively.

Not everyone can filter out sensory impacts in the same way. What might be distracting or overwhelming for one person, may not even be noticed by another. Small modifications can make it easier for different people to take part. For example, quiet spaces and warnings about expected loud noises for those with sound sensitivities, or moving to an area with dim or natural light for someone who is sensitive to bright or flickering light.

#### **Multi-sensory communication**

Understanding that we all sense and interpret the world differently is important for developing direct, clear communication with each other and finding ways to break down information and instructions and to allocate tasks.

Neurotypical people tend to rely on verbal and written communication, but this isn’t how all people communicate best. Don’t assume that because someone has difficulty communicating verbally that it means they cannot communicate or complete a task, or that they have a low intelligence. Conversely, don’t assume that because someone communicates with flowing, articulate language it means they have a higher level of intelligence and will be able to communicate or complete a task with ease.

Consider communicating instructions in multiple ways. For example, in addition to verbally explaining instructions, printing out clear, simple instructions for volunteers to follow as they go, providing instructions with accompanying images, using visual cues around the site, giving only one instruction at a time, practising hands-on learning. You can also consider the strengths and comfort levels of your volunteers when assigning different tasks. Some people excel at physical tasks, while others might be your go- to when assigning creative or governance-based tasks. Some work best on their own, others in a team.

### **Meeting and onboarding new volunteers**

People's individual communication styles and needs differ, but simple, clear and direct language, and open, empathetic conversations are generally effective. Listen, learn and adapt the conversation as you go. It is OK to ask if they have any specific requirements, and about how you can help them join in. Be respectful and think about what is necessary to know for you to bring the volunteer on board. Don’t make their disability the focus of the conversation, but likewise don’t avoid asking important questions that will help you support them best.

For example, you should feel comfortable asking outright:

* Why do you want to volunteer with us?
* What do you want to get out of this  
  experience?
* What are your barriers to participation?
* What are your limitations?
* How can we support the work you want to do?

Note that it is important to ask questions one at a time and allow time for thinking and response. This is especially important when communicating with Autistic people or otherwise neurodivergent people.

Just like with any other volunteer, it’s important to find out why they are interested in joining your team, how they like to work, what they are really good at and what they find difficult. A “Manual of Me” is a useful document to create when bringing any new team member on board and you can find a template in Appendix A.

Be honest about the physical disability supports you do and do not have in place (e.g. there is a wheelchair-accessible toilet onsite but no ramp into the main building) and potential accessibility issues (e.g. the event will be on unstable ground). Nobody expects small, resource-limited organisations to be able to accommodate every need. What is more important is a commitment to inclusion, creativity and an openness and enthusiasm about how you can overcome barriers together to work together.

## Building an inclusive culture

Accessible volunteering isn't about one-off events, it's about culture. There are several steps you can take to become a more welcoming environment, but they require commitment and passion from across the organisation.

### **Take the temperature of your current organisational culture**

Think about your current community of staff, volunteers, board members, members and supporters. What’s the demographic breakdown of your community? How, where and when do you hold your events? What are your expectations of volunteers? How and where do you advertise your activities? Try to identify places in your communications and systems where you might be unknowingly excluding people.

### **Bring your community along**

Ensure you have the support and buy-in of your whole team. Sometimes individuals can be resistant to change, particularly when long-held practices, processes or systems need to be adapted. Communicate why change is important and allay fears of excessive costs or challenges. Educate your team about disability, accessibility and inclusion, and consider professional training or education where resources allow.

Creating (or updating) a Code of Conduct document that values inclusivity, accessibility and community safety together can be a powerful way to review organisational culture and create shared values and expectations. However, it is vital that this is an active and honoured document and that it is strictly upheld across the organisation, at all levels of seniority and age. You can also develop an Inclusion Statement that articulates your commitment to inclusion and accessibility.

Celebrate and display your Code of Conduct and Inclusion Statement in prominent places and refer to them regularly. Visual reminders of inclusivity help to enforce norms and make people feel safe and valued.

Investigate creating inclusivity resources for all volunteers and staff (e.g. ‘the manual of me’) and practices (e.g. offer support and flexibility to everybody) that don't single people out, or force people to out themselves but focus on supporting all people to feel welcome.

