



Ripple Effect Project

End of Test and Learn project report
October 2025

Produced for Swim England and Spirit of 2012

If an adaptation allows a disabled volunteer to complete a role or job,
then it should be considered normal

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Foreword from Andy Salmon



Andy Salmon
CEO of Swim England

It's fair to say that Swim England's two-year Ripple Effect project has made waves across our volunteering programme.

Created for disabled individuals who wanted to become volunteers and get involved in aquatic sports, the Ripple Effect project has been a huge success.

After working closely with seven National Disability Sports Organisations, Swim England has been able to increase the number of volunteers who have a range of disabilities, which include visual and hearing impairments, intellectual and physical disabilities and dwarfism.

While a large percentage of our volunteers have a swimming background, what's most encouraging is many of our new cohort had not considered volunteering in aquatics before signing up to the project.

However, they have realised it's a great community to be part of and have not only learnt a new skill but are part of the aquatics family where they are made to feel welcome.

All the volunteers have shown a determination to progress through the different qualifications and are totally dedicated to what they do – and are proud to be part of an ever-increasing inclusive community.

Seeing everyone involved making such an impact poolside at a local, regional and even national level is what makes the Ripple Effect such a rewarding project.

You don't have to take our word for that either. The Ripple Effect project – and its team of amazing volunteers – has received a number of nominations in various local and national awards.

I'm tremendously grateful to everyone who has been involved in the inspirational project. The team at Swim England have put in a great deal of hard work to make the scheme such a huge hit.

However, my biggest thanks must go to all the volunteers who have been involved – it's been wonderful to see them progress through their volunteering journey and prove that barriers can be broken down.

Foreword from Ruth Hollis OBE



Ruth Hollis OBE
CEO of Spirit of 2012

At Spirit of 2012, we are well aware of the benefits that volunteering can bring for disabled people. This includes improved health and wellbeing, increased social connection, and a boost in self-confidence through the development of new skills. However, addressing the barriers that exist is crucial for making volunteering truly inclusive. While we know progress has been made in the efforts to make volunteering more accessible, we also want to reinforce that there is still much to be done, and it is vital that we do it.

The Ripple Effect was a 'Test and Learn' project, initiated in response to our call out to organisations wishing to pilot inclusive approaches to volunteering using a practical approach. We funded it because we saw the potential for this work to be rolled out across the UK in swimming clubs and for the learnings to influence physical activity and sports organisations more broadly. Change often starts with small steps, with the ripples creating waves of further change.

The report shows the very positive benefits for the small numbers of volunteers that worked with Swim England as part of the project. Change for a small number of participants, with targeted support and engagement can pave the way for much larger change. These volunteers are at the vanguard, and their learning and feedback will open the doors for a better experience for many more disabled volunteers in the future. It is

wonderful to see how far they have come, including officiating at the Swim England Winter National Championships 2023. Having disabled people represented in a wide variety of club roles does not just benefit the volunteers, but the swimmers and the spectators.

While we have been pleased to follow the journey that these volunteers have taken and see their progress, the report does highlight the scale of the challenge we have ahead of us. The report reflects on how some clubs were less open to removing barriers and adapting their approach, with a lingering perception that disabled people cannot take on official roles. The Ripple Effect project demonstrates that this is not the case. It is highly likely that these misconceptions around disability are not specific to swimming, but to many other sports, and it shows that there is much more work to be done to make volunteering truly inclusive. We invite Swim England and all sporting organisations to take positive action to increase the number of disabled volunteers and to continue to be vigilant and responsive to the challenges that exist.

I want to thank Swim England for the openness, curiosity and honesty with which they have approached this project. I also want to thank all the volunteers and their mentors who took the plunge and gave their time and expertise to this important project

The Ripple Effect: an overview

Swim England was awarded funding in March 2022 to develop a project in collaboration with National Disability Sports Organisations (NDSOs), aimed at encouraging disabled individuals to volunteer within aquatics. However, an early insight revealed that the initial scope of the project was too broad, with limited interest from potential volunteers in engaging with disciplines such as artistic swimming, diving, or water polo. This reluctance stemmed largely from the fact that these sports were less familiar to the participants. As many individuals were already stepping out of their comfort zones by joining the project, they were hesitant to venture further into unfamiliar territory.

We therefore needed to change the focus of the project to be more specific. With this in mind, we chose to centre the project on swimming, specifically engaging volunteers to train as Technical Officials. As well as developing local level volunteers, a major aim was to create viable pathways which would lead to at least one Ripple Effect volunteer operating as a Technical Official at the Winter Nationals event at Ponds Forge in December 2023.

The Ripple Effect was designed to work with a small cohort of volunteers in order to test the boundaries of volunteering in aquatics and learn what type of support would be required for those with different impairments. By creating strong working relationships with the volunteers and acting on learnings from the project in real time, we have been able to find clubs that have been able to support disabled volunteers and guide them through their training. Our relationship with the project volunteers has enabled them to open up about their experiences and identify barriers regarding their impairments. Our discussions with clubs and mentors have enabled barriers to be broken down and volunteers to thrive.

It is hoped that this report will provide a foundation from which aquatic organisations can incorporate the projects learnings to better support disabled people, creating a more inclusive environment and aquatics workforce. Learning will be an ongoing part of this process and should be welcomed and encouraged by all organisations. We hope that the legacy documentation which comes out of this project will help with that as we move into the future.

