MAYOR OF LONDON

IMPROVING THE VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE THROUGH INCLUSION

A good practice toolkit

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ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

This toolkit is a flexible resource to provide practical steps to help create a better volunteering experience through implementing Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion practices in volunteering contexts. It provides guidance on how to leverage the voices and insights of volunteers to co- produce solutions to progress EDI work.

We commissioned The Inclusive Village, a Black female-led management consultancy with a specialism in Equality Diversity and Inclusion, to support delivery of the sessions and help create our final toolkit.

The document is intended to offer guidance to anyone supporting and managing volunteers, volunteer involving organisations, EDI consultants, HR departments, Learning and Development teams, or other Civil Society groups who wish to work collaboratively with their stakeholders, volunteers, or beneficiaries towards a more diverse, equitable, accessible, and inclusive volunteer experience.

The toolkit is built around key themes to develop what good inclusive practice is, and how that supports Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in volunteering. Under each theme, there is a brief rationale, an outline of what we did and how this was done, as well as key considerations that toolkit users may adapt.

We recognise that the toolkit may require adapting to the context where they will be applied, taking into account internal processes, resource(s) available, organisation size including staff and volunteers, geographical location, existing demographics of staff and volunteer base.



Photo: Caroline Teo

WHAT LED US HERE?

Following on from reports in the wider voluntary sector focussed on the volunteer experience, namely 'Time Well Spent' (NCVO, 2019) as well as a Diversity Research project in 2020, reporting that 'some volunteers are less likely to have a positive experience than others, including younger, Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME), and disabled volunteers', we saw the need to review our own internal practice to make improvements. We create this toolkit to document and share our learning from this process.

Across April-November 2022, the Civil Society and Volunteering Team coordinated a Team London Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Volunteer Advisory Group made up of 17 diverse volunteers across our Ambassador, London Squad, and Major Events volunteering programmes. The aim of the group was to help shape positive change to our volunteering programmes and to ensure optimised inclusion and accessibility at all stages of the volunteer experience.

The group's remit focused on **race**, **disability**, and **neurodiversity** to reflect demographics who continue to be **underrepresented** within volunteering programmes, and who report a less positive volunteering experience.

METHODOLOGY:

PROJECT OBJECTIVES AND ACTIVITIES

Project Objectives

- GLA staff, The Inclusive Village and volunteer collaboration
- To come up with key recommendations about how to improve the experience of underrepresented volunteers, specifically Black Asian and Minority Ethnic and disabled volunteers.
- To learn lessons about how to run an effective and inclusive volunteer EDI working group.
- To share good practice both internally across the GLA and externally with other volunteerinvolving organisations

Project Activities

- Build psychological safety through inclusive set-up of the group and meetings.
- Run six accessible and flexible hybrid sessions with face-toface and online options.
- Upskill and support EDI VAG members to conduct field visits, function collaboratively, apply inclusive practices.
- Collect data through surveys to reach a wider range of volunteers.
- Build in feedback loops to improve the project on a live basis.
- EDI Recommendations Report as a final output

In setting up the group, we based our design around **co-production**, '**participatory research approach**' and '**psychological safety**' to engage volunteers.

We centred the approach around "**nothing about volunteers, without volunteers**" to leverage the experiences and insights of Team London Volunteers for the betterment of the overall volunteer experience. We set out to create a process that was equal, safe, participatory, generous, and non-extractive. A process where volunteers' participation was reciprocal, enriched by both giving and receiving.

It was crucial to establish a safe space for all those involved to feel authentic and participate fully in building and developing the project. We had an initial group discussion about an individual needs approach, and conversations around 'agree to disagree' and respect were central to a psychological safety.

We used the method of Participatory research, a "**collaboration of those affected by the issue being studied, for the purpose of education and taking action or effecting social change**". Participatory principles and values enable those who experience issues to investigate their own reality. Participatory research engages participation of nonacademic researchers in the creation of setting the methodology, collecting, and analysing the data, disseminating findings.

