



Volunteer Impact Assessment

Fourth edition

Introduction

Carried out amid the third national lockdown, our fourth Volunteer Impact Assessment (VIA) provides a unique insight into the experiences of Guide Dogs' volunteers during the pandemic, as well as the staff who support them.

Volunteers are an essential part of our Guide Dogs and support us in almost every area of our operations and services. We're extremely grateful to everyone who gives their time to support us. Without our volunteers, we simply couldn't provide life-changing services for people with sight loss. In fact, most of our volunteers have several motivations for volunteering for Guide Dogs with the top three ranked as 'Supporting people with sight loss', 'Feeling I am making a useful contribution' or 'giving something back' and 'Gaining skills or new experiences'.

In turn, we strive to provide the best possible experience for volunteers by providing a nurturing and supportive environment whereby volunteers have the necessary information, training and support to carry out their roles. So, how do we do this? We continually review and improve these key areas.

Every two years, we undertake our VIA survey to gauge the views of those involved in the volunteer programme. It tells us everything, from how volunteers are feeling about the contribution they're making to the support they receive from their volunteer managers and organisation as a whole.

The research aims to paint a picture of the current volunteering experience and helps to identify any changes in levels of support and engagement or areas where there is room for improvement.

This summary provides an overview of the key themes, challenges and progress that has been made across the organisation, as well as useful insights and future actions (page 14) that can be used to help shape and develop the volunteering experience in the future.

Research for developing the fourth edition of the VIA was carried out between October 2020 and March 2021. Based on input from workshops, conversations and questionnaires, the VIA survey was released in April 2021 and canvassed the views of 2,793 volunteers and 661 staff. It was conducted by the Volunteering Team in partnership with the Civil Service Analytical Volunteer programme.

A big thank you to everyone who took the time to take part in this research.

What's happening in 2022

Improvement area	Planned Activities
Volunteer feedback	Review our overall approach to developing volunteer surveys and gathering feedback so they're more relevant, concise, and timely for both volunteers and staff. Alongside this review, we'll share the insights, actions and ongoing progress from last year's Volunteer Impact Assessment and the shorter volunteer pulse surveys.

For the list of our key activities for 2022, please refer to 'Future Actions' on page 14.



Volunteering through the pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenges and many changes were made to follow Government guidance and keep everyone safe. This has unsurprisingly taken its toll on this year's findings but it's still a positive story for volunteering overall.

Against a backdrop of several lockdowns and ongoing social distancing, some volunteer roles were paused or adapted while some staff were temporarily furloughed. This has inevitably had an impact with most survey indicators showing a slight drop when compared with the 2019 research, undertaken pre-pandemic.

Volunteers in dog-based roles were more likely to continue volunteering throughout - 92% of Breeding Dog Holders, 84% of Puppy Raisers and 73% of Fosterers were able to continue, in contrast to 30% of Speakers, 28% of Fundraisers and 18% of My Sighted Guide volunteers. Those in non-dog roles were more likely to offer alternative ways to volunteer. For example, 70% of My Sighted Guides took on an alternative role such as making 'keep in touch' calls to service users.

In relation to volunteers and the pandemic:

- 84% feel their safety and wellbeing was considered, especially My Sighted Guide volunteers (92%).
- 92% believe there was nothing Guide Dogs should have done differently to allow for volunteering to continue.
- Most did not want to stop volunteering and were keen to do more to support the organisation in alternative ways.
- Many said there was a lack of contact and communication from staff members, particularly those in dog-based roles.
- 47% accessed most/some of the information they needed from the Volunteer Information Point (website for volunteers), while 40% did not use it.

Recognition

80% of all volunteers feel their supervisor values their contribution, down 7% on average from 2019. The My Sighted Guide role bucked the trend with 94% of volunteers feeling valued, a rise of 6%.

Engagement

Overall engagement of volunteers has dropped to 76% (a decrease of 7% from 2019) with a lack of personal contact, communications and quality interactions from volunteer managers being cited as the main reason why. This is understandable given the lockdown timing and some staff being furloughed.

