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Good communication is key. It is essential that you understand the communication requirements of your volunteers.

While it is useful for volunteer managers to be knowledgeable about different types of impairment, it is important to avoid making assumptions about someone's communication needs based on their impairment.

It is good practice to ask all new volunteers about their communication needs and how they would like to keep in touch. Some people may find phone calls intrusive, while others may find them more accessible than a written communication. Always communicate directly with the volunteer.

“If I’m with a non disabled person, people always talk to them first. They talk about me as if I’m not there. Then if they’re forced to address me they speak as if I were a child. Their tone of voice changes, they speak slowly and often shout. Just because I use a wheelchair doesn’t mean I’m stupid.”

Juliette Hayworth, fundraising volunteer for an animal rights charity

Hearing impairment

There are different degrees of hearing impairment and different ways to communicate with people who are deaf or have hearing impairments. Before meeting, find out how the person prefers to communicate. Many deaf people choose not to speak. In the UK many deaf people use British Sign Language (BSL) as their first language. Others use Sign Supported English (SSE), which is based on the sentence construction of spoken English. Some deaf people lip read. Some use a hearing aid.

If a person uses an interpreter, speak directly to the person you are trying to communicate with, and not to their interpreter. Note that interpreters usually have to be booked well in advance.

If a person lip-reads, ensure they have clear sight of your face; speak clearly; keep objects away from your mouth including hands and fingers. People that use a hearing aid can benefit from an induction loop, especially in meetings involving a number of people.

For guidance, contact RNID*.

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Visual impairment

Many visually impaired people have some useful sight. You will not be able to predict what sight people have or what aid is needed. As with any disabled person it is always best to ask. A wide range of aids and equipment includes: Braille, large print, magnifiers, CCTV, audiotape. For further guidance, contact the RNIB*.

Wheelchair users

Wheelchairs are a mobility aid. Some wheelchair users use their wheelchair on a permanent basis, others use them just to get around. Do not assume that because an individual is a wheelchair user they can't do certain things.

It's important to remember that a wheelchair is part of the users' personal space and respect that space by avoiding leaning on the wheelchair or grabbing the handles without asking if assistance is required. Don't be offended if it isn't.

Bear in mind that it is best to communicate at the same height. Pull up a seat for a long conversation. If you are standing, stand back so that the person using the wheelchair does not get a crick in their neck.

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Learning difficulties

People with a learning disability find it harder to learn and understand, but with support can lead full and independent lives. The degree of an individual's learning difficulty can vary because of their early experiences, support, upbringing, schooling and the condition itself. You may therefore meet someone who cannot read or write and yet can understand loan agreements and contracts.

It may be necessary to confirm that the person understands what you mean but always assume that the person will understand and if necessary explain more than once. Avoid complex sentence structures and speak simply and clearly. Use different ways of explaining and use different media.

Some people with learning difficulties use the Maketon sign language to communicate. Some people prefer pictorial alternatives to writing, which can aid with communication, others don't.

Contact Mencap* for further guidance.

*see contacts page 69

Speech impairment

People with speech impairments can be among the most excluded people in our society. A very common misconception is that having a speech impairment is an indication of being unable to think or act independently.

Don't feel embarrassed if you have difficulty understanding someone. Take time to understand and do not pretend to understand if you don't. Ask the person to repeat what they've said or to say it a different way. It may be preferable to use pen and paper or another suitable medium or to use a companion to interpret for you.

Some people with speech impairments use communication tools. These can include electronic devices, such as voice synthesisers, and more simple tools such as communication mats. For more information on communication mats, refer to the Talking Mats website*.

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