



Special Olympics
Ireland

YOUTH VOLUNTEERS FEEDBACK & RECRUITMENT SUMMARY

AUGUST 2023 V1

Volunteer Department, Special Olympics Ireland

Context:

During March and April of 2023, a number of focus groups were held with youth volunteers, the purpose of which was to explore from the youth volunteer's perspective, how Special Olympics can reach and foster relationships with youth volunteers to inform Special Olympics' communication strategy and bring practical solutions to clubs for club volunteer recruitment (youth volunteers).

As volunteers are a shared resource in Irish society, all of us who are involved with Special Olympics have a responsibility to give youth volunteers the best volunteer experience we can. They may not stay with a club for a long time depending on changes at their stage of life, but we should all consider the importance of youth volunteers leaving with a consideration that they will come back at some stage and they will advocate for Special Olympics among their peer group and network.

The following themes were explored with youth volunteers as part of this initiative. Their insights should inform readers when recruiting volunteers, in particular, youth volunteers

Awareness of Special Olympics

Most respondents who currently volunteer in a Special Olympics club got to know about the club because a family member or friend was either volunteering in a club or participating as an athlete. Participants said that their school pals or friends wouldn't know anything about Special Olympics and would likely make a connection to Paralympics, as if both were the same organisation. A point was made that because clubs use schools or community buildings, there was an absence of Special Olympics branding which would otherwise support in making the community more aware of its presence. There was more of an association with Events and not Clubs amongst those who had only recent association with Special Olympics.

What to do with this if recruiting volunteers in your community: Don't assume everyone knows about your club. Look for local communication channels or events to promote your club and be clear about your ask

Motivation to volunteer

Motivation to volunteer are many and varied between respondents.

Motivators include the following:

- The sport itself and the opportunity to get coaching training experience
- School, college and youth initiatives, e.g., Gaisce, Duke of Edinburgh, John Paul II awards.
- Experience to add to a CV and talking point at (job) interview
- Skills development, e.g. interpersonal, language, coaching and transferable skills in general to the work environment. Volunteering provides an opportunity to learn and to practice and hone skills in a safer, less pressurised way than a job opportunity might provide
- Volunteering was described by respondents as being "just part of some people" and their lifestyle
- Connection to a cause (through family or someone they know or stories they hear). They suggested that hearing testimonies from parents/families relaying how Special Olympics has changed their family members' lives would help potential volunteers connect to Special Olympics.
- Get out and have fun and make new connections
- Give back to their own community

- They need to be able to connect to the opportunities and see how they will fit in and make a difference

What to do with this if recruiting volunteers in your community: Don't assume that what motivates you to volunteer will motivate others. Be prepared to sell the benefits of volunteering and make potential volunteers aware of how volunteering could add to their life experience. Tailor your recruitment messages

How volunteering adds value to a young person's life

Volunteering makes people feel good, especially when they see how they can make others feel happy. The experience supports their personal development and skills development. Volunteering is rewarding and fun. Some have said they can see the impact their involvement has and because that's in their own community it means a lot to them. Volunteering brings a great sense of satisfaction especially when an athlete's progress can be seen.

What to do with this if recruiting volunteers in your community: It's impactful when a volunteer speaks from their own experience to potential volunteers who are like them

Barriers to volunteering

- Some young (potential) volunteers think they don't have anything to offer because they don't know what to expect.
- Some younger volunteers experience apprehension when engaging with adults (in particular) with and ID, they don't know what to expect and what is expected of them in this situation.
- Difficulties with traveling to volunteer can be a barrier, it was suggested to target those closest to the clubs.
- Young volunteers may experience fear of going into a club on their own or not seeing anyone like them volunteering. They want to be with people of their own age.
- They want to see people their own age recruiting or talking about their volunteering experience.
- Time was mentioned by some as a barrier – time needed for study, part-time job and/or going out. They suggested that it's easier for them and their peers to volunteer when the club can have more flexibility so they don't have to commit to the same time every week.
- Some young people just don't consider volunteering at all – it just doesn't cross their minds. Others may want to volunteer but don't know where to look.
- They would become disinterested in volunteering if they felt other older volunteers were dismissive of them because of their age or a perception they are inexperienced. They want to feel valued, welcomed and respected. If they were to become bored by their experience they would leave and move on to something else.