Across all roles, 73% say they are enjoying their day-to-day tasks, while 85% would recommend volunteering at Guide Dogs to others. Future commitment to volunteering remains strong (97% intend to keep volunteering), with a sense of making a useful contribution and an understanding of the impact of sight loss among the top drivers.

What's happening in 2022

Improvement area	Planned Activities
Volunteer website and content	We're developing a dedicated website for volunteers with increased functionality and accessibility. It's called 'My Guide Dogs'. Designed around you and your interests, My Guide Dogs will be your one-stop-shop for volunteering information, training, resources, and communications.



Management and support

Around two-thirds of volunteers felt well supported over the pandemic, compared to three-quarters in pre-Covid times, while most staff (74%) agreed they had enough support and resources to carry out their volunteering responsibilities.

Volunteers in dog-related roles and My Sighted Guide volunteers felt the most supported, ranging from 94% for Breeding Dog Holders and 82% for My Sighted Guide down to Fundraisers (70%) and Speakers (50%). When asked specifically about support during the pandemic, there was a 13% drop on average compared to normal circumstances.

In terms of support:

- 86% of volunteers know who their key contact is.
- For day-to-day support, volunteers are most likely to go to their supervisor (37%) or key contact (25%).
- Those in dog-related roles are more likely to go to their Guide Dog Trainer or Guide Dog Mobility Instructor over their key contact (i.e. Operations Volunteering Officer).
- Four in five volunteers (79%) would go to a member of staff when they needed something rather than another volunteer.

Volunteer support

Whose responsibility it is for managing volunteers wasn't always clear. The Operations Volunteering Officer (OVO) role was introduced in 2020 as a key contact to support volunteering for Canine Assisted Services (CAS), while other teams operate a different model.

Lead volunteers

Two-thirds of volunteers - across all roles - would be happy to be supported by a lead volunteer. This is most favourable with My Sighted Guide Volunteers (75%) and least favourable by Breeding Dog Holders (59%). Similarly, 82% of staff would be comfortable with a lead volunteer supporting their volunteers.

Generally, a lead volunteer provides information, support, mentoring and sometimes delegates tasks to volunteers, but this varies by lead volunteer role (e.g. Fundraising Group Coordinator or Puppy Raising Mentor). They also help volunteer managers with some aspects of recruiting, inducting and developing volunteers.



It was found that:

- 67% of volunteers across all roles would be happy to be supported by a lead volunteer - (75%) among My Sighted Guide volunteers, followed by Puppy Raisers (72%) and Fosterers (70%).
- 75% of staff would be comfortable with a lead volunteer supporting volunteers.
- Volunteers would be most comfortable with a lead volunteer supporting them with ongoing training, keeping them informed about upcoming opportunities and providing advice.

What's happening in 2022	
Improvement area	Planned Activities
Develop our Lead Volunteer programme	We're aiming to ensure we have the best possible support for existing lead volunteer roles, and if needed, create additional opportunities for volunteers who would like to take on additional responsibility.
Support from volunteer Managers	Introduce a Volunteering Framework bringing together essential volunteering information and guidance which will be a key resource for volunteer managers. It will contain all the essential information, guidance, and tools for volunteer managers to support volunteers across a range of roles with differing skills and experience.
Nurture local volunteering communities	Our community hubs pilot is continuing to trial creating links between roles within Guide Dogs whereby volunteers can easily connect with one another, provide peer-to-peer support and feel better connected with Guide Dogs in their area.

For the list of our key activities for 2022, please refer to 'Future Actions' on page 14.

Training and development

Four in five (78%) volunteers feel they have been properly trained and most new starters (86%) have a clear idea of what their role will involve. Many are keen for additional or refresher training, and as we emerge from the pandemic, there is still a demand for online training.

With variation across roles, 94% of My Sighted Guide volunteers felt properly trained (up 1% from 2019) through to 57% of Fundraisers. Those who did not feel fully trained gave reasons, including not being offered training (41%), being shown what to do by a fellow volunteer (22%) and needing further training (20%).