Seven National Sports Disability Organisations (NDSO's)

5

disabled volunteers
are full qualified
Timekeepers from
difference swimming clubs
around the country

14

disabled volunteers
have completed their Theory
Timekeeper and are working
towards being fully qualified

4

disabled volunteers
have completed their Theory
Judge Level 1 course and
are working towards being
fully qualified

1

disabled volunteer
is fully qualified Level 1
Judge and has been an
official at a national event at
Ponds Forge, Sheffield

Ripple Effect Project Timeline

Phase 1

(March – November 2022):

- National phase – Collaboration between Swim England and Spirit of 2012
- Recruitment of Project Officer
- Identification of NDSO's (National Disability Sports Organisations) – 7 were identified as prospective partners
- Recruitment of project volunteers and agreement on place based approach – NDSO's sourced volunteers through various social media platforms and clubs

Phase 2

(November 2022 – May 2024):

- Place-based phase – contact made with local Swim England clubs to see if they could support disabled volunteers through Timekeeping practical training
- Bespoke support of identified volunteers through existing volunteer structure in discipline (artistic swimming, diving, swimming or water polo) and pathway (officiating, events etc.) of their choice
- Creation of Final project report and Good Club Guide: Engaging Disabled Volunteers detailing all outputs and learnings.

Meet the National Disability Sports Organisations (NDSO's)

We understood that we would need expert advice to uncover the barriers that were stopping disabled people from volunteering, and the impact that breaking down any of these barriers would have on potential volunteers. We knew that some adaptations would have incurred a financial cost and in some cases these barriers would not be able to be broken during the course of this project. However, others needed discussing and addressing, with a flexible approach to removal.

There are seven NDSO's that were involved with the project. By supporting a range of volunteers with different impairments, we aimed to identify the different challenges and barriers that disabled volunteers faced.

 DWARF SPORTS ASSOCIATION UK	To make regular sporting opportunity accessible and enjoyable to anyone and everyone with dwarfism in the United Kingdom, regardless of their race, colour, ethnic origin, gender, location, sporting ability or financial support. They aim to promote and develop sport for persons living with dwarfism and to enable them to enter and compete in sport on an equal footing. DSAuk work to promote recreational sport for the benefit of any persons of restricted growth. They promote competitive sport for dwarf athletes both in the United Kingdom and Internationally. To provide opportunities for dwarf athletes to train for and compete in the World Dwarf Games, the Paralympic and the Olympic games. www.dsauk.org/
 CP SPORT cerebral palsy sport	They are a national disability sport organisation and charity. They encourage people with cerebral palsy to live more active lives by promoting the opportunity, capability and motivation involved in taking part in sport and physical activities. They provide sport and activity opportunities for people with cerebral palsy, a range of support services and also use their voice to influence change for the benefit of disabled people. cpsport.org/



They have been providing opportunities for people with physical impairments to take part in sport for over 75 years. Based at Stoke Mandeville Stadium, the birthplace of the Paralympic movement, WheelPower is at the heart of wheelchair sport.

From first timers to Paralympic medallists, they support and promote participation at all levels. They have seen how playing sport can enrich lives, offering tremendous physical and psychological benefits, whatever your age or ability.

wheelpower.org.uk/



UK Deaf Sport works in partnership with key organisations to ensure that deaf children, young people and adults have equal opportunities to participate and excel in sports and physical activity as their hearing counterparts from grassroots to elite level.

As the National Governing Body for Deaf Sport, UK Deaf Sport is responsible for ensuring good governance including the administration and coordination of deaf sport teams competing abroad at both a British and Home Nation level.

UK Deaf Sport is also responsible for the selection and management of the DeaflympicsGB Team, the official team that represents Great Britain at the Summer and Winter Deaflympics.

ukdeafsport.org.uk/

**Special
Olympics**
Great Britain



Special Olympics Great Britain (GB) is a non-profit organisation and largest provider of year-round sports training and athletic competition in summer and winter sports for children and adults of ALL abilities with intellectual disabilities also known as learning disabilities.

With a competition pathway designed to nurture and progress athletes from local competitions through to accessing elite level competitions, the focus at Special Olympics GB is on ability not disability and providing opportunities for athletes to compete with others at similar levels both at home in Great Britain and abroad.

www.specialolympicsgb.org.uk/



LimbPower support amputees, individuals with limb difference and their families to bridge the gap between hospital rehabilitation and community and school engagement to rebuild lives and improve physical, social and mental well-being.

This includes advocacy, in-person and online events and workshops, video resources, and paper resources. They also have programmes in and around the Limb Centres including the Physical Activity Advisers and Nordic Walking Instructors.

limbpower.com/



British Blind Sport is the national sports charity for children and adults with sight loss in the UK. They use the power of sport to change the lives of people with sight loss and support them to lead more active, healthy and independent lives.

Whether they're new to physical activity or a seasoned athlete, they can provide you with the information you need to get involved. From football and goalball, to guide running and boccia, there's something for everyone. They want to ensure that coaches and volunteers know how to create an inclusive sporting environment for people with sight loss.

britishblindsport.org.uk/

Delivery of The Ripple Effect project

The Ripple Effect was a small scale project in terms of resource allocation when compared to other national initiatives. However, it provided Swim England with a valuable opportunity to engage directly with disabled volunteers, deepening our understanding of their needs and identifying the types of support necessary to facilitate their progression within the aquatics sector. A key early focus was to keep volunteers embedded within their local environments, where they were supported by familiar networks, before gradually introducing opportunities to engage in regional and national events once they had completed their initial qualifications.

Volunteers were identified and approached through their respective NDSO's. Some had prior experience within aquatics clubs as a participant, while others were entirely new to the sport. Once an individual expressed interest in taking part, the Ripple Effect Project Officer made direct contact to begin building a relationship and to outline the scope and aims of the project.

Given the focused nature of the initiative the Project Officer served as a single, consistent point of contact for each participant. This continuity played a vital role in establishing strong working relationships and in developing a personalised understanding of each volunteer's unique needs, particularly in relation to event support. The one-to-one engagement allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of the diversity of impairments represented within the cohort and the specific barriers faced by volunteers within their local pool settings. The strength of these relationships enabled open, constructive dialogue about how practical adaptations could be made in highly individualised and effective ways.