We ensured that the journey, participation, and learning were as valuable as the outputs. The volunteer advisors were themselves on a journey to explore what difference their contributions could make towards a more inclusive volunteering service, testing out innovative ideas and approaches within sessions to understand what "inclusive feels like". We were keen to emulate the idea of '**power with and not over, research with people not on people.**'

The project delivery was flexible enough to allow change of direction, whilst being closely tied to the agreed objectives.

For example, facilitators had to pivot quite quickly and remain responsive to the needs of the advisory group in terms of what could be achieved within 2-hour meetings. Some of these adjustments included reducing content to create more space for people to talk and discuss their experiences with peers, particularly in smaller breakout groups.

Based on constructive feedback from group members early in the process, we had to reconsider how we could ensure balanced participation among all members taking into account individual levels of knowledge and experience around Equality Diversity and Inclusion issues, confidence levels, neurodivergences amongst other factors.



Watch the reflections video here >

In this group, we specifically looked at the experience of underrepresented groups in volunteering, namely **race**, **disability** and **neurodiversity**, to come up with collaborative and volunteer-led solutions. Volunteers identifying as from an ethnic minority background, having a disability, neurodiversity or additional support need(s) were sent a Role Description about the intentions of the group and the advisor role, and asked to express their interest using minimal questions and selection criteria.

Expression of Interest Form Questions:

- Why would you like to be part of the EDI Volunteer Advisory Group?
- What skills/experience/knowledge would you bring to the group?
- What one key positive difference would you like to see in our volunteering programmes to make them more inclusive and/or accessible?
- Have you sat on an advisory board/working group/held a trustee role before?
- Do you have any additional support needs that we would need to consider so you could take part in this group?



Photo: Mediorite

Setting Up A Volunteer Advisory Group

A Role Description should cover the following aspects:



Group make-up

We selected a group of 17 advisory group members with a range of experience participating in EDI initiatives, from those who had very little experience to those who regularly participated in EDI initiatives through their employer, as well as varying levels of volunteering experience, age diversity from 25-70 years old, etc. All members expressed their motivations around EDI initiatives and commitment to the project objectives. One member commented that this was a 'rare opportunity to be involved with decision-making'.



Top three recommendations

Allow responses in varied formats to cater for diverse needs and accessibility, i.e. via online form (Google form, MS Forms), email phone call, audio recording, video, by post.	
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Ensure you reflect the local communities, your service users demographics or underrepresented groups when reviewing applications.
applications.

Diversity of thought is key when considering the group make-up, and ensure you consider intersections between age, gender, ethnicity, disability, location, socioeconomic background and other protected
characteristics.

Creating a safe space for collaborative work

Bringing groups together in an inclusive participatory space requires skills and practical arrangements that allow everyone to feel safe, acknowledged, and able to participate authentically. It's important to consider the positionality of the facilitators and any external consultants involved in leading and delivering the session.

Positionality refers to the social and political context of someone's identity, and how this in turn impacts their preconceptions, the way they see the world and people with identities different to their own. In summary, it is important to recognise the power of one's own personal lens and recognise how that impacts the way we perceive and connect with others.

The project brought together volunteers representing many **intersectional identities**; volunteers occupied identities across the three different group experiences we focussed on in this project of race, disability, and neurodiversity.

We built in adjustments and facilitatory approaches that would achieve a inclusive space, for example we sent out the agenda and materials in advance in order to support volunteers with additional support needs such as dyslexia, and also ensured each workshop incorporated a variety of different types of activities from 1-1 work to larger group discussions to meet differing participation styles and preferences.

Psychological safety

Creating, and maintaining '**psychological safety**' was a huge priority within our work. Establishing a '**safe space**' early on enabled volunteers to work together to achieve a shared goal, even when they had differences in opinion or experienced issues in different ways.

In the first workshop with the group, we wanted to begin to create a group identity and break down any apprehension, we asked members to shared their favourite (karaoke) song, which was then compiled into a Spotify Playlist, a resource we continued to reference over the course of the program to reinforce the fun, belonging and social element of our work. We also asked volunteers to collectively identify what we wanted the space to look and feel like and put this together into a '**safe space word cloud**'.