Other findings included:

- 51% of volunteers would expect cultural awareness training to be provided. However, only 29% of staff felt they would be confident in giving advice on a cultural matter – suggesting there is a training gap for staff development.
- 98% of new starters had been given information on how to safely carry out their role and the majority received written information such as a role description (94%) and volunteer handbook (74%). However, fewer volunteers were invited to a regional welcome event (51%) or CEO welcome (23%), most likely due to Covid restrictions.
- More volunteers have started who already hold the skills they need for the role, the biggest shift since 2019.

91% of staff were rated highly on being friendly and approachable, having a positive attitude and understanding volunteering.

Staff training gaps

Over half of staff (58%) believed focusing on training volunteers should be Guide Dogs' top priority, aligning with the skills they feel most confident and knowledgeable in (50%). Using personal judgement (46%) and delivering role specific inductions (48%) were other skills staff felt confident about.

Around half (43%) of key contacts had never attended a volunteer management essentials course, including 61% of fundraising staff, offering scope for this to be part of staff refresher training.

What's happening in 2022

Improvement area	Planned Activities
Volunteering infrastructure	Introduce a Volunteering Framework – a standardised approach to volunteering across Guide Dogs – which clearly defines how we support, train and develop our volunteers and their volunteer managers. It'll be the foundation and reference point for all future volunteering related activities and resources, including a volunteer manager toolkit.
Volunteer learning and development/training	Review our volunteer learning pathways across all our roles to ensure synergy and standardisation where possible to enable more effective delivery, including e-learning, and a better volunteer experience as well as encouraging cross role opportunities.

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Communications and engagement

While contact from volunteer managers decreased over the pandemic, three-quarters (76%) of volunteers rated communications overall from Guide Dogs – a mix of national and local communications, as well as contact from volunteer managers – as good or excellent (compared to 82% in 2019).

During the pandemic, there was an increase in national communications, including the use of video or webinar-based formats, which shared organisational news, developments and Covid updates.

The main area for improvement was cited as sufficiency – receipt of information about national news, team news and information from other departments – with volunteers increasingly saying they would like to hear from Guide Dogs more. However, the information that volunteers would like and what they are not receiving enough of or too much of varies:

- 14% increase in satisfaction among volunteers who previously wanted national Guide Dogs news and updates but didn't receive it.
- 37% said that they want to receive information about their local teams but don't.
- One in four (23%) said that they are not interested in receiving information about other departments but nearly half (44%) would like to but don't.
- 22% do not want to know about volunteering opportunities but 43% want to receive this information but don't.

It appears that volunteers' demand for national news is being met but there is more that could be done to keep them updated about local news and opportunities.

Local e-bulletins, the Volunteer Information Point (the section of our website for volunteers), The Guide e-newsletter and Forward magazine came out on top as the preferred channels for receiving information.

Contact from volunteer managers

On average 73% of volunteers agreed that they received a quick response when asking a question but this varies across roles with only half (52%) of volunteer Speakers in agreement.

Key contacts

Most face-to-face communication during the pandemic moved to phone and Zoom calls. Although the frequency of contact reduced overall when compared to normal circumstances, 58% of volunteers received phone calls from their key contact and 47% met on Zoom.

On the whole, both volunteers and staff adapted well to working remotely. Around two-thirds of volunteers (60%) agreed that remote sessions helped answer their day-to-day questions, while 56% thought virtual meetings had the right amount of people in them and 45% said it gave them the opportunity to meet a wider range of volunteers than they usually would.

Volunteer Voices

The majority of volunteers (77%) are keen for representation and influence but around half were not aware of Volunteer Voices, local consultative groups for volunteers to share learnings, experiences and feedback.

What's happening in 2022	
Improvement area	Planned Activities
Improve local communications	Review and develop a new approach and process for local and role specific communications, content development and contact by volunteer managers.
Volunteer feedback and influence	Raise awareness of Volunteer Voices – our network of feedback groups – through their planned activities, project involvement and feedback, and volunteer communications.

For the list of our key activities for 2022, please refer to 'Future Actions' on page 14.



