

# County Durham Breakfast Seminars

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## Is Volunteering Reaching Everyone?

Wednesday 19<sup>th</sup> March 2025

Is volunteering inclusive of all people and communities both in terms of levels of participation and the volunteer's experience of being involved? Is the role of helper and helped an outdated concept, and what are the barriers embedded in our volunteering infrastructure that we must break down, to ensure that it's a fully inclusive experience.

### ***About the Breakfast Seminars***

Operating since 2011, quarterly Breakfast Seminars provide an opportunity for participants to listen to provocations and discuss important topics that affect our communities. With a guest speaker each meeting, elected members, officers, partners, and faith communities take part in roundtable conversations to explore some of the ethical and moral issues that affect policy decisions in a thoughtful and collaborative way. Our seminars are chaired by Rev. Canon Caroline Dick.

### ***About our Speakers***

Our speaker for this seminar was Abby Weatherill, Volunteering Development Manager from [Durham Community Action](#). Abby is DCA's management lead in volunteering, safeguarding, community resilience, training, and growing organisations, overseeing all volunteer centre and volunteering support services.

Abby's presentation covered the key barriers that prevent volunteering from being inclusive and how these can be addressed. She touched on points such as how our perceptions of who can volunteer and how we can challenge these encouraging a wider range of people such as those with disabilities, young people or, or those with limited free time; to consider the cultural and systemic barriers to volunteering and to make those barriers more open and less bureaucratic and to rethink volunteering as a mutual exchange, rather than a one-way act of charity, to open up space for more people to contribute. Abby also raised the question of whether faith groups are fully tapping into their networks, experiences, and cultural diversity to enrich the volunteer landscape.

### **Seminar Discussion**

In the usual format, participants broke into small discussion groups and considered the following questions to help shape the discussion:

- Do we really understand the barriers to recruiting volunteers?
- What can we do to overcome them?
- How can we work together to develop a more inclusive volunteering community?
- Can faith groups play a more active role in diversifying the volunteer community?

### **Group Feedback**

- Concerns were raised about the accessibility of volunteering opportunities for young people, though it's noted that the largest proportion of volunteers on the DCA platform are aged 18-24, with an increasing number of under-18 volunteers.
- Volunteering opportunities for those undertaking the Duke of Edinburgh award are still quite limited, potentially restricting their participation.
- Students face increased pressure to balance studies and jobs to support themselves, reducing the time available for volunteering.
- Volunteers often feel undervalued, suggesting the need for greater recognition to boost retention and provide a sense of ownership and involvement.
- Volunteering is not a job but requires defined roles. For young people especially, breaking opportunities into smaller, manageable roles, or developing taster sessions can attract those hesitant to take on larger commitments.
- Volunteer roles should highlight the development of skills, experiences, and the community benefit they provide, and can provide opportunities for confidence building for the individual.
- In certain cases, volunteers remain in roles due to misplaced guilt about leaving, unintentionally hindering opportunities for others.
- Consideration should be given to individuals with criminal convictions where DBS checks may pose a barrier, when there is no requirement for unsupervised roles.