Training was delivered through blended learning which included a combination of online modules, accessed via the Institute of Swimming's CPD platform, and practical poolside sessions at local facilities. Each volunteer registered with the Institute of Swimming, Swim England's globally recognised training arm, to undertake the required theoretical courses. Upon successful completion of the online training, contact was made with local swimming clubs to identify and assign appropriate mentors. These mentors played a critical role in guiding the volunteers through their practical training, supporting them in overcoming challenges, and identifying any necessary adaptations to enable their continued development as Technical Officials.

Technical Officials Qualification Pathway

The Timekeeping (online) course represents the initial step on the Technical Official pathway within the aquatics officiating framework. Delivered in an accessible e-learning format, the course takes approximately one hour to complete. Upon successful completion, volunteers were able to download their certificate and were then introduced to their assigned mentors at local swimming clubs. These initial meetings provided an opportunity to walk through the requirements of the practical training element and to discuss how it would be delivered during local swim meets. Following the completion of both theoretical and practical components, and once volunteers had been given adequate time to build confidence in their role, they were offered the opportunity to progress to the next stage of officiating: the Judge Level 1 (J1) qualification. This represents a significant step forward and prepares individuals for a broader range of responsibilities on poolside, including roles such as Chief Timekeeper, Chief Inspector of Turns, and managing disqualification reports, among others.

Progression to the J1 qualification was always approached collaboratively and sensitively. Discussions were held with each volunteer, and where appropriate, with carers or support persons to ensure they felt confident in continuing their training and that appropriate assistance was in place. Support included guidance in accessing theoretical content as well as facilitating any necessary adjustments to complete the additional practical training.

Ongoing contact between mentors and volunteers was maintained throughout the process. This consistent communication ensured that volunteers were supported effectively during events and that any concerns regarding accessibility or the need for reasonable adjustments at competition venues could be promptly addressed and recorded. Feedback from these interactions proved invaluable in identifying areas where clubs and facilities could further enhance their inclusivity practices.

The graphic on the following page displays the Swimming Officiating pathway:



Swimming officiating pathway

Level of official	J1	J2	J2 (S)	Referee
Target audience	Swim England member who wishes to gain an initial understanding of Swimming World Aquatic Rules and the roles of Timekeeper and Inspector of Turns.	Qualified Judge 1 with 15 hours post qualification experience, who wishes to progress to the roles of Stroke Judge and Finish Judge.	Qualified Judge 2 with 15 hours post qualification experience, who wishes to progress to the role of Starter.	Qualified Judge 2S with minimum of 50 recorded officiating hours across all roles and at a variety of levels of meet since the date of qualification as a J2(S). Application must be supported by the relevant County and Regional Officials Coordinators.
Competition level	Intra-club, inter-club, open meets, county, regional and national events.	Intra-club, inter-club, open meets, county, regional and national events.	Intra-club, inter-club, open meets, county, regional events. Can take on the role of referee at Level 4 licensed open meets.	Intra-club, inter-club, open meets, county and regional events.
Minimum age to commence training	15 years	16 years	16 years	19 years (20 years as at date of exam)
Course delivery	Online theory and knowledge assessment. Completion of log book to evidence poolside competence.	Combined classroom theory, knowledge assessment and evidence of practical competence.	Combined classroom theory, knowledge assessment and evidence of practical competence. Final assessment of practical competence.	Application by 31 December for exam in November of following year. Combined classroom theory and evidence of practical experience. Three hour exam (pass mark of 85 per cent, maximum two re sit attempts). Final assessment of practical competence.

Structure of the Project

Establishing a project from the ground up presents significant challenges, and having access to the right contacts and networks is essential for success. From the outset, it was clear that creating a realistic and sustainable model that worked for all stakeholders (volunteers, clubs, and partner organisations) would require a considered and flexible approach. Much of the project's early development was shaped through a process of trial and error, direct engagement with volunteers, and ongoing dialogue with National Disability Sports Organisations (NDSOs). These experiences led to key learnings, which were continuously refined and implemented as the project evolved.

Progress on the project was initially slow, as outreach to clubs was conducted using a centralised database to identify those potentially able to support the disabled volunteers. Identifying individuals within clubs who were both willing and equipped to take on the role of mentor proved time-consuming. In some cases, a lack of prior experience or confidence in supporting disabled individuals created uncertainty, often stemming from limited knowledge rather than unwillingness.

The original project design focused on working with three NDSOs and a selection of swimming clubs across three specific regions. However, it soon became apparent that the limited geographic scope would restrict the number of volunteers available to participate. In response, the project was expanded to a national level, opening up opportunities to work with volunteers from across the country. This broader reach also allowed for the inclusion of all seven NDSOs, enabling engagement with individuals who represented a wider range of impairments and support needs.

This shift in scope proved essential. Without expanding beyond the initially identified regions, the project would have faced significant difficulties in recruiting sufficient volunteers to meaningfully test and explore the challenges faced by disabled individuals within club environments. Moreover, the broader inclusion of participants allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the barriers experienced by volunteers with different disabilities, ultimately strengthening the learning and outcomes of the project.

Volunteer Recruitment

One of the participating NDSOs, British Blind Sport (BBS), was unfortunately unable to recruit any volunteers for the Ripple Effect project despite making several concerted efforts to engage individuals from their network. Although visual impairment encompasses a broad spectrum of sight loss, with some individuals retaining partial vision, it was hoped that at least one volunteer might be willing to trial the courses and explore the feasibility of undertaking a volunteering role. Engaging with someone with a visual impairment would have provided valuable insight into what adjustments might be necessary and what levels of participation could be realistically supported. However, this was not to be, with several individuals expressing concerns around accessibility poolside.

This challenge aligns with findings from Sport England's Active Lives Survey, which indicates that individuals with visual impairments are significantly less likely to

engage in both physical activity and volunteering compared to the general population and other disabled groups. The survey highlights a range of barriers to volunteering for people with sight loss, including issues related to accessibility, awareness, confidence, and transportation. A broader lack of understanding and experience among organisations in working with people with visual impairments further compounds the issue, often resulting in limited opportunities for engagement. These factors likely contributed to the low response rate within this part of the project.