### **Assess how you could make your buildings, meetings and activities more accessible and inclusive**

This might look like applying for council funding for an accessibility ramp or bathroom, choosing more accessible locations for activities or a commitment to host hybrid meetings with the opportunity to join in-person or online. Outdoors Victoria has a great resource on “How to make your facilities more accessible” in their recent [toolkit](https://www.outdoorsvictoria.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/TOOLKIT-Welcoming-people-who-live-with-a-physical-disability-into-your-program-C.pdf).

It might also look like introducing flexibility in role expectations, times and locations. Flexibility is a key factor restricting participation not only by people living with disability, but also those with young families or other caring responsibilities, work responsibilities or transport issues etc.

By offering more flexibility, you can increase overall accessibility of your culture, without people needing to explain why they might need to spread out their volunteer hours, volunteer only at particular times or volunteer remotely. Flexibility in time and location is especially helpful for those with chronic disabilities which may flare up unexpectedly, or who have a limited amount of energy at their disposal each day.

### **Be overtly inclusive**

Because of the barriers many have faced in finding accessible volunteering opportunities, prospective volunteers will likely assume you are not inclusive or accessible unless you communicate otherwise. To engage with these prospective volunteers, you will need to communicate inclusivity in your marketing materials (more on this in the “Getting the word out” section of this document). It is also very important to promote inclusivity actively at your events through visual and verbal reminders.

### **Be pro-active and adapt as you go**

Building inclusive, accessible environments isn't always easy, and it is impossible to pre-empt every need, expectation or situation. Be pro-active, listen to your community, make changes where you can, plan for future changes and be honest about the limitations of your situation. An inclusive culture doesn’t baulk at a challenge, it gets creative!

### **Questions to ask yourself**

* Have you educated yourself and other staff or volunteer managers about the  
  nature and diversity of disability, and the barriers people living with disability  
  face accessing volunteering?
* Have you developed an inclusive and accessible Code of Conduct to manage  
  discrimination? Have you developed an Inclusion Statement or Disability  
  Inclusion Plan?
* Have you completed a stocktake of current systems and practices to identify  
  and remove discriminatory structures and expectations?
* Are you confident that all senior members of your organisation understand the  
  value of diversity in the workplace and the importance of providing an inclusive,  
  accessible and welcoming workplace culture and environment, and will be  
  enthusiastic in actively supporting changes to build an accessible environment?
* Are your expectations of fairness, inclusivity and accessibility displayed  
  prominently and clearly in the workplace and in your internal and external communications?

### **Useful resources**

* [The Australian Federation of Disability Organisations guide](https://www.afdo.org.au/news/language-guide/)
* [People With Disability Australia guide](https://pwd.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/PWDA-Language-Guide-v2-2021.pdf)
* [Amaze (Autism Victoria): About Autism](https://www.amaze.org.au/about-autism/)
* [Amaze A-Plus program](https://www.amaze.org.au/a-plus-program/) (training for organisations)

## Facilitating accessible opportunities

Offering accessible opportunities often has far reaching outcomes for organisations. Not only can it make it possible for previously excluded individuals to participate, it can also address other access, inclusivity or cultural issues, helping people feel comfortable to bring their families and friends, participate more regularly and identify proudly with their organisation.

### **Many ways to contribute**

A key barrier to participation by people living with disability is the limited roles and activities offered by volunteer-organisations.

Consider how you currently ‘use’ volunteers? How can you offer more opportunities to make better use of different people’s strengths and limitations? Can you offer more flexibility in terms of location or working hours? Think outside the box. Be creative and look at your organisation’s needs.

* Website and IT support, marketing, social media, graphic design, newsletter writing, event organising, governance, fundraising - these are all important activities that can be done remotely and in a person’s own time.
* Event photography, reception, bring a plate... There are many creative ways people can contribute to an event.

You can also think about the different steps involved in a particular event or activity and how they might be separated and allocated to different volunteers, based on individual strengths and limitations. For example, on a typical ‘tree-planting’ day:

* A gregarious person with limited mobility might enjoy greeting and signing-in volunteers as they arrive onsite
* A team of people with limited mobility might work to organise, separate and hand out plants for planting.
* A person with horticultural expertise and tactile sensory issues might be tasked with instructing volunteers, checking plants are planted correctly and offering advice.
* A person who prefers working on their own or in their own time might be tasked with propagating the seeds and planting the tubestock in preparation for the event.

