

Overcoming Language Barriers in Volunteering – Factsheet

Introduction

The boroughs of Oldham, Rochdale, and Tameside are linguistically diverse, with many residents speaking languages other than English as their main language at home. In Rochdale, over 80 different spoken and written languages are used across the borough. In Oldham, around 25,000 residents reported a main language other than English in the 2021 Census.

Volunteering should be accessible to everyone who wants to get involved but language can be a barrier to accessing opportunities, even when people have valuable skills and experience.

Language barriers

Who faces language barriers?

- **People with non-native English proficiency:** Each person has different language proficiency levels (e.g. [CEFR](#)). Speaking, writing, and reading may not all be at the same level.
- **People with poor literacy skills:** 1 in 6 (6.6 million people) adults aged 16 to 65 in England have very poor literacy skills. [Adult Literacy Rates in the UK | National Literacy Trust](#)
- **People with disabilities, health conditions and language disorders e.g. dyslexia, aphasia, stammering.**
- **People from different cultural or regional backgrounds.**
- **People with different dialects.**

Common language barriers

- **Inaccessible materials:** Marketing information, application forms, and training materials may use complex language and/or are only be available in English.
- **Jargon:** Words or phrases that are specific to an organisation or industry can be a barrier. This is especially common with acronyms e.g. VCFSE.
- **Negative emotions:** People who face language barriers may be fearful of making mistakes or lack confidence in speaking, reading or writing. Shame and embarrassment can come up if the environment isn't comfortable for them.
- **Social exclusion:** People who face language barriers might not be able to fully engage with social aspects of volunteering and feel excluded.

Benefits of volunteering

Language proficiency does not define someone's ability to contribute. When we recognise the skills, experiences and strengths volunteers bring we make our voluntary organisations stronger. In turn, volunteering can support language development, connection and belonging.

- Benefits for individuals
 - Practise spoken, read, or written English in a real-world setting
 - Use their native or additional language skills to make a difference
 - Build confidence
 - Meet new people and reduce isolation
 - Gain new skills and references
 - Improve employability

- Benefits for organisations
 - More diverse volunteer teams
 - Better representation of local communities
 - Improved engagement with residents
 - New skills, experiences and perspectives

What can voluntary organisations do?

Most volunteering roles can be successfully carried out by people who face language barriers when they are properly supported through straightforward communication, buddy systems, visual demonstrations and multilingual support.

Make volunteering opportunities easier to access

- Use plain English in role descriptions and application forms.
- Develop translated promotional materials where appropriate.
- Use images and videos to promote opportunities.
- Offer a range of ways to apply e.g. online, on the phone, in person.
- Use digital tools e.g. translation software to facilitate multi-lingual communication.

Review your language requirements

- Review recruitment processes and role descriptions.
- Critically evaluate what level of spoken English and literacy is genuinely needed for each role.
- Focus on communication skills above general English ability or literacy.

Take a strengths-based approach

- Focus on what people can do, not what they may struggle with.
- Recognise existing skills, qualifications and lived experience.
- Get to know individual volunteers; find out about their language needs and goals for volunteering.
- Be supportive and discrete when discussing language barriers.

Create a welcoming and supportive volunteering environment

- Use buddy systems or peer support.
- Provide visual instructions where possible.
- Encourage volunteers to learn through demonstration and observation.
- Be flexible and open to creative solutions.

Build relationships with trusted community organisations

- Connect with ESOL providers, refugee organisations, faith and community groups.
- Listen to what support people need.
- Attend community events to promote volunteering opportunities.