In light of the recruitment difficulties, an alternative approach was taken. Swim England worked with BBS in a different capacity, conducting site visits to a number of swimming facilities to assess their accessibility for visually impaired individuals. These visits involved collecting photographic evidence and detailed notes based on on-site observations and discussions. The findings have contributed to the development of guidance materials that aim to inform and assist clubs and leisure facilities in creating more inclusive environments for people with sight loss. BBS has since extended its outreach by offering support and training to staff at leisure complexes across the UK, focusing on best practices for guiding and supporting individuals with a visual impairment.

While the project did not yield volunteers with visual impairments for Technical Official roles, there was strong interest from individuals to take part in aquatics as a participant rather than as a volunteer. As a result, the Ripple Effect collaborated with BBS to support the British Blind Sport Gala. Volunteers from the project provided officiating support during the event, which gave young swimmers with a range of visual impairments the chance to experience swimming and diving, as well as the unique opportunity to meet a Paralympian. This experience highlighted a key insight: while individuals with a visual impairment may be less inclined to engage in volunteering roles such as officiating, they are often highly motivated to take part in aquatic activity itself.

Cerebral Palsy Sport (CP Sport), another NDSO involved in the project, also encountered difficulties in volunteer recruitment. Despite wide promotion through posters, event engagement, and social media outreach, no volunteers ultimately joined the project through this route. Following discussions with CP Sport, it became clear that some of the hesitation stemmed from practical concerns. Questions were raised about whether individuals with cerebral palsy would be able to navigate the online learning independently, or whether physical limitations might impact their ability to operate timekeeping equipment such as stopwatches and backup buttons.

Two individuals initially expressed interest in the project but later identified that the technical requirements of the officiating role would likely prove too challenging. Nevertheless, they appreciated the opportunity to contribute feedback and engage with a project specifically designed to be inclusive of disabled people. These insights were valuable and reinforced the importance of tailoring volunteer roles to match a wider range of abilities. Had the project offered alternative volunteering options beyond officiating, it is possible that greater participation may have been achieved from individuals within the CP Sport community.

The below table displays the breakdown of volunteers across the project:

NDSO	Number of Volunteers	Locations
Dwarf Sports Association UK	6	London, Bolton, Southampton, Dudley
British Blind Sport	0	N/A
UK Deaf Sport	8	Birmingham, Stoke-on-Trent, Hornchurch, Plymouth, Northolt
Limbpower	11	London, Milton Keynes, Kingston-Upon Hull, Nottingham, Catterick, Sittingbourne
CP Sport	2	Poole
Special Olympics GB	7	London, Hull, Leeds
Wheelpower	2	Durham, Plymouth
Other (found through NDSO but not affiliated)	4	Doncaster, Leeds, Warrington, Ashford



Impact and learnings

Overall, the delivery of The Ripple Effect has made a meaningful and positive impact on the volunteers who have taken part. The project has been particularly effective in driving progress across the following key areas:

Satisfaction

The majority of volunteers involved in The Ripple Effect project reported an increase in their overall satisfaction as a direct result of their roles. Many expressed that they felt a valued part of their team and recognised for the contributions that they were making. Each volunteer was supported by a dedicated mentor, providing a trusted source of guidance and encouragement, which in turn helped to build their confidence and support their development.

Regular conversations with volunteers highlighted a strong sense of belonging within their club environments, where they had established positive relationships with fellow volunteers and felt comfortable and supported in their progression.

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Swimming Clubs supported a Ripple Effect volunteer with their training to gain Technical Official Qualifications

Visability

Ripple Effect volunteers have proudly contributed across all three levels of swimming meets: Local, Regional, and National. As such, the impact of this project has created a ripple throughout the wider aquatics community. Disabled individuals are now seeing people like themselves represented in officiating roles which is prompting interest, questions, and a

growing number of enquiries about how to get involved in volunteering. Awareness of the project has increased among existing Officials, many of whom are actively engaging with the initiative and are eager to support disabled volunteers at the local level. This includes exploring ways to adapt training where needed and taking practical steps to make the poolside environment more accessible and welcoming.

Clubs are demonstrating a growing commitment to ongoing support, with an encouraging shift towards prioritising inclusivity within their environments. The availability of a Legacy guide (The Good Club Guide: Engaging Disabled Volunteers) will further empower clubs to promote their inclusive practices and be better equipped to have meaningful conversations with prospective volunteers about the types of support that can be put in place.

Support

While the visibility of different impairments on poolside varied, every volunteer reported a positive and rewarding experience. They expressed appreciation for the warm welcome that they received from what is often a well-established and experienced officiating community.

Although many volunteers initially felt some apprehension about attending events, all shared that once involved, they felt well-supported and guided in their roles. The encouragement they received has helped build their confidence, and each has expressed genuine enthusiasm about continuing their volunteering journey at future events.

From a National perspective consistent communication with volunteers, including regular check-ins following events, helped to build strong, trusting relationships. This open dialogue created a space where volunteers felt comfortable sharing feedback both positive and constructive.

An end-of-project survey revealed that enjoyment was the most frequently cited characteristic of the experience. This is a strong indicator that volunteers felt genuinely included, valued, and connected to the Swim England team. While most feedback was overwhelmingly positive and volunteers were eager to share their personal highlights, there were occasional instances where challenges or concerns were raised. Importantly, volunteers felt safe and supported enough to speak openly about these experiences — an essential factor in shaping meaningful, future-focused inclusion efforts.



Adaptations

By identifying mentors within each club, volunteers were given a dedicated point of contact who could take the time to understand their individual needs and determine what support might be required, particularly in the poolside environment.

For some individuals with physical impairments, this support could involve assistance in accessing the poolside area, using equipment, or adapting aspects of their role to ensure it could be performed safely and effectively. In many cases, small adjustments, guided by open discussion, were all that was needed to make a role accessible and achievable for each volunteer.

