

Wales Council for Voluntary Action

Supporting charities, volunteers and communities

4. Volunteers

4.30 Supporting Volunteers who have Additional Learning Needs



What are Additional Learning Needs?

Additional Learning needs, or ALN, usually refers to a person who has a reduced intellectual ability (and also a physical disability) and difficulty with everyday activities. This can include dealing with household tasks, socialising or managing money – which affects someone for their whole life.

People with ALN tend to take longer to learn and may need support to develop new skills, understand complicated information and interact with other people.

Volunteering can be rewarding and valuable experience for individuals with ALN, it can be beneficial to the health and wellbeing of an individual, can provide structure and a feeling of 'worth' for those who have not had many positive experiences in their lives.

Many individuals interested in volunteering who have ALN, a physical disability, impairment or existing health issue, will need their particular requirements to be taken into consideration.

The level of support someone with ALN will need depends on the condition(s) they have and what they are interested in doing. For example someone with low Additional Learning Needs who is interested in volunteering in a charity shop may only need a low level of support in order to learn the tasks and settle in. Someone with a more severe Additional Learning Needs may need full time support and have a support worker. Individuals with certain conditions may also have a physical disability and/ or a learning difficulty.

Some disabilities are visible, however many are hidden, and could include:

- attention deficit hyperactivity disorder,
- dyscalculia,
- dyslexia,
- dyspraxia,
- learning disabilities (including autism and Asperger's syndrome, cerebral palsy, challenging behaviour, Down's syndrome, fragile X syndrome, global development delay, Williams syndrome)

What does this mean?

Individuals may struggle with communication, social skills and relationships and may have particular behaviours, interests and activities. They may have problems processing information and difficulties with their sensory responses. Some individuals may have very specific issues which are only evident during times of anxiety or distress.

Good practice

When things are done appropriately, people with ALN can thrive in a volunteering environment. When things are done badly, a lot of potential and talent goes to waste.

Here are some good practice tips for supporting people with ALN.

- Provide awareness training to the team that will be working alongside someone with ALN. This can help to make sure the person is brought into a welcoming and enlightened environment.
- Role matching - the right person for the right role, take into consideration any known conditions and work with the individual to look at any possible barriers. You may find the Wellness Action Plan (WAP) a useful tool (see Appendix 1). When completing a Wellness Action Plan, or something similar, you may need input from an individual's support worker and/ or family member.
- Offer additional support or make some reasonable adaptations.
- Have one point of contact, this should be someone the person feels comfortable with. It could be a volunteer manager or supervisor, mentor or buddy.
- If for any reason you cannot support the volunteer, suggest they speak to their local volunteer centre to look for other opportunities.

Reasonable adjustments

The Equality Act 2010 requires 'employers' to make reasonable adjustments that will remove barriers to disabled people seeking to find and keep a 'job'. Although this legislation does not specifically cover volunteers all organisations should treat people fairly and ensure individuals have equal access to opportunities. It is important that volunteer involving organisations are proactive in reducing barriers to volunteering and avoid behaviour that could be perceived as discriminatory. Embracing a diverse range of volunteers also shows an organisation is part of the community within which it operates and welcomes everyone.

People with ALN may need physical adjustments, but not in all cases, many of the adjustments required often cost nothing at all. By making adjustments to your organisation's policies and procedures you will remove barriers for this group of potential volunteers and you may well benefit others too.

Volunteer managers should take the initiative in asking a volunteer with ALN if there is anything that could help them to do the role.

Adjustments could include:

- offering flexible volunteering, including changes to start / finish times and hours required
- changing the volunteering role or environment, for example providing a quiet place
- working with the volunteer to create an action plan to help them manage their condition(s) while volunteering
- providing training or mentoring (for the volunteer/other volunteers/staff)
- provide a coach, buddy or mentor for the volunteer
- making alterations to premises
- ensuring that information is provided in accessible formats such as easy read or visual prompts
- modifying or acquiring equipment (you may be able to access additional funding for equipment)
- allowing extra time to complete tasks
- you may also need to take into account practicalities with regards to access, welfare and hygiene.

For many individuals getting somewhere on time and actually walking through the door can be a very big step; dealing with individuals on a case-by-case basis can help with solving most barriers.

Your organisation may not be able to support all individuals with all of their issues. If your organisation is able to offer any support, make it clear what you can help with.

Supporting volunteers is an integral part of recruiting and managing volunteers, however, you are not expected to be an expert in everything – neither are you a doctor, social worker, housing or benefits specialist.

Contact your local County Voluntary Council who can help you signpost your volunteers to the support or services they may need in your local community, you may also find the links below useful .