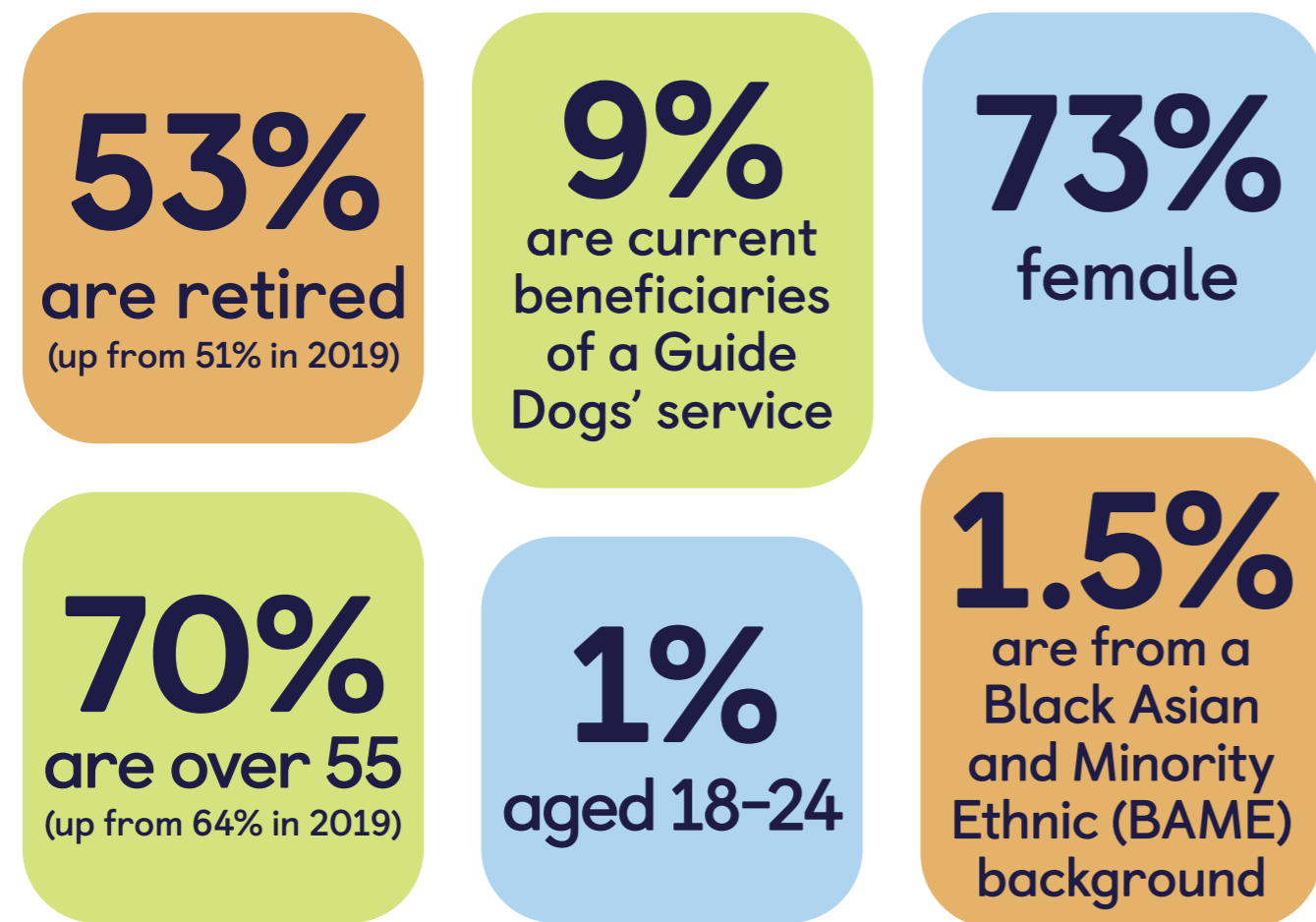
Volunteering profile and diversity

As we strive to help more people with sight loss through our services and campaigns, we'll need to attract more volunteers to help in different ways to support our work and affect change. We can only do this by expanding our range of volunteering opportunities, including flexibility, to people with diverse skills, experiences and interests.

A snapshot of our volunteers

Guide Dogs' volunteers carry out around 74 different roles, from Puppy Raisers and Breeding Dog Holders to Fundraisers, Fosterers and My Sighted Guides.