This person-centred approach helped ensure that volunteers felt supported, respected, and empowered in their journey.

Flexibility

The primary goal at the outset of the project was to support disabled volunteers in qualifying as Technical Officials. Many of the volunteers were already passionate about being in the pool environment and were motivated by a desire to give back and support others. However, it became clear that not all participants would be able to pursue this specific pathway, either due to the nature of their impairment, or through a personal decision to explore alternative roles within the sport.

Listening to this feedback, we responded by offering the volunteers access to our Learn to Swim – Swimming Lesson Helper course. Volunteers who previously found the technical officiating course challenging were able to engage with this new format and complete it successfully. They are now proudly qualified as Swimming Lesson Helpers.

We were also in the process of developing a new qualification: Swimming Pool Helper and as such we made every attempt to make this course as accessible as possible. This course has been designed with inclusion in mind, making extensive use of videos and infographics to enhance accessibility and improve comprehension.

It is vital that reasonable adjustments are considered and implemented to support disabled individuals. These adjustments should be shaped through open, collaborative conversations between the club and the volunteer, considering the club's capacity, available resources, and the specific demands of the event. With the right dialogue and a flexible approach, effective solutions can be found.





The Ripple Effect and Me – Case Studies

While this report is primarily centred on the objective outcomes of the project, we also felt it was important to capture the personal perspectives of those directly involved. To that end, we invited two Ripple Effect volunteers to share their reflections on their experiences and what being part of the project has meant to them.

Will Browning

“My name is Will and I want to learn more and do more volunteering too. I want to use my voice to support Swim England to help people like me get involved more. It will help me in the future.”

Will initially began his journey by enrolling on a timekeeping course. However, he found that the format and content were not well suited to his learning style, and he experienced difficulty in understanding the material due to his learning disability. Following an open conversation with The Ripple Effect Project Officer, Will shared his passion for helping others learn to swim. In response, he was offered the opportunity to take part in the Swimming Lesson Helper course; a more accessible and aligned pathway that perfectly supported his personal interests and future aspirations.

“The team helped me choose the course that was good for me. I said I wanted to help at swimming lessons and the course will help me with what I want to do in the future. I enjoyed the course. I liked all the videos, pictures

and quizzes and my sister helped me through it.

I haven't been able to do Swim England courses before. I found the test at the end of the timekeeper's course too hard and some of the words in the assistant's course were tricky, but my sister helped me understand it.

Thank you to Nicola (Ripple Effect Project Officer) for being so helpful to both me and my family.

I want to help more people to volunteer at galas.

Volunteers are very important. I go to swimming galas with volunteers, they help lots of people and make sure everyone can join in and have fun.

The project has been really fun and good for my future. Don't be scared to get involved and to ask for help if you need it.”

Will Browning, Ripple Effect Volunteer



Allyson Irvine

“My name is Allyson and I got involved with the Ripple Effect project through Nicola Hughes and Limbpower. I didn’t know what it was going to involve, but when I did know from my first experience of trying for my Timekeeper, I loved it! It’s something I thought I would never do especially with my disabilities, but I did manage to do as required and I really enjoyed it.

I found it difficult at first to hold a stopwatch and a back-up button when doing timekeeping, but I had so much help and support from my mentor Louise, that I found I could hold both even without my fingers. So, that started me thinking I can do this, and I did - and I love doing timekeeping!

There isn’t a lot I didn’t like about my experiences around the pool but what I did find rather frustrating is the people who didn’t understand that a person with disabilities can do the same things as a normal abled body person we just needed a little bit of help.

I also found that when I did summer and winter swimming meets some of the more experienced judges didn’t really go out of their way to make you feel comfortable, which was a bit off

putting and I suppose if it wasn’t for me having a great mentor and the swimming club, I might not have carried on but for the group who have been amazing with me and supported my needs, I carried on and I decided to go for J2. This wouldn’t have been possible without the Ripple Effect project.

I must admit, I am proud of myself for getting so far in such a short time and I do tell other amputees about my experiences with the Ripple Effect project, but now I think there should be some form of association for people with disabilities who wants to learn this side of the side of aquatics where they can go and get training and support, as it’s done me the world of good , I love doing my sessions, it makes me happy, it can be a bit hard going sometimes but again I do get looked after by the club.

I would recommend anyone who wants to take it up to do so but they would need to find a group like the Ripple Effect or a local swimming club to help and support them get on their way with training.

Allyson Irvine, Ripple Effect Volunteer

Challenges and key learnings

The Ripple Effect project was intentionally developed as a test and learn initiative. Its core aim was to explore Swim England's existing processes and officiating pathways through the lens of disability inclusion, using real time feedback to inform and refine future practices. From the outset, the ambition was to recruit approximately seven volunteers from each of the seven NDSOs, with the goal of engaging up to 49 individuals interested in trialling Technical Official roles. This was an ambitious target and, in hindsight, reflected both the scale of the challenge and the aspirations of the project.

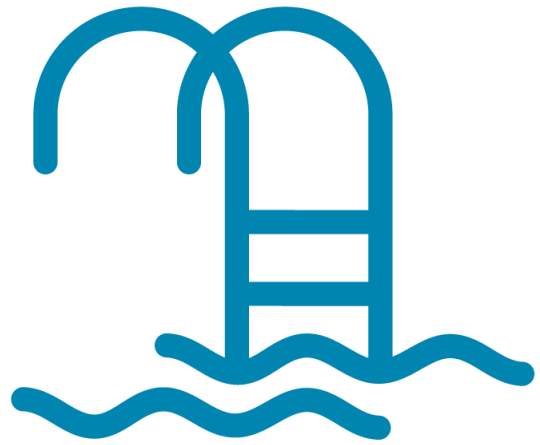
Following the initial registration phase and the delivery of focus groups, it became clear that some participants had misunderstood the nature of the volunteering roles on offer. A number of individuals had anticipated opportunities to support from a coaching perspective and had not been aware that the project was specifically designed around Technical Official positions such as Timekeeping and Judging. Once this clarification was provided, some volunteers expressed a reluctance to continue, as coaching appeared to align more closely with their interests or prior experiences. This initial misunderstanding highlighted a key challenge in terms of how we present information. While this provided an obstacle to recruitment and retention, it also revealed a valuable opportunity; the potential to improve visibility and understanding of Technical Official pathways among disabled individuals. Although coaching fell outside the remit of the Ripple Effect project, this learning underscored the importance of clear communication and the need to better promote the diversity of volunteer roles available within aquatic sport.