### **Partner up and co-design!**

Connect with disability organisations in your local community. Run for and often by people living with disability, these groups should be your first port of call when designing accessible opportunities for groups with specific accessibility requirements. They may be looking for activities for their community to participate in and can often:

* provide or recommend training
* Advertise co-led events to their community
* Promote volunteer opportunities to their community
* Provide or recommend support staff

Remember that many local disability organisations are also volunteer-led and low on resources, so will need time and capacity to collaborate. You can also look to peak national or state-wide disability representatives for resources and guidance. For example:

* [Blind Sports and Recreation Victoria](https://www.blindsports.org.au/)
* Amaze (Autism Victoria)
* [Disability Sport and Recreation](https://www.dsr.org.au/)
* [Deaf Sports Australia](https://deafsports.org.au/)
* [Scope Australia](https://www.scopeaust.org.au/)
* [People With Disability Australia](https://pwd.org.au/)
* [Inclusion Melbourne](https://inclusionmelbourne.org.au/)

Finally, there are also community, youth and mental health support organisations, some of which are registered to provide support for NDIS participants and who are often looking for activities and opportunities for their community. Consider connecting with one or more of these organisations to share your opportunities and activities.

* [Outdoors Inc.](https://www.outdoorsinc.org.au/)
* [GenU](https://www.genu.org.au/?utm_source=google&utm_medium=sem&utm_campaign=brand_all_states&gad_source=1&gclid=Cj0KCQjwo8S3BhDeARIsAFRmkOOjqpSSVM00vECUfFepC2BNLVJPT0ihBHONHeApr_J1r3_F3fzfRwsaAhEeEALw_wcB)

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### **Making adjustments**

Be proactive about accommodations and adjustments you could make to your activities and locations. Think about the different ways you could accommodate sensory needs or mobility constraints, and what you can offer to make people feel comfortable and supported. Accommodations and adjustments might look like:

* moving an activity so that it can be reached by a level path
* allowing service animals to attend activities
* reducing volunteer shift length or allowing for more breaks
* providing seating and a table to work at
* borrowing, hiring or making space for adaptive equipment

There are many tools available to help people with different physical or sensory impairments participate in physical and outdoor activities. These range from long-handled gardening tools to all-terrain wheelchairs. Some volunteers will be able to bring their own equipment, while larger and more expensive equipment (like wheelchairs and roll-out pathways) can often be hired for an event. Parks Victoria has a number of All Terrain Wheelchairs across Victoria, which can be [booked in advance and borrowed for free](https://www.parks.vic.gov.au/get-into-nature/all-abilities-access/all-terrain-wheelchairs#:~:text=The%20TrailRiders%20are%20free%20to,at%20community%20locations%20near%20parks.). If you plan to regularly use a specific piece of equipment, you might consider approaching your council or a philanthropic body for funding to acquire it.

### **Listen and adapt**

Ask all volunteers if they have what they need to complete their role or task. Follow up after events and check in regularly with your volunteers to find out how they are enjoying their role and what could be improved. Listen to their ideas and continue to adapt your programs, roles and culture along the way.

### **Questions to ask yourself**

* Have you considered the range of volunteer roles that are available at your  
  organisation and whether they provide a variety of opportunities to people with different accessibility requirements?
* Have you reviewed your expectations of volunteers and identified opportunities that could be undertaken flexibly in terms of hours, times, days  
  and locations?
* Are there accessible facilities at your activity locations?
* Are your activities easily accessible via public transport, accessible parking, and level, even pathways?
* Have you asked your team, “Who are we potentially excluding from this event/activity?”, and brainstormed ways you could be more inclusive?
* Have you investigated potential partnerships with disability organisations and support groups in your area?