As a result, volunteers felt like they had a stake in the ongoing culture of the group and a responsibility to maintain this space for themselves and their peers. Exploring our safe space words formed a "fun" starting point of each session and became familiar feature over the course of the project i.e., a clear understanding of "what makes me feel safe and what I can do more of for my fellow collaborators to feel safer.





Photo: James O Jenkins

Feedback

We were open in asking for feedback on the sessions in order to continually learn and improve. We asked for verbal feedback at the end of the sessions, as well as follow-up via email at the end of the sessions. One group member fed back around creating equal voice and participation across the group. We took this onboard and established some 'ground rules' via an engagement tool using spoons.

This activity introduced plenty of humour and lightness, but also opened space to discuss equal participation and empowered each group member to take responsibility and ownership of their participation, and to support their peers to do so. Subsequent feedback about voice and safety significantly improved after the introduction of this activity.

This balance of participation among members was an ongoing challenge, with some volunteers feeding back that online meetings at times needed better management. Allocating the appropriate number of staff is key in successful online delivery. Capacity needs to be allocated for monitoring different elements of online participation (participants unmuting to speak, raising hands, posting comments in the chat). Part of creating safety is to also consider and plan for the ending of the group, to ensure members understand next steps, and feel that their ideas and input has been heard and will be taken forward.

Engagement Activity

- Ask each group member to find 5 spoons (if not spoons, it could be other cutlery, pens, cards or any other physical items)
- For the duration of the meeting, each time someone contributes to the meeting, they 'spend a spoon.'
- Each group member is to monitor their number of spoons, and those of their peers.
- Halfway through the session, encourage the group to review their remaining spoons. If they still have the majority of their spoons left, the work and discussions is missing their contribution
- Contributions are also encouraged via written format, and volunteers wrote on post it notes, any ideas or thoughts that time would not allow them to share.
- Encourage group members to support their peers too, and if someone hasn't yet contributed in the meeting to bring them into the conversation

• This enabled those who need more voice", to not disengage or holdback as they gave their colleagues "airtime". Similarly, those who prefer to speak less would write as opposed to speak, and "spend their pens" that way

Top four recommendation

	Ask the group to define what a 'safe space' means for them, using
	the <u>Safe Uncertain Framework</u> . Generate a word cloud using
	these words/ideas to summarises the group's needs, expectations,
· · ·	and definition of safety. Regularly review and refer to this word cloud
	ideally at the start of each session.

Request and accommodate member feedback during and after each	
meeting throughout the project, to ensure any issues are	
immediately addressed, and that people feel unreservedly heard.	

Send agenda and any other relevant meeting materials in advance of each meeting to enable reflections from all group members.
or each meeting to chable reneotions norm an group members.

	Ensure you have sufficient staff capacity to run effective and inclusive online meetings.
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Photo: Mediorite

Participatory Research

Participatory Research (PR) is a qualitative research approach involving collaboration between researchers and those affected by the social issues being studied to bring about positive change. It focuses on social change that promotes democracy and challenges inequality and seeks to 'empower participants to have a greater awareness of their situation to act.'

To have an accurate picture of the experiences of our diverse volunteers we worked with the advisory group to design a piece of participatory research. This helped us to gain the views of a wide range of volunteers in an approachable and authentic way, by working with their peers to gather information.

The Volunteer Advisory Group members tested out survey questions intended to reach the wider Team London volunteer pool. They investigated issues through an online survey and in-person research interviews.

In-person interviews were solely peer-led. 237 responses were collated, and this data was analysed by Civil Society and Volunteering team staff and Inclusive Village, drawing out key themes.

These themes were collated and discussed by the Volunteer Advisory Group; findings, and recommendations were highlighted and used to produce an EDI Recommendations Report.

Interview Questions 3 open questions to understand volunteer attitude towards our current EDI progress and support offered, proposed solutions and changes.