Volunteers took part in local swimming meets, where they had the opportunity to apply their theoretical learning in the role of Timekeeper. Each was supported by experienced Technical Officials who provided mentoring and guidance to support their practical development. The learning process varied depending on the nature of each volunteer's impairment. Some volunteers required additional time and exposure to events to become comfortable using stopwatches and other aspects of the Timekeeping role. For others with physical impairments, further support was needed to assess whether adaptations were necessary to remove potential barriers. In some cases, a lack of appropriate equipment created avoidable challenges. On one occasion, a volunteer who was a double below-knee amputee experienced discomfort due to prolonged standing, which placed pressure on their residual limbs. Although a request was made for a chair to be provided, the venue, having only recently opened, did not yet have the necessary equipment available. While the volunteer chose to continue, the initial discomfort led them to question whether they could remain involved in the project. Although this was a difficult moment, it underscored the importance of preparation and accessibility. We worked closely with subsequent clubs and venues to ensure that environments were appropriately equipped and welcoming for all disabled volunteers. Despite the early challenges, the volunteer in question went on to achieve their Judge Level 1 (J1) qualification and has since progressed to Judge Level 2 (J2); an achievement that exceeded the expectations set at the start of the project. This outcome stands as a powerful example of the dedication shown by our volunteers, and of the project's potential to support meaningful, long-term progress.

Another one of the key challenges identified during the project was the limited awareness and understanding of aquatic disciplines beyond swimming. While the Ripple Effect was originally designed to explore Technical Official roles across all four of Swim England's aquatic sports (swimming, water polo, diving, and artistic swimming) early conversations with prospective volunteers revealed that the latter three held little interest for most participants. Feedback suggested that many volunteers already saw their involvement in the project as a significant step outside of their comfort zones. The prospect of engaging with sports they had no prior experience in was often viewed not as an exciting opportunity, but as an added barrier. For many, the idea of learning new technical skills within an entirely unfamiliar discipline felt overwhelming. In contrast, swimming was far more accessible. It was a sport that the majority of volunteers were already familiar with, either through personal experience or through existing connections to clubs. This familiarity provided a solid foundation, helping participants better understand the roles being introduced and contributing to increased confidence and engagement. This insight reinforced the importance of meeting volunteers where they are comfortable and building on their existing knowledge and experience to create a more inclusive and supportive environment. It would also suggest that there is wider work to be done in other aquatic disciplines to increase accessibility in the future.

A key aim of the project was for each volunteer to train at a pool local to them, whilst being supported by a club that could guide them through their journey as a Technical Official. Proximity to the pool helped ease logistical challenges, such as arranging transport, and offered volunteers a sense of familiarity and comfort within their local area. Given that most swim clubs are run by volunteers, we felt there was a natural alignment with the project's goals in creating an environment where volunteers could support one another at a grassroots level. In practice, however, the level of engagement varied. Some clubs were more open to removing barriers and adopting flexible approaches, while others faced limitations. Feedback highlighted that certain clubs lacked the knowledge or confidence to support a disabled volunteer effectively. In some cases, time constraints also made it difficult for club members to take on a more hands-on mentoring role. These insights emphasised the need for targeted guidance and resources to better equip clubs in creating inclusive, supportive pathways for all volunteers.

There was a notable decline in volunteer participation between the first and second phases of the Ripple Effect project, resulting in a final cohort of 24 active participants. While some volunteers chose to withdraw after realising that officiating was not the right fit for them, others were unfortunately unable to continue due to health-related issues; either their own or those of close family members. These circumstances highlighted a significant challenge: the need to balance the project's structured timelines with the unpredictable and often complex realities of volunteers' personal and medical needs. At times, progress felt uncertain, and there were genuine concerns about whether the project would be able to meet its intended objectives. However, a core group of committed volunteers remained engaged and moved forward at a pace that was sensitive to their individual circumstances. Their persistence not only ensured that the project continued, but also reaffirmed the importance of flexibility, patience, and a person-centred approach when designing and delivering inclusive volunteer programmes.



Facilities

Not all events have been fully accessible to every volunteer involved in the project. In some cases, Health and Safety considerations have led to the decision that certain environments were too hazardous for both volunteers and athletes. Often, these challenges stem from the structural limitations of older facilities, where necessary adaptations are either difficult or not currently feasible.

For volunteers who use wheelchairs, accessibility barriers made it difficult to complete the required training. Common obstacles include changing rooms located at a distance from the poolside, steps that cannot be removed during galas, and narrow poolside areas that become crowded with athletes. In such situations, the risk of collisions or restricted movement has resulted in volunteers being unable to participate safely.

Other volunteers with physical impairments have faced difficulties accessing key areas such as the start and turn ends of the pool. These sections often involve steep steps and lack supportive features like handrails or ramps. While newer venues are typically more accessible, with built-in ramps and improved layout, some still present challenges. For example, ramps may be too steep or difficult to navigate without assistance.

Looking ahead, it would be of great benefit if the perspectives of disabled people were considered during the planning stages of new facility developments. Involving disabled users in the design process can help ensure that accessibility is not an afterthought, but a fundamental part of the venue's structure. Even among newly built or recently upgraded venues, gaps in accessibility remain, particularly for wheelchair users. Gathering feedback directly from disabled volunteers, athletes, and spectators could support facilities in becoming more inclusive. This not only broadens opportunities for swimmers but also encourages wider participation from disabled volunteers.