Top tips

- Keep verbal communication as clear as possible; certain individuals may not be able to recognise non-verbal communication or facial expressions. They may take instructions very literally or not understand at all. Use of humour can also be problematic as individuals may take a 'joke' literally.

- Try different ways to give instructions, for example verbal, written, visual/ pictorial. people respond differently to each of these. You might think someone is not listening to you when actually they are, they are just not good with eye contact. You could ask them to repeat instructions or show you they have understood.
- Be patient, you may need to go over instructions or tasks a number of times and repeat them on a regular basis.
- Consider sensory 'overload', such as noise, too many people and bright lights. This can increase anxiety and make it harder for a person to function.
- Change is unavoidable, but it's important to think about how you communicate any changes; a change to a regular routine could be quite upsetting. Give the volunteer plenty of time to process the change and discuss any options or coping strategies for dealing with the new circumstances.
- Treat people as individuals, what works for one volunteer may not work for another.
- Consider the logistics and practicalities, does your volunteer manager or the mentor/ buddy have the capacity to support more than one person at a time? It may be more practical to have different people volunteering on different days. Consider also that sometimes individuals do not get along with one another well, especially if they have differing support needs.
- Extend the trial period if necessary and get feedback from the volunteer at regular intervals.
- If you decide to use a Wellness Action Plan (WAP) you may need to invite someone along that the volunteer feels comfortable with. The WAP is intended as a guide only. You can adapt it and the language used, to suit your needs.

Further information

Mencap has a wealth of useful information including:

[more information about ALN](#) and [Information for individuals interested in volunteering if they have ALN](#). There is an [easy read guide for volunteers](#) and there [are resources for employers](#)

The Mencap publication [Good for business – the benefit of employing people with a learning disability](#) makes an effective business case.

[People First](#) has local self advocacy groups for people with learning disabilities in Wales

[Health and safety for disabled workers and people who work with them](#) Health and Safety Executive (easy read).

[Valued in public – Helping people with a learning disability to work in public bodies](#) Department of Work and Pensions .

[Employing disabled people and people with health conditions](#) guidance from the Department of Work and Pensions.

[Infoengine](#) is an online database where you can search for local services

See also the following CVC/WCVA information sheets

4.6 [Equality and diversity in volunteering](#)

4.12 [Volunteers and welfare benefits](#)

4.15 [Supporting harder to place volunteers](#)

4.17 [Understanding mental health and volunteering](#)

4.22 [Managing volunteer exits](#)

Disclaimer

The information provided in this sheet is intended for guidance only. It is not a substitute for professional advice and we cannot accept any responsibility for loss occasioned as a result of any person acting or refraining from acting upon it.

Appendix 1. Wellness Action Plan (WAP)

A WAP reminds us what we need to do to stay well whilst volunteering and details what our supervisors can do to better support us.

The information in this form will be held confidentially and regularly reviewed by you and your supervisor together. You only need to provide information that you are comfortable sharing and that relates to your volunteering role and context.

This form is not legally binding but it will help us to agree, together, how to practically support you in your role and address any health needs.

1. What helps you stay healthy/ happy whilst volunteering? (For example: taking adequate breaks, being clear about tasks)
2. What can we do to support you to stay healthy/ happy whilst volunteering? (For example: regular feedback and supervision, explaining wider developments, limiting changes to routine)
3. Are there any situations that might arise during your volunteering that can trigger ill health for you or make you feel unhappy? (For example: conflict, something not going to plan, loud noises, too many people)
4. How might stress or health difficulties impact on your volunteering? (For example: find it difficult to make decisions, struggle to focus on tasks.)
5. Are there any early warning signs that we might notice when you are starting to feel stressed or unwell? (For example: changes in normal behaviour patterns, withdrawing from other people)
6. What support could be put in place to minimise triggers or to support you to manage symptoms? (For example: extra catch-up time with supervisor, a quiet space away from other volunteers)
7. If we notice early warning signs that you are feeling stressed or unwell – what should we do? (For example: talk to me discreetly about it, contact someone that I have asked to be contacted.)

- 8 What steps can you take if you start to feel unwell or unhappy when volunteering?
Is there anything we need to do to help you take these steps? (For example: take a break and go for a short walk, talk to a support worker or buddy, ask your supervisor for support, adapt some of the tasks)
- 9 Are you happy to talk to someone when something is going wrong? If yes let us know who you would be happiest talking to... (e.g. Manager/ supervisor, mentor, buddy, family member, social worker)

Please include contact names and numbers if you would like your supervisor to get in touch with someone if you become unwell.


Volunteer's signature..... Date.....

Supervisor's signature..... Date.....

Date to be reviewed:.....

Adapted from Mind Cymru

For further information contact

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