Participatory Research Guidance documents

Data

Sheets

Collection

A paper version and an online Excel spreadsheet option, including a large print version.

EDI Glossary	Definitions of words around Equality Diversity and Inclusion themes to aid conversations between volunteers.
Research	A clear process around the what, how, when, why of the surveys
Interview	and the preparation and expectations for volunteers before,
Process	during and after their research visits.

We sent out a Team London EDI survey specifically to those from our three target groups, allowing a three-week response window including a mid-way reminder email. To expand the range of responses and to be as inclusive as possible, we created a QR code for the online survey and arranged in-person Research visits where group members in pairs or groups of three visited their fellow volunteers on location around London to discuss the Team London EDI Survey questions. This was to ensure that no volunteer was 'lone-working' whilst also ensuring group members could support each other in having potentially triggering and challenging conversation around EDI themes. It also proved to be another opportunity for volunteers to build connection and to speak about the work and focus of the EDI Volunteer Advisory Group. We worked to each persons' strengths, and some group members felt comfortable to directly interview, whilst some felt more comfortable to take notes.

We also discussed with participants the issues of how data would be used and other research ethics including purpose of the research, how information will be captured, stored, and analysed, data storage and disposal arrangements as well as confidentiality and anonymity arrangements made.

Top three recommendations checklist

Equip volunteers with adequate skills, techniques, and support to carry out the role including how to interview effectively, asking open and neutral questions and roleplay activities.

	Offer various ways to respond to reach a wider pool of volunteers, including using online surveys via Microsoft Forms, paper forms and in person interviews conducted by their peers.
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Involve volunteers in decisions around how the final outputs show be presented, structured, produced, and disseminated.	ıld
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Photo: Mediorite

Reward and Recognition

Volunteering can expose huge gaps in accessibility, particularly in relation to affordability. Addressing issues relating to the affordability of volunteering can provide opportunities for improved inclusion.

When setting up this group, we were very keen to recognise and value the input of group members and made this clear in the role description. We are acutely aware that people from underrepresented groups are often asked to share their lived experience and contribute to EDI initiatives, and this can have an emotional toll. After the session, we were able to acknowledge their time with a voucher to recognise their contributions. Travel expenses were reimbursed to each volunteer to facilitate their attendance to in-person meetings. This included accessibility needs such as using taxi services to their nearest step-free station, or nearby parking.

Do promote the in-kind / added benefits of participating in an advisory or working group such as this, including connecting with fellow volunteer peers, gaining valuable experience and skills that can strengthen CVs, future advisory group/trustee/board groups roles, enhancing educational or professional profile and making a difference to their community. Offer opportunities for volunteers to speak publicly about their experience and/or attend events beyond the project.

Top three recommendations checklist

	Decide how members will be recognised for their participation in the advisory group and communicate it clearly to members. This does not have to be via a voucher or otherwise, however a recognition of their time would be advisable.
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	Ensure adequate acknowledgement and crediting to group members in any outputs or outcomes of the work, e.g. adding their name as contributors to work produced.
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Involve volunteers in decisions around how the final outputs should be presented, structured, produced, and disseminated.	



Photo: Mediorite

Activities, Schedules, and Venues

The timing of project activities and accessibility of venues can be an enabler or barrier to effective participation. Although we collated availability for meetings and tried to identify the most convenient meeting time, some volunteers provided feedback on the need for increased flexibility in relation to session timings, in order to fit around other commitments, in particular full-time employment and caring responsibilities.

Group members were asked to commit to six hybrid workshops, as well as undertake inperson research visits. Meeting dates and times were pre-arranged for the six-month period and sent out once volunteers were confirmed as advisory group members. Group members were asked to share their availability for a morning, afternoon or evening meeting time slot. Members appreciated the flexibility of online sessions, however inperson sessions proved the most popular option. We chose a central location at a GLA office and scheduled a large accessible room with additional breakout rooms. A few volunteers appreciated the option to join online through Microsoft Teams; although we saw face to face attendance improve with each subsequent meeting, as volunteers saw the additional social benefit of being together in a physical space.