What to do with this if recruiting volunteers in your community: Each of the above barriers can be mitigated by how you ask someone to volunteer, how you describe your experience and how you manage a new or potential volunteer's expectations of what is expected of them

What youth volunteers bring

- Fresh perspective and ideas.
- Skills and knowledge of social media which could really help their club promote their presence in the local community. They have the opportunity to influence and reach potential volunteers their own age and spread awareness of Special Olympics.
- Energy, enthusiasm, creativity and a sense of fun. Their age offers relatability to so many of the athletes.
- Sport specific direction is brought by those volunteers who have engaged in a particular sport since they were young children.

What to do with this if recruiting volunteers in your community: Look within, involve youth volunteers in recruitment. Make a conscious decision to recruit youth volunteers for all the above reasons – even if they only stay a short time. If a person hasn't volunteered before they may not realise they have something to bring so make it obvious what you are looking for in ways your audience can relate to

Reaching youth volunteers

- Make Special Olympics visible in communities and create awareness of SO in the community through whatever local channels are available e.g., posters in local shops, flyers, mail drops, bulletin boards, adds in local papers (yes, youth volunteers told us they still read posters too)
- Clubs to arrange school visits in towns where there are clubs (or nearby towns) BUT interactions should be primarily delivered by Special Olympics youth volunteers who volunteer in the local club and can describe their experience in a way that's relatable to their audience. That experience should include, what's expected and required as a volunteer in a Special Olympics club and some information about disability.
- Similarly attend clubs and society days in college but have students at the stands sharing their experience, use digital content to let potential volunteers know what volunteering is like and signpost benefits and what we are looking for to help manage expectations.
- Provide people with a list of clubs in their area. Don't make it difficult for people to find us, when we get their attention, get their details for further communication
- Build connections with other sports clubs in the town where there's a club
- It could be impactful if a parent of an athlete spoke about what their involvement in SO means
- Take advantage of the bigger days to get volunteer interest, e.g., Collection Day

Reaching youth volunteers through social media

- The social media platforms suggested to have most impact with this audience is Instagram, TikTok and YouTube. Digital clips of volunteers and athletes in action can let others know what the volunteering context is like. Motivating podcasts from the athlete and volunteer perspective would serve to motivate others.
- Be aware that people may need a few weeks of seeing an ad or call to action on social media before they act.
- Digital clips should be used to show what happens in a club, to bring to life the expectation. Use reels as more popular than static photos and change the reels every few days when you are promoting your club or looking for volunteers

- When asked, respondents advised they would fill in a basic form on social media if interested in getting involved.
- It was suggested to do “a day in the life of x club” or provide the opportunity for an Instagram takeover where a volunteer takes over Special Olympics’ Instagram for the day.
- It was suggested that mothers/fathers/guardians of potential youth volunteers could be targeted via Facebook asking them if there was a younger person in their lives looking for a rewarding experience etc.
- Observation was highlighted as the best hook; it lets people see what it’s like for themselves. This could be facilitated through open days or club action clips.
- Offer flexibility: recruit more than you need so volunteers don’t have to commit to every weekend

What to do with this if recruiting volunteers in your community: Plan to recruit and give potential volunteers reasons to volunteer with your club and let them see what that experience could be like. Don’t expect volunteers to just come to you. Get a few people in your club to start a social media campaign if you don’t already have one.

To catch the attention of youth volunteers, communication should contain the following:

- Have a balance of messages from SO Ireland and the regions to show we are island-wide
- List where the SO clubs are (towns, counties as club names mean nothing to those who haven’t yet connected) make it obvious, don’t get potential volunteers searching for them
- Practical information about what is expected in a volunteer role
- Help to alleviate apprehension when volunteering with others with an intellectual disability
- What skills are needed or not
- Should contain benefits of volunteering and what a youth volunteer could take away from their volunteering experience
- Use action clips in clubs to let youth volunteers see volunteers like them, in action, having fun and being constructive
- One of the big benefits of SOI is that coaching is accessible – can get qualifications accredited by Sport Ireland

Youth Champions

A linked initiative was also taken in May 2023 where adult club members who are naturally talented at fostering relationships with youth volunteers [*Youth Champions*] were asked to share their practices when recruiting, on-boarding and engaging youth volunteers in their clubs.