Accessibility should never be a deterrent. However, when local venues remain unsuitable for an individual's needs, it can discourage potential volunteers from getting involved. Addressing these issues through consultation and inclusive planning would mark a significant step toward creating a more welcoming and supportive environment across the sport.

Venues could consider the following areas for adaptations, to ensure increased accessibility:

- Ramp access to boom areas or sides of the pool where starter blocks are.
- Ramp access to areas where steps lead to poolside. Not appropriate to go through other rooms or leave the building to get to poolside.
- Detachable grab rails to get up and down at ends where starter blocks are.
- Removeable ladders to assist people in wheelchairs be able to volunteer poolside safely.
- Chairs to be available poolside for those who cannot stand for long periods of time with a physical impairment.
- Weights of doors in venues to be checked and adapted to make it easier for disabled people to get through safely.
- Accessible toilets not to be used as changing rooms and kept obstacle free.
- For individuals who are neurodivergent, a quiet space for when they are feeling overwhelmed.
- When meeting rooms are upstairs and no lift available, alternative room to be sourced so a disabled person is not excluded.
- Sunflower lanyard for those with an impairment that is not visible. When appropriate, let organisers know of any individuals that may need extra support.
- For those with a hearing impairment, let organisers know in advance in case any extra support is needed at the event.
- For those that need time to prepare themselves for an event, if any information can be made available in advance it will help to alleviate any stress or anxiety.

Many of these changes require minimal financial investment but can make a significant difference in improving accessibility. Implementing them would create a more inclusive environment not only for volunteers, but also for swimmers and others who use the space.



Things we would do differently

In some cases, individuals' support needs were not immediately apparent during initial meetings or early stages of training. This became evident when two volunteers with intellectual disabilities (ID) began working through their Timekeeping theory courses. They encountered difficulties with certain aspects of the training, particularly with understanding how to average three recorded times: the manual time from the Timekeeper, the touchpad time, and the backup button. This aspect of the course caused unintentional distress for both individuals, as the concept proved difficult to grasp and led to feelings of confusion and frustration. At the time, we had not anticipated this response, and our immediate concern was to prevent further upset during what should have been a positive learning experience.

Following open discussions with parents and carers, we gained a clearer understanding of the volunteers' specific needs and how ID affected their ability to process certain types of information. These conversations helped us reflect on the importance of providing alternative, accessible pathways from the outset. As a result, we explored and recommended options such as the *Swimming Lesson Helper* course, which offered a more accessible format. We felt that the structure of this course; featuring visuals, shorter sentences, and interactive content, was better suited to the volunteers' neurodiverse learning styles. They engaged with the content confidently from the start.

This experience highlighted the importance of ongoing education around neurodiversity and the need for adaptable, flexible training approaches. No one sets out to cause distress, and this situation served as a valuable reminder that inclusion requires active listening, learning, and the willingness to adjust. As a result, additional strategies were implemented to ensure all volunteers feel supported and understood throughout their journey.

A significant area of learning during the project came through our work with volunteers who were deaf or had a hearing impairment. Initially, a lack of understanding around the specific needs of these individuals led to unintended consequences. During the registration process, some volunteers felt overwhelmed by the information presented. Rather than voice their concerns, they chose to quietly withdraw from the project. Through detailed conversations with UK Deaf Sport (UKDSP), we came to understand the extent of the confusion and distress experienced. The communication style and expectations had not been accessible, which contributed to a sense of isolation for the individuals involved. In response, members of the Swim England team undertook training in British Sign Language (BSL) to develop a better understanding of how to support deaf and hearing-impaired volunteers. While the experience was a difficult one, it proved to be a valuable learning opportunity and one that shaped our approach moving forward and helped to prevent similar situations.



Safeguarding training for disabled volunteers emerged as another area in need of thoughtful reconsideration. As a core requirement for ensuring the safety and wellbeing of all participants the course is an essential part of volunteer development. However, the standard delivery format, consisting of a single three-hour online session, proved particularly challenging for individuals who are neurodivergent or have an intellectual disability.

In collaboration with the Safeguarding Team and the Head of Diversity and Inclusion at Swim England, a more accessible version of the course was created. The revised format breaks the content into three one-hour sessions delivered over consecutive days, making it more manageable and easier to engage with for those with varying learning needs.

Importantly, this new approach is not limited to The Ripple Effect participants. The course will be offered four times a year and will be available to others across the aquatics community who may benefit from a more flexible and inclusive learning environment. Once again, the impact of the project here is evident. Learnings from The Ripple Effect have already been applied to the wider Swim England network to shape more inclusive practices that support lasting, meaningful change across our sports.

Sustainability and future actions

There will always be disabled individuals who are eager to contribute as volunteers. Having a consistent point of contact or mentor; someone they trust and feel comfortable approaching with questions, concerns, or for support with planning and goal setting; can make a significant difference in whether they feel able to take on a role. For many, the presence of a familiar, supportive figure is a key factor in building the confidence to engage. From our conversations with clubs, it's clear that there is a growing desire to welcome and support disabled people into volunteer roles. Clubs are increasingly recognising the value of inclusion and are keen to play a role in continuing this momentum. Volunteers who have taken part in The Ripple Effect project will continue to be supported by their local clubs and regional networks even after the formal conclusion of the initiative. The hope is that these volunteers will share their experiences with others, thus producing larger "ripples" across the network, and inspire the next cohort of disabled volunteers

While the project has rightly focused on supporting disabled individuals, an important insight has emerged: it is often non-disabled people who require training to ensure they are equipped to communicate with and support disabled volunteers appropriately. Understanding how to engage respectfully, without resorting to intrusive questions, or assumptions, has proven just as important as any practical training delivered. This recognition prompted the development of a Legacy Document, not solely for the benefit of volunteers, but as a practical guide for clubs. Its purpose is to help clubs approach these conversations and relationships with sensitivity, confidence, and a better understanding of how to provide inclusive support. The document does not attempt to be a comprehensive manual on disability, but rather offers guidance rooted in the experiences of The Ripple Effect and informed by the National Disability Sports Organisations involved. By equipping clubs with this knowledge, we hope to break down uncertainty and ensure that no volunteer is left unsupported simply because a club is unfamiliar with their needs. In doing so, we take another step toward embedding lasting inclusion within the culture of aquatics.