### **Useful resources**

* [Welcoming people who live with a physical disability into your outdoors program - Report and Toolkit by Outdoors Victoria](https://www.outdoorsvictoria.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/TOOLKIT-Welcoming-people-who-live-with-a-physical-disability-into-your-program-C.pdf)
* [2020 Inclusion Guide and Self-Assessment Resource for Camps and Outdoor Activity Providers - Resource by the Australian Camps Association](https://auscamps.asn.au/application/files/1615/9651/5855/ACA_INCLUSION_GUIDE_RESOURCE_2020.pdf)
* [All Terrain Wheelchairs - free hire through Parks Victoria](https://www.parks.vic.gov.au/get-into-nature/all-abilities-access/all-terrain-wheelchairs)

## Getting the word out

Once you are prepared to welcome and support people with disability into your programs, it’s time to let the community know! To make sure you can reach and engage prospective volunteers, you’ll need to:

1. Clearly state accessibility and inclusivity details
2. Actively promote your inclusive culture and opportunities
3. Advertise widely and reach out through new channels
4. Optimise your communications for accessibility

### **Clearly state accessibility and inclusivity details**

Many people with disability, or who are neurodivergent, experience fear or anxiety when faced with a new situation or opportunity. Without knowing what to expect, they may fear that an environment or situation may not be safe, comfortable or enjoyable for them to navigate physically or emotionally. While people without disability may experience this to an extent, fear is a significant barrier to participation, particularly for people with sensory differences or impairments, people who are neurodivergent, and people with mental health conditions.

You can make it easy for people to assess whether it is possible and safe for them to attend your activities by clearly stating accessibility details in all event advertising, as well as detailed information on what to expect from an event.

Use clear headings to separate accessibility information about parking, transport, terrain and site navigation, facilities, whether service animals are allowed etc. Be clear about what accessibility features are and are not available onsite. If you have a regular location, it is helpful to also organise these details into an accessibility tab on your website.

Include a link to the location via Google Maps. Many people use Google Maps to determine site accessibility and plan transport. Note that it is vital you ensure that all location, time and accessibility information on your website and event materials is correct and kept up to date. This is critically important to avoid vulnerable people being sent to incorrect locations or arriving to find accessible facilities that are temporarily out of order or no longer available.

Describe clearly what to expect at an event, from the schedule, to a step-by-step explanation of the activity, and details about meals and breaks. This information is important for people to be able to assess their capacity to take part in a task, and is also important to help people – particularly neurodivergent people or people with anxiety – to prepare mentally for the event. If you are hoping to engage volunteers on the Autism spectrum, it is a good idea to [create a social script](https://www.amaze.org.au/training/social-scripts/).

Make it clear that you welcome all people to join in and that you are willing to be flexible and make adjustments to support individuals living with disability to participate. Include space in your recruitment and event registration forms for people to identify accessibility requirements, just as you would with dietary requirements. Make sure to follow up with registrants well before the event to let them know whether you can meet their support needs and how you will do so.

### **Promote your inclusive culture**

Promote your commitment to inclusivity and accessibility widely and regularly so that people know they will be welcomed and supported at your events and in your community.

Develop an Inclusion Statement, include it in a prominent space on your website and event materials and link to it through your social media. Use inclusive imagery and language on your website, social media and communication materials. Celebrate your community and build a reputation of inclusivity by sharing volunteer photos, stories and experiences on your social media. Make sure that you encourage all volunteers to get involved in sharing their volunteer stories and experience, don’t single out people with disability.

Show people what to expect by sharing photos from your events that show people in action and enjoying themselves. Remember, you must make sure you get the consent and approval of participants before sharing identifying photos. Connect with outdoor or nature-focused accessibility and inclusivity organisations and share their messages via your social media.

### **Advertise widely and reach out through different channels**

With a rise in casual volunteering and the expanded landscape of information sharing, advertising events through a variety of platforms is important for attracting new volunteers, particularly from younger demographics7. To reach new audiences, consider advertising in time-honoured (and still effective) places, like through local council and education centres, as well as via social media on widely-used platforms such as Instagram and Facebook.

You should also reach out through the newsletters, websites and social media of local community and disability-focused organisations. This is where building partnerships can be really powerful. There are also community and disability-focused programs on many local radio stations. Through these pathways, you can also reach local NDIS providers who may be looking for opportunities to connect their clients with.

Clear, attractive posters in community centres and notice boards can also be valuable for communicating your organisation and events. Make it clear that everyone is welcome, state essential details and include a QR code leading to more detailed information.