There has been little change in the demographics of our volunteers over the past two years:



Staff training gaps

53% Staff see increasing diversity as another key area to address but only 11% felt they had all the skills needed to ensure this in recruitment. This suggests further staff training could prevent lack of skills in this area becoming a barrier to progress.

What's happening in 2022	
Improvement area	Planned Activities
Increase Volunteer Base	Launch national volunteer recruitment drive supported by local campaigns to promote opportunities to existing volunteers, expand our volunteer base and attract volunteers with diverse backgrounds and interests.
Diversifying volunteering roles and involvement	Diversify our volunteering portfolio by expanding our range of roles and activities to appeal to a wider audience, including young people, families and those with varying levels of time commitment.

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Future actions

This research will be used to inform and shape Guide Dogs' local, regional and national action plans with the aim of improving the overall volunteer experience.

There's a lot of work happening across Guide Dogs' Volunteering function and teams to improve and enhance the volunteering experience. It's a big undertaking, so we're prioritising several big developmental or change projects alongside numerous planned activities. Together, these will create the required step change.

Investment in technology and developing volunteer learning, support and training is already taking place. Alongside this, a more community-based style of volunteering is being piloted to help bring volunteers from different roles closer together to know each other better, offer peer-to-peer support and discover new volunteering opportunities.

The below table gives a flavour of what our volunteers and volunteer managers can expect in 2022.

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Improvement area	Planned Activities
Volunteer feedback	Review our overall approach to developing volunteer surveys and gathering feedback so they're more relevant, concise, and timely for both volunteers and staff. Alongside this review, we'll share the insights, actions and ongoing progress from last year's Volunteer Impact Assessment and the shorter volunteer pulse surveys.
Volunteer website and content	We're developing a dedicated website for volunteers with increased functionality and accessibility. It's called 'My Guide Dogs'. Designed around you and your interests, My Guide Dogs will be your one-stop-shop for volunteering information, training, resources, and communications.
Develop our Lead Volunteer programme	We're aiming to ensure we have the best possible support for existing lead volunteer roles, and if needed, create additional opportunities for volunteers who would like to take on additional responsibility.
Support from volunteer Managers	Introduce a Volunteering Framework bringing together essential volunteering information and guidance which will be a key resource for volunteer managers. It will contain all the essential information, guidance, and tools for volunteer managers to support volunteers across a range of roles with differing skills and experience.

Nurture local volunteering communities	Our community hubs pilot is continuing to trial a community-based style of volunteering within Guide Dogs whereby volunteers can easily connect with one another, provide peer-to-peer support and delegate tasks.
Strengthen volunteering infrastructure	Introduce a Volunteering Framework – a standardised approach to volunteering across Guide Dogs – which clearly defines how we support, train and develop our volunteers and their volunteer managers. It'll be the foundation and reference point for all future volunteering related activities and resources, including a volunteer manager toolkit.
Volunteer learning and development/ training	Review our volunteer learning pathways across all our roles to ensure synergy and standardisation where possible to enable more effective delivery and a better volunteer experience as well as encouraging cross role opportunities.
Improve local communications	Review and develop a new approach and process for local and role specific communications, content development and contact by volunteer managers.
Volunteer influence	Raise awareness of Volunteer Voices – our network of feedback groups – through their planned activities, project involvement and feedback, and volunteer communications.
Increase Volunteer Base	Launch national volunteer recruitment drive supported by local campaigns to promote opportunities to existing volunteers, expand our volunteer base and attract volunteers with diverse backgrounds and interests.
Diversifying volunteering roles and involvement	Diversify our volunteering portfolio by expanding our range of roles and activities to appeal to a wider audience, including young people, families and those with varying levels of time commitment.



How to get in touch with us

If you have any thoughts about how we can improve your volunteering experience, please get in touch with your Volunteer Manager. The Volunteering Coordinator in each team will be able to provide your local VIA report.

Contact details available from: <https://www.guidedogs.org.uk/contact-us/>

Alternatively, feel free to email our team directly:
volunteer@guidedogs.org.uk and we can provide the full Volunteer Impact Assessment national report (fourth edition).

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