

Best practice for the inclusion of people with disabilities through volunteering: a summary of two webinars

Summary of two webinars held on Tuesday 2 and Friday 5 June 2026, organised as part of the [European POWER project](#). The webinars brought together more than 40 participants from a variety of backgrounds, including representatives from associations, government agencies, regional authorities, support services and volunteering organisations, as well as professionals working in the fields of disability, inclusion and civic participation.

Introduction

Both webinars began with a welcome address by **Sanjin Plakalo** (senior project officer and moderator, POUR LA SOLIDARITÉ). This event forms part of the ongoing European **POWER** project ('Promoting Opportunities for the Engagement of Adults with Disabilities and Recognising their Role'), supported by **Erasmus+** and implemented in France, Belgium and Italy.

He reiterated the project's aim, which will continue until **August 2027**: to strengthen the inclusion of adults with disabilities in society through volunteering, to combat forms of ableism, and to promote the recognition of people with disabilities as full citizens and active participants in society.

The organisation of this webinar marks an important step in sharing and contextualising the project's work. It provides an opportunity to compare the survey results with the experiences and analyses of professionals working in the field, whilst fostering a collective reflection on the levers that can be used to strengthen and improve inclusive volunteering practices at European level.

Presentation of the results of the POWER survey on inclusive volunteering – Chloé Croes (SUSA Foundation)

During the two webinars, **Chloé Croes (Training Project Officer at the SUSA Foundation)** presented the main findings of the survey conducted as part of the European POWER project. This presentation provided an opportunity to share the lessons learnt from the research phase and to contribute to discussions on the development of more inclusive volunteering practices for people with disabilities.

Across Belgium, France and Italy, 99 questionnaire responses were collected, and 37 interviews were conducted between January and May 2026. The results show that the respondents were mainly volunteers with disabilities, alongside support professionals. The activities carried out cover a wide range of areas: social and solidarity initiatives, administrative tasks, maintenance of green spaces, participation in cultural or sporting events, as well as various forms of activism. Among the notable examples, the mobilisation of volunteers with disabilities during the Paris Olympic Games by the French Red Cross was cited as a particularly positive experience.

The survey highlights that the main driver of voluntary engagement lies in a sense of purpose and the desire to contribute to society. Volunteering also appears to be an important means of combating isolation, enhancing psychological well-being and developing skills.

For support professionals, it provides a means of promoting the social participation of those they support and of challenging stereotypes associated with disability. In some cases, the observed effects even extend beyond the scope of volunteering and contribute to access to housing or socio-professional integration.

Several obstacles remain, however. From the volunteers' perspective, the difficulties cited include, in particular, prejudice and infantilisation, the need to adapt to different paces and timetables, fatigue, anxiety and certain challenges relating to social relationships. The development of social skills therefore appears to be a key need. On the other hand, professionals highlight the persistence of stereotypes within certain support organisations and the need to provide gradual support. In this process, the support worker plays an essential role in mediation and support before gradually fostering the volunteer's independence.

The discussions also helped to identify five key skills for support professionals:

- Adaptability,
- Empathy, the ability to tailor expectations to each person's specific needs,
- The ability to manage crisis situations or relationship difficulties,
- As well as the ability to gradually step back in order to support the volunteers' independence.

Furthermore, the professionals interviewed identified several recurring challenges:

- Finding suitable volunteering placements,
- A lack of funding dedicated to support,
- A lack of available time,
- As well as a still insufficient recognition of their work. Host organisations also mention the burden of stereotypes and limited resources for supervising volunteers.

Based on these findings, three target groups have been identified for the project's future training initiatives: the volunteers themselves, host teams and support professionals. The content will focus in particular on developing a volunteering project, building social skills, raising awareness of disability and designing for inclusion.

Finally, Chloé Croes announced that an initial pilot training course would be organised in September 2026 in Belgium. This will include social theatre workshops developed in collaboration with the Italian partners, with the aim of boosting participants' self-confidence and interpersonal skills.

Presentations on 2 June 2026 – Bernadette Varlet (AVIQ), Caroline Reinault (In.out.sider Festival), Sylvain Cigna (PUSH asbl)

Bernadette Varlet (Project Manager, Disability Department, Agence pour une Vie de Qualité – AVIQ) presented the 'Citizen Activities' scheme set up by AVIQ in 2013. This initiative aims to provide a framework for engagement for people with disabilities who are unable to find a place in paid employment but who wish to participate actively in social and civic life.

The scheme is aimed at people aged 18 and over who receive an income replacement allowance and have a sufficient level of independence to engage in voluntary activities, whilst not being able to hold paid employment. Currently, 23 organisations are accredited and subsidised under this scheme, supporting nearly 500 people across Wallonia. Two further organisations also receive co-funding from the European Social Fund (ESF).