### **Optimise your communications for accessibility**

Consider how different people may read or access information about your organisation and opportunities. Use simple design principles to make your written materials more accessible and provide information in a range of formats for those with visual, auditory or cognitive differences.

#### **Written**

* Minimum text s­ize 14pt.
* Use simple, sans serif fonts because they are easier to read. E.g. Arial, Helvetica, Tahoma and Lucida Sans.
* Use **bold**, rather than *italics*, for emphasis.
* Avoid BLOCK CAPITALS.
* Keep designs simple and clutter-free so it is easier to identify and concentrate on text.
* Ensure contrast between background and text is at least 25%.
* Avoid red and green colour contrasts.
* Avoid overlaying text on complicated picture backgrounds. Choose text on plain backgrounds.
* Use simple recognisable imagery to support text-based explanations and instructions.
* Use clear, simple language accessible at a Grade 9 level. The Hemingway website is useful for assessing readability.
* Spell out acronyms and avoid jargon.
* Produce large print and “[Easy Read](https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/content-types/easy-read)” versions of written communications and make sure people know they are available. Word documents are more accessible to those using screen-reader devices than PDFs.
* Make sure links stand out clearly from the text.
* Clear, large headings.

#### **Video and audio**

* Always include captions in video and make sure they are automatically displayed
* Provide written transcripts to support audio

#### **Images**

* Create alternative text to accompany images on your website, social media and communications. Alternative text describes a picture so that people with vision-impairment don’t miss out on information in the image.

#### **Website accessibility**

Make sure your website is simple to navigate and that information about your opportunities is clear to find. Simplify page structure to make it easier to access important information. Consider listing links to upcoming opportunities and accessibility information prominently on your home page.

### **Questions to ask yourself**

1. Are your organisation's documentation, policies, training, meetings, recruitment and promotional materials accessible for a variety of audiences and kept up to date?
2. Are you actively promoting a culture of inclusion and access through your website, newsletter and social media?
3. Are accessibility details clearly stated in your event registration details?
4. Are you providing space in registration or recruitment forms for people to identify their accessibility requirements?
5. Are you advertising your accessible opportunities through the right channels? For example, by partnering with local disability organisations, support providers and community pages to promote events through their newsletters, noticeboards and social media?

### **Useful resources**

* [Example Inclusion Statement from Volunteering Victoria](https://volunteeringhub.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Example%20Inclusion%20Statement.pdf)
* [Amaze A-Plus training program for organisations](https://www.amaze.org.au/a-plus-program/)
* [Amaze Info sheet 6: How to communicate effectively with Autistic people](https://www.amaze.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/How-to-communicate-effectively-with-autistic-people_2023FINAL.pdf)
* [Empower Autism Guide to Attracting and Engaging Autistic Volunteers](https://empowerautism.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Empowering-Autism-Book-Step-2.pdf)
* [Australian Government ‘Easy Read’ resource](https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/content-types/easy-read)
* [Hemingway Editor for readability](https://hemingwayapp.com/)
* [Guide to Alternative Text - Victorian Government Resource](https://www.vic.gov.au/alternative-text-digital-guide)
* [Edit Video Captions on Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/help/509746615868430/?helpref=related_articles)
* [Edit Alternative Text on Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/help/android-app/214124458607871?paipv=0&eav=AfaZHIakJwYEIRVnXUPLQLpI9wKs3GpiWByYyLg5dLqVQ0CsMM0o-g616JlY2YnRJOo&_rdr)
* [Edit Alternative Text on Instagram](https://help.instagram.com/503708446705527)
* [Web Accessibility Initiative](https://www.w3.org/WAI/fundamentals/)

# Conclusion

Across Australia, there are thousands of enthusiastic and passionate individuals who want to contribute their time, skills and energy to caring for nature. Disability should not be a barrier to participation for those who want to volunteer.

There are small but effective changes that organisations can make to be more inclusive of volunteers who live with disability, addressing mindsets, systems and practices.

It all starts with recognising and challenging unconscious attitudes and biases and normalising conversations about individual ways of working to our strengths and limitations. If we create an inclusive environment where all people feel welcome to ask for support we create a safe space where these conversations can happen with respect and empathy.