If required by members, offer extra support around tech, e.g., a tech learning session if there is interest, to ensure all participants can join and access online sessions seamlessly. If Wi-Fi access is an issue, consider allowing access to your offices if feasible, allowing volunteers to join meetings by phone (Zoom and Microsoft Teams both allow this functionality), suggest local public services offering free Wi-Fi or reimburse the cost of a coffee so a volunteer can go to a café to access Wi-Fi.

Top three recommendations checklist

In order to suit as many volunteers' schedules as possible, offer a morning, lunchtime, afternoon and evening slot to collate availability. Ensure there are regular breaks during the session to allow for screen breaks, and to meet neurodiversity needs and to avoid 'screen fatigue,'
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	\checkmark	Make sure an accessibility checks/risk assessment has been completed on the venue prior to any activity to ensure it caters to any individual access and/or support needs.
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	Create a virtual space (such as SharePoint, WhatsApp group, Slack, email group, etc) for collaborative working between the project staff and consultants, and volunteers too where possible.
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Overcoming Challenges

Reflecting All London's Communities	Unfortunately, we did not receive any Expressions of Interest from volunteers under 25, therefore were unable to engage this demographic in our advisory group. Our team is committed to looking at ways to increase engagement in this age group in future volunteer working groups.
Equitable Participation	At times it proved difficult to manage the time and agenda, with such a large group. By introducing the engagement activity, reminding everyone of their own and others' contributions and allowing more time for volunteer discussion meant that we were able to improve on time management as the sessions progressed over the six months.
Building Trust	This group was the first in person session with volunteering staff since the COVID 19 pandemic, with a largely new staffing team. Allowing opportunities for volunteers to connect with each other and staff, introducing activities with humour, and creating space for volunteers to be heard increased this sense of trust and safety with time.
Sufficient Staffing Support	It proved challenging to manage all the vital aspects of the meeting including the hybrid element, creating space for all group members and logistics with one staff member. From the mid-point onwards, we were able to engage a secondary staff member to support the sessions, offering more capacity to allow adequate management of all areas.
Balancing Co Production with Timelines	Whilst we had planned to involve volunteers more heavily in analysing the survey data, due to an urgent volunteer deployment in relation to Operation London Bridge we had to readjust timelines and pivot the project, pulling out key themes from the survey responses for volunteers to consider and comment upon.
Support Balancing Co Production with	It proved challenging to manage all the vital aspects of the meeting including the hybrid element, creating space for all group members and logistics with one staff member. From the mid-point onwards, we were able to engage a secondary staff member to support the sessions, offering more capacity to allow adequate management of all areas. Whilst we had planned to involve volunteers more heavily in analysing the survey data, due to an urgent volunteer deployment in relation to Operation London Bridge we had to readjust timelines and pivot the project, pulling out key themes from the survey responses for volunteers to consider and



Photo: Caroline Teo

Ending the Group

The impact of this inclusive and participatory process, led to a strong investment from volunteers in the future of this work, including next steps and how / when their recommendations would be implemented into the volunteer programmes. Questions around what would happen after the project ended arose early in the process and we identified a need to remain transparent about how we intended to conclude the project and engage volunteers afterwards to maintain the relationships they had formed. Volunteers also communicated a sense of deeper engagement and emotional investment in wanting to see the recommendations translated into practice.

We provided a clear timeline for members, as well as intended communications on what is next in the project journey. We arranged a final celebration meeting where we collected feedback, invited senior members of the GLA to acknowledge the work and give thanks. We reflected on our initial objectives, acknowledged our outputs as well as the connections formed and the journey together. We shared future plans including the launch of the EDI Recommendations Report and our good practice toolkit in early 2023. We also encouraged feedback in a group setting, an option for 1-1 feedback in a separate room for confidentiality, via phone, email or videocall. We also sent each volunteer a personalised thank you card with a message from both GLA staff and the Inclusive Village consultants.