What can clubs do?

One of the early challenges faced by the project was reaching potential volunteers, even with the support of the NDSOs and access to their networks. From a Swim England perspective, it became apparent that there is a wider issue around the visibility of inclusion within the club network. Many clubs do not actively promote their ability to support disabled individuals, and for many, it is not commonly understood that volunteering opportunities are accessible to people with a range of impairments. Awareness of The Ripple Effect project itself was limited in the early stages.

However, once contact was made with clubs on behalf of volunteers, the response was overwhelmingly positive. Most clubs were open and willing to mentor and support disabled volunteers once the opportunity was presented to them. This highlights the importance of a more strategic and inclusive approach to communication. Future outreach must be comprehensive, targeted, and multi-channel, ensuring that information reaches a broad and diverse audience. Where

possible, accessibility tools and inclusive formats should be used to remove barriers and ensure that disabled people feel informed, welcomed, and encouraged to get involved.

Encouraging a positive volunteer experience

Resources such as the *Good Club Guide: Engaging Disabled Volunteers* are designed to equip clubs with the knowledge and confidence needed to create welcoming environments for disabled individuals. By promoting openness, flexibility, and inclusivity, tools like this can encourage clubs to engage with people who might not otherwise consider volunteering. In many cases, physical adaptations may not be required at all; simply having a supportive person to guide a volunteer, answer questions, and help them feel comfortable can make all the difference.

Ensuring that all volunteers have a positive experience is essential. When volunteers, disabled or not, face negative or discouraging situations, they may choose not to return. This not only affects the individual but can also contribute to a broader shortage of volunteers in key roles. It is therefore vital that clubs foster an environment where volunteers feel supported, listened to, and valued. Recognising and addressing issues early can help prevent setbacks and ensure volunteers feel confident and motivated to continue their journey.

Connecting communities

At its core, The Ripple Effect has been about embedding inclusion into the culture of volunteering; bringing disabled and non-disabled individuals together to contribute side by side. In the early stages of training, some volunteers shared that they felt isolated, with a few reporting that other members did not engage with them, leading to moments of discomfort and uncertainty among established teams of officials.

Despite these challenges, Ripple Effect volunteers demonstrated exceptional commitment and resilience, making a tangible impact within their local clubs. Their presence and progress has not gone unnoticed; other volunteers have, on occasion, approached them to learn more about their training and experiences, opening the door to meaningful conversations and increased awareness around inclusive volunteering.

As visibility of disabled volunteers grows, both within clubs and at larger events, the hope is that others will feel inspired to get involved, not only in swimming but across all aquatic disciplines. The clubs that have welcomed Ripple Effect volunteers have shown a strong willingness to support their development, recognising the value that they bring to the community.

As one club member remarked, “I wish more people had the resilience, determination and commitment of one of the Ripple Effect volunteers.” This sentiment captures the spirit of the project and the lasting impression these volunteers have and continue to make across the sport.

What's next?

From the outset, the aspiration of the project was for all volunteers to remain actively involved within the local clubs that supported them throughout their training and qualification journey. Over the course of the project, volunteers have developed strong connections within the officiating community and the feedback received has been overwhelmingly positive. Their enthusiasm and commitment has been clearly demonstrated, with many expressing a desire to continue volunteering and, in some cases, to progress to the next level of officiating qualifications. This highlights not only the dedication of our disabled volunteers, but also their genuine passion for being part of a wider sporting community.

It is hoped that the continued presence of Ripple Effect volunteers on poolside will serve as a powerful source of inspiration for other disabled individuals, encouraging them to engage with Swim England's volunteering pathway and feel confident in taking their first steps into the aquatics community.

How to volunteer with Swim England

There are many ways to volunteer with Swim England across the four aquatic disciplines – swimming, diving, water polo and artistic swimming. Whether you want to be involved as a Technical Official or help support local, regional or national events, [click here](#) to find out more:

Volunteer Training Development

Thank you

Thank you to Spirit of 2012 for funding the Ripple Effect project. Without their generous and unstinting support it would not have been possible to go on this learning journey and to start breaking down barriers for disabled people. Thanks go to the NDSO's for working with us and introducing the volunteers to us as well as helping provide information for the Legacy guide – The Good Club Guide: Engaging Disabled Volunteers. Thanks go to the Swimming Clubs for welcoming and supporting our disabled volunteers and making changes in order to break down the barriers that were preventing disabled people from volunteering at their clubs. Also, a huge thank you to the Volunteers themselves who put their faith into the project and went on a journey that many thought wasn't possible for them. Without them we would not have challenged, changed or pushed boundaries in Aquatic Sports. As one volunteer said, you don't know what will happen until you try!

Afterword

The Ripple Effect project and its associated reports, results, materials and benefits would have been impossible without the efforts of Nicola Hughes, who has been the Project Officer in charge of leading the Ripple Effect. We at Swim England owe her an enormous debt of gratitude for all her fantastic work since 2022, as do clubs and volunteers up and down the country.

Lisa Brookes, Volunteering Manager
Claire Coleman, Head of Development





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Pavilion 3, SportPark, 3 Oakwood Drive, Loughborough University, Leicestershire
LE11 3QF

Tel: 01509 618700 | swimming.org



SwimEngland



@Swim_England



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