After this page, you will find a summary checklist for inclusive volunteering. Though the checklist is general in nature, working through each question should help you to develop a culture of inclusivity, understand event accessibility and get your opportunities out there. There are specific adjustments and modifications that can be made to help any individual get involved in volunteering for nature, and we have tried to include links to these throughout and at the end of this toolkit.

We hope that this guide is a starting point that helps you to build a more inclusive culture and facilitate accessible activities that strengthen volunteer recruitment, engagement and retention for your cause. Experiences of disability are extremely diverse, as are volunteer organisations! So please connect with disability experts and support groups near you and listen to those with lived experience to develop programs that suit your community.

We thank our content experts and lived-experience consultants and all who contributed their knowledge, experience and enthusiasm to this project.

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# Inclusive Volunteering Checklist

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Actions | ✓ |
| Have you educated yourself and other staff or volunteer managers about the nature and diversity of disability, and the barriers people living with disability face accessing volunteering? |  |
| Have you developed an inclusive and accessible Code of Conduct to manage discrimination? Have you developed an Inclusion Statement or Disability Inclusion Plan? |  |
| Have you completed a stocktake of current systems and practices to identify and remove discriminatory structures and expectations? |  |
| Are you confident that all senior members of your organisation understand the value of diversity in the workplace and the importance of providing an inclusive, accessible and welcoming workplace culture and environment, and will be enthusiastic in actively supporting changes to build an accessible environment? |  |
| Are your expectations of fairness, inclusivity and accessibility displayed prominently and clearly? |  |
| Have you considered the range of volunteer roles that are available at your organisation and whether they provide a variety of opportunities to people with different accessibility requirements? |  |
| Have you reviewed your expectations of volunteers and identified opportunities that could be undertaken flexibly in terms of hours, times of day, days of the week and locations? |  |
| Are there accessible toilet facilities at your activity locations? |  |
| Are your activities easily accessible via public transport, accessible parking, and level, even pathways? |  |
| Have you asked your team, “Who are we potentially excluding from this event/activity?”, and brainstormed ways you could be more inclusive? |  |
| Have you investigated potential partnerships with disability organisations and support groups in your area? |  |
| Are your organisation's documentation, policies, training, meetings, recruitment and promotional materials accessible for a variety of audiences and kept up to date? |  |
| Are you actively promoting a culture of inclusion and access through your website, newsletter and social media? |  |
| Are accessibility details clearly stated in your event registration details? |  |
| Are you providing space in registration or recruitment forms for people to identify their accessibility requirements? |  |
| Are you advertising your accessible opportunities through the right channels? For example, by partnering with local disability organisations, support providers and community pages to promote events through their newsletters, noticeboards, radio and social media? |  |

# Resources

**Language**

* [People With Disability Australia: Language Guide](https://pwd.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/PWDA-Language-Guide-v2-2021.pdf)
* [Australian Federation of Disability Organisations: Language Guide](https://www.afdo.org.au/news/language-guide/).
* [Amaze: Identity-first language in the Autistic community](http://amaze.org.au/about-amaze/our-language/)

**Communication**

* [Australian Federation of Disability Organisations: Communication with  
  people with disabilities](https://afdo.org.au/resource-communication-with-people-with-disabilities/)
* [Australian Human Rights Commission: Creating accessible and inclusive communications](https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/disability-rights/creating-accessible-inclusive-communications)

**Autism**

* [Amaze: Creating Autism-friendly Workplaces](https://www.amaze.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/AMZ_11134_2019_FACTSHEET_A4_6pp_FA_screen.pdf)
* [Empower Autism: Attracting and Engaging Autistic Volunteers](https://empowerautism.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Empowering-Autism-Book-Step-2.pdf)

**Intellectual disability**

* [Inclusion Australia: Thinking about inclusive practice - a guide for managers and policy makers](https://www.inclusionaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Guide-to-Inclusion-for-Policy-Makers.pdf)

**Policy and planning resources**

* [Example Inclusion Statement from Volunteering Victoria](https://volunteeringhub.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Example%20Inclusion%20Statement.pdf)