Bernadette Varlet emphasised the central role of support services in the success of volunteering pathways. These services ensure that host organisations are made aware of the challenges of inclusive volunteering, support beneficiaries in developing their volunteering plans, and help them to develop the skills necessary for their participation, particularly in terms of mobility and independence. They also look after the well-being of participants throughout their volunteering journey and ensure they receive support tailored to their needs.

To ensure the commitments are secure, each activity is based on a tripartite agreement involving the volunteer, the host organisation and the support service. This document sets out the tasks assigned, the monitoring arrangements and the responsibilities of each party.

Bernadette Varlet also drew attention to several points requiring vigilance. The first concerns the risk of replacing paid employment, which requires regular monitoring to ensure that community activities do not take the place of paid jobs. The second relates to the reimbursement of expenses for volunteers: where an organisation reimburses all its volunteers, people with disabilities taking part in the activities must receive the same treatment. In this regard, the reimbursement limits applicable in 2026 are 44.20 euros per day and 1,760.83 euros per year, without affecting income replacement benefits.

Finally, she presented a specific scheme co-funded by the ESF for the period 2024–2027. This scheme is aimed at people who are particularly distant from the labour market and provides support for up to two years, with the aim of facilitating a transition to training or employment where feasible.

Caroline Reinault (Co-organiser, In.out.sider Festival) shared their experience of inclusive volunteering at the 2025 edition of the In.out.sider Festival. Founded in 2022 in Brussels, this multidisciplinary Franco-Belgian festival showcases various forms of artistic expression, such as music, performance, visual arts, circus and cinema. Organised in partnership with Urban Boat in France, it places a strong emphasis on artists with disabilities, particularly those with autism or Down's syndrome, in its programme.

For the 2025 edition, the festival welcomed six volunteers with disabilities from the French Red Cross for the first time. Spread across five areas of activity, the volunteers helped to produce the festival's signage, prepare meals and organise the kitchen, welcome artists and the public, run the artists' bar, and provide snacks for young visitors. Some were also involved in technical aspects relating to sound and lighting after receiving appropriate training.

Beyond the organisational aspects, this approach had a positive impact on all stakeholders. The festival teams, the artists and the audience particularly appreciated the supportive atmosphere created by this collaboration, which helped to change perceptions of disability and reinforce the inclusive nature of the event. Regarded as a success, this initiative is set to be repeated in future editions of the festival.

Sylvain Cigna (Director, PUSH ASBL) presented the activities of PUSH ASBL, a Brussels-based association founded in 2014 whose main mission is to support people with disabilities in developing and carrying out volunteering projects within associations and public bodies. Unique in Brussels, the organisation currently supports more than 80 people thanks to the work of a team comprising three support workers and a director.

The approach developed by PUSH ASBL is based on a fundamental principle: focusing on the individual and their aspirations rather than their disability. The aim is to harness each individual's talents, skills, interests and motivation in order to develop a tailored and meaningful volunteering project. This approach involves personalised support, which generally begins with a series of preparatory interviews and continues throughout the volunteering experience until the individual's integration is well established and positively assessed.

The organisation also pays particular attention to supporting host organisations. This involves raising staff awareness of disability issues, appointing a designated contact person within the organisation, and establishing regular communication channels to enable any difficulties to be identified quickly. To promote the accessibility of information, PUSH uses a range of adapted formats, such as FALC (Easy to Read and Understand), pictograms and visual aids. Sylvain Cigna also highlighted the benefits of working in a multidisciplinary team, which allows for the pooling of expertise and improves the quality of the support provided.

Several barriers to inclusion have been identified through the PUSH association's experience. On the part of organisations, the main obstacles relate to a lack of understanding of disability, a fear of not knowing how to act appropriately, accessibility issues, and a lack of time or financial resources. People with disabilities, for their part, may face challenges relating to self-esteem, health issues, reluctance from those around them, or concerns about retaining their benefits.

However, the results of an evaluation carried out in 2025 among volunteers supported by the PUSH association demonstrate the positive effects of the scheme. All respondents stated that their voluntary work brought them tangible benefits and made them feel useful. A large majority also reported having developed new social relationships thanks to their involvement. In some cases, the volunteering experience even served as a springboard to employment, with some

people being recruited by the organisation they volunteered for or having strengthened their social and professional integration as a result of this experience.

In conclusion, Sylvain Cigna emphasised that inclusion through volunteering is not a matter of improvisation but a structured process based on listening, support and trust. In his view, when professionals sincerely believe in a person's potential and give them the means to get involved at their own pace, that person often ends up developing the same confidence in their own abilities.