Top three recommendations checklist

	Ensure volunteers are clear on next steps with the project, and how they can remain updated and involved.
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	Acknowledge and thank them for their contributions to the group e.g., via a thank you card, a celebration event.
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	Allow time for reflection and feedback and ensure this is collected in a variety of methods e.g., face-to-face, follow-up emails, phone call, to suit all learning types and needs.
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Photo: Mediorite

The Volunteer Advisor Experience

In our final meeting, we took time to reflect with volunteers and to look at whether we had achieved our objectives around safety, reciprocity, learning and skills.

Volunteers expressed a sense of pride to have participated in the project; they valued the relationships formed over the six months and many were keen to stay in touch both with each other and us as a programme team to understand what would happen next in the EDI space.

Despite some challenges throughout the project, nearly all volunteers said that they would take part in another Team London volunteer working group. The project experience is captured through these volunteer quotes on the page overleaf.

The feedback clearly shows the positive impact of the membership of the group, with volunteers noting it was not only a space to give but also to learn. Some also noted the learning which was taken into other areas of their lives including their workplaces.

The feedback highlights that the diversity of the advisory group was clear and was seen as a positive aspect of the group.

I came into this program expecting only to give, but I am surprised that I have also learnt a lot. We worked so hard to create a safe space, I feel our contributions were valued, I'm a bit sad we are finishing. - Kishma

I am using the safe space concept we learnt here at work, it's helpful. I enjoyed all the stuff around research design and looking at the data, I learnt a lot, great fun, a lovely experience...

- Chandravadan

Volunteering can be a very transactional process, you come, you do, you go. Having an opportunity to work together over 6 months provided a sense of continuity as we worked towards a clear goal. I enjoyed it...

- Celia

I'm proud to have been a part of the group and I look forward to seeing the results implemented to improve the volunteering experience for all. - Hanan

Being in an EDI group can feel exhausting, where you are the only person with lived experience. Here, everyone had something to bring to the table, and it was brilliant.

- Shona

I have never come across an initiative like this before...The space felt safe and judgement free. It was good to have exposure to and be able to empathise with others' experiences and understand the barriers their face.

- Adnaan



Photo: James O Jenkins

Conclusion

The Civil Society and Volunteering Team's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Volunteer Advisory Group created a viable experimental and collective space for volunteers to apply their knowledge and lived experience in envisioning what better inclusive volunteering practice could be like.

Across the timespan of the six-month project, there was positive change and different skill sets acquired by group members, including creating psychological safety within a diverse group, participatory research, inclusive facilitation, as well as working and collaborating across difference. The feedback clearly captures the positive impact being part of the group had on its members.

The reality is that whilst advisory groups such as this often cannot completely resolve complex and deep-rooted systemic issues, they serve as a powerful membership function and a hub for generating stakeholder-led solutions. The creation of this group was an important part of the journey towards ensuring an accessible and inclusive experience for all current and future volunteers within our Team London volunteering programmes.

We welcome other volunteer-involving organisations to use this toolkit as most appropriate to their context, engaging in co-production and participatory research with their volunteers, whilst establishing and maintaining a safe space for all.

We started out... contemplative, curious, a blank canvas with very diverse experiences

In the end... we had pulled together different strands of our web of ideas into a structured, useful, recognisable pattern

Things felt...rigorous, but we were ready to listen, engage, understand and build trust

1

Ideas blossomed... and we grew more united, empathetic, action focused and aware We tapped into... humour, energy, experience, sincerity, teamwork, and conscientiousness

Further Reading

Diversifying your Volunteers – a toolkit for volunteer involving organisations – → – West Glamorgan Volunteering Support

Volunteering Together: Inclusive Volunteering and Disabled People – A Report for Spirit of 2012 -

Making volunteering inclusive toolkit - Voluntary Action Leeds

A Bit Rich - Why is volunteering biased towards higher socio-economic groups? – Dr Ricky Lawton and Will Watt at Jump Projects

Making Volunteering Open to All – Mayor of London and Voluntary Action Harrow Co-Op

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