**Accessibility and inclusion**

* [Bellarine Catchment Network: Inclusive Volunteering Guide: a practical resource for inclusive environmental volunteering](https://www.environmentbellarine.org.au/resources/Inclusive%20Volunteering%20Guide_Oct-2023.pdf)
* [Welcoming people who live with a physical disability into your outdoors program - Report and Toolkit by Outdoors Victoria](https://www.outdoorsvictoria.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/TOOLKIT-Welcoming-people-who-live-with-a-physical-disability-into-your-program-C.pdf)
* [2020 Inclusion Guide and Self-Assessment Resource for Camps and Outdoor Activity Providers - Resource by the Australian Camps Association.](https://auscamps.asn.au/application/files/1615/9651/5855/ACA_INCLUSION_GUIDE_RESOURCE_2020.pdf)
* [Victorian Government Design for Everyone Guide (Universal Design)](https://sport.vic.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/2268761/Design-for-Everyone-Guide-A-Guide-to-Sport-and-Recreation-Settings.pdf)
* [Australian Federation of Disability Organisations: Event Accessibility Checklist](https://www.afdo.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Checklist-Accessible-Events.pdf)

**Digital accessibility**

* [Australian Government ‘Easy Read’ resource](https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/content-types/easy-read)
* [Guide to Alternative Text - Victorian Government Resource](https://www.vic.gov.au/alternative-text-digital-guide)
* [Edit Video Captions on Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/help/509746615868430/?helpref=related_articles)
* [Edit Alternative Text on Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/help/android-app/214124458607871?paipv=0&eav=AfaZHIakJwYEIRVnXUPLQLpI9wKs3GpiWByYyLg5dLqVQ0CsMM0o-g616JlY2YnRJOo&_rdr)
* [Edit Alternative Text on Instagram](https://help.instagram.com/503708446705527)
* [Web Accessibility Initiative](https://www.w3.org/WAI/fundamentals/)
* [All Terrain Wheelchairs - free hire through Parks Victoria](https://www.parks.vic.gov.au/get-into-nature/all-abilities-access/all-terrain-wheelchairs)

**Making adjustments­­­**

* [Australian Human Rights Commission: Customising a job for a person with disability](https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/disability-rights/customising-job-for-person-with-disability)

# Appendix A: Manual of Me

A ‘manual of me’ is a document that describes the way a person works and communicates best, and what they need to perform their best. It can be a powerful way to bring a team together, if everybody fills one out. Here are some examples of useful questions to put on your ‘manual of me’, but there are many examples out there.

About Me:

I prefer to communicate via:

* Phone \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
* Text \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
* Email \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
* In person \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
* Other \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

I’m very good at:

I work best when:

The times and days I work best are:

I feel comfortable when:

I feel uncomfortable when:

I enjoy:

I struggle with:

It bothers me when:

The best way to give me feedback is:

When I give feedback I can:

You should also know:

# Appendix B: Code of conduct information and ideas

A code of conduct outlines the standards of behaviour and practice by all members of an organisation (for example staff, board members and volunteers).

Staff and volunteers should be presented with and expected to sign the code of conduct when joining the organisation. In the case where volunteers may join a single event, without joining the organisation long term, a printed code of conduct can still be helpful to share during advertising or event registration.

A code is specific to each organisation, but usually includes

* The ethical principles that guide the organisation’s systems and behaviour,  
  in line with legislative requirements and relevant standards (for example  
  the [National Standards for Volunteer Involvement](https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/National-Standards-Document-FINAL_Web.pdf)).
* The philosophy of the organisation by which you expect staff, volunteers  
  and other members to conduct themselves
* Direct expectations and rights, clearly stated

It is important that the code of conduct is championed by senior members of the organisation, is communicated clearly and often, and is upheld by all members of the organisation. A plain language version of the code of conduct should be available to ensure responsibilities, rights and expectations are clearly understood.

Here are some statements you could consider including in your code of conduct, to build an accessible and welcoming culture and environment.

* Always treat everyone with respect, courtesy, fairness, equality, dignity  
  and sensitivity, taking into account people’s individual experiences and views.
* Always communicate clearly, respectfully and sensitively with one another and with visitors
* Always act in an inclusive and non-discriminatory manner towards all people
* Never make assumptions about each other’s experiences, ability, strengths or limitations

Detailed information about Code of Conduct and an example code is  
available [here at Volunteering Australia](https://volunteeringhub.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Writing%20a%20Code%20of%20Conduct.pdf).

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