Speeches on 5 June 2026 – Milèna Chantraine (Plateforme francophone du Volontariat ASBL) and Ismael Paez Civico (Confederation of European Senior Expert Services – CESES)

Milèna Chantraine (Secretary-General, Plateforme Francophone du Volontariat ASBL – PFV) explained that the PFV brings together 260 associations and members in Wallonia and Brussels, and supports volunteers, organisations and local authorities through training, tools, networking activities and guidance services. It advocates a vision of volunteering as a voluntary, solidarity-based and meaningful commitment, in accordance with the framework set out by the Belgian Act of 2005.

Milèna Chantraine's presentation highlighted several initiatives focused on the inclusion of people with disabilities. These include the organisation of a Volunteering Network dedicated to disability, bringing together nearly 300 participants; a collaborative research project carried out with the Centre for European Volunteering; and personalised support for people wishing to get involved in voluntary work. Milena Chantraine also presented her own approach to internal inclusion at the PFV, notably through the recruitment, since 2024, of a volunteer with a disability – an experience which has helped to raise awareness amongst staff and strengthen the organisation's inclusive practices.

Several tools have been developed to support organisations and volunteers: a guide to volunteering in FALC, resources on the transition from service user to volunteer, best-practice guides, and a section dedicated to inclusive volunteering within its toolkit for volunteer coordinators. The platform also provides free access to volunteering vacancies and testimonials highlighting the experiences of volunteers with disabilities.

Finally, Milèna Chantraine calls in particular for the removal of certain administrative barriers linked to social benefits that may hinder civic engagement among people with disabilities, and advocates for better financial support for support schemes. To mark the International Year of Volunteers 2026, the platform is also continuing its awareness-raising efforts by collecting and promoting testimonials from committed volunteers.

Ismaël Paez Civico (Director-General, Confederation of European Senior Expert Services) outlined the initiatives undertaken at European level to promote more inclusive volunteering, through the work of the **Centre for European Volunteering (CEV)** and **CESES**. He pointed out that the CEV works to create an environment conducive to volunteering across Europe by supporting volunteers, organisations and public decision-makers. Among its

priorities is the development of favourable and inclusive legislative frameworks, such as the Belgian law on volunteering.

The speaker also introduced CESES, which brings together organisations that engage retired or pre-retired experts in mentoring, entrepreneurship and international cooperation. He emphasised that the challenges faced by older people, particularly in terms of mobility and accessibility, often mirror those faced by people with disabilities, and that digital tools can be a key driver in promoting their participation.

Particular attention was paid to the European project **TEAM for Inclusive Volunteering (TEAM-IV)**, which aims to train 250 mentors across five European countries to support people with disabilities in their volunteering journeys. The project's unique feature lies in particular in the involvement of mentors who themselves have disabilities. This approach is based on a peer-to-peer relationship and helps to change perceptions by recognising people with disabilities as active participants, mentors and project leaders.

The platform offers practical resources on inclusive mentoring, support tools and a discussion forum where mentors and volunteers can share their experiences. Available in English, French, Spanish, Bulgarian and Romanian, the training can be completed at one's own pace. This approach, based on mentoring and peer learning, helps to change perceptions of disability by recognising people with disabilities as full participants in civic engagement.

Finally, Ismaël Paez Civico presented the **IEWS (Volunteering Inclusion in European Widening Sport)** project, which focuses on developing inclusive volunteering in the sports sector. The project identifies and brings together best practices from across Europe to help sports clubs and organisations better accommodate volunteers with disabilities. It also aims to strengthen the organisation and recognition of sports volunteering by providing suitable tools and resources.

In conclusion, Ismaël Paez Civico emphasised the importance of continuing efforts to promote fully inclusive civic participation at European level, particularly in the context of the gradual roll-out of the European Disability Card by 2028.

Conclusion of the webinars

To close the two meetings, **Sanjin Plakalo** thanked the various speakers for their valuable contributions and the complementary perspectives they had provided. The discussions highlighted how the findings of the research carried out as part of the POWER project are reflected in the practices developed by those working on the ground, whilst also forming part of a broader debate at European level.

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See also:

- "Citizen Activities" project
(Volunteering): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DnJ1958LJzY&t=22s>
- AVIQ website: <https://www.aviq.be/fr>
- Festival In.out.sider website: <https://www.inoutsiderfestival.com/>
- PUSH asbl website: <https://www.pushasbl.be/>
- Plateforme francophone du Volontariat ASBL website: <https://www.levolontariat.be/>
- CESES website: <https://www.ceses.eu/>
- TEAM IV project website: <https://teamiv.org/>
- VIEWS project website: <https://www.viewsproject.eu/>