The following are such shared suggestions and recommendations from club volunteers:

Specific to recruitment:

A number of participants said they link in with Transition Year students in ROI through a TY coordinator and also make the link with Special Olympics volunteering and the Gaisce award. Similarly in Northern Ireland, participants connect with schools through DoE awards or John Paul II, linking in with Year Heads.

Ideally it’s best to link in before term ends, suggested mid-May to support registration completion ready to go for September.

Relationships have been built up locally by individuals in the clubs and schools and standard templates communicating process and purpose have helped to communicate the ask of visiting the schools.

Where there is an opportunity for athletes to integrate with other non-Special Olympics clubs in the area, natural connections will be made and greater opportunities for athletes to encourage other sport specific potentials to volunteer in the local SO club.

Some clubs attend youth fairs and some ask past volunteers to recruit newer ones - get teenagers talking to teenagers

It was suggested to be flexible – maybe recruit more than you need so that volunteers don't have to come every week

A member of the group advised that they look for college placements in their club

Consider use of language in all recruitment communication, e.g., instead of saying *give an hour every week*, use : *give what you have available to give*. Another example, to make potential youth volunteers aware of their value or what they can contribute, maybe we should phrase our recruitment ask using the following: .. *if you are good at social media....organising... having fun* or using phrases like: *have you thought about.....*

Adopt social media to promote your club and to reach those you want/need to reach via Instagram, TikTok, YouTube. When using social media the channels need to be busy – shiny things attract people. Ask your existing youth volunteers to support this initiative, use their skills. Use visuals to communicate to take any trepidation that may be there, to demonstrate what volunteering is like, to show your club in its best light, e.g. a day in the life of a volunteer.

Link in with NGBs and other mainstream sports clubs. Make a direct ask for energetic youth members of NGBs to expand their sports and coaching experience by volunteering in your club.

Use social media to follow mainstream clubs and get them linked in with SO clubs

Look within: Don't just leave recruitment to the CMT, get involvement from all demographics in your club to work together on different approaches to recruitment depending on the various target audiences

Promote your club in your community, examples given: local fashion show; get to local papers; club playing at half time at a large sporting event locally

Specific to On-boarding/Settling in:

A buddying system was suggested, e.g., recruit two friends and let them stay together doing the same activities to settle in or buddy an individual with an existing volunteer.

Some clubs ask the youth volunteers what roles they'd like to undertake. It gives them the opportunity to see what they can do and feel more settled.

Doing induction and looking through the code of conduct as a group exercise gives new youth volunteers a gentle introduction. The need to find out what youth volunteers are interested in and what they love to do can help meet or manage expectations and lead to a great experience.

One club has a pizza night at the start of the academic year to welcome new volunteers.

Delay the club opening to athletes by a week so that volunteers can be brought in together the week before to prep and get comfortable before the athletes come in the following week

Volunteers are all different so how you approach and try to help an individual fit in depends on the character of that individual so you may have to try different things and adapt to the individual, e.g. a very shy person could be given specific tasks to do with equipment at first and move onto other tasks as their confidence grows.

Give some links to training from Special Olympics on what the club and athletes are all about. Athletes are by their nature very welcoming to new people but for some volunteers that have not had interactions with people with intellectual disabilities they can struggle to know how to behave.

Give them a clear view as to what expectations are so that when they arrive, they know what's expected of them

Specific to development and involvement:

Where a youth volunteer is interested in the sport in particular, offer to support with coaching courses and qualifications. This can be done with parental consent and engagement and if there is further commitment given by the volunteer.

Figure out what their skill sets are and work with them to utilize those specific skills.

Get the basics right: notice what the volunteers are doing and thank and praise them. Communicate as you would with adult/more mature volunteers, demonstrating encouragement and respect. Ask for their input.

Depending on the volunteer, they could be asked where they want to develop and provide opportunities for that to happen.

Making the experience great:

A number of participants described "away days" as a great way to reward volunteers and have fun as a club or a group of youth volunteers. Examples given were to the zoo or to Jump Zone.

One participant described holding a club ball – everyone dressed up and the youth volunteers acted as escorts for the athletes.

Some have a Christmas event and give small Christmas presents.

Try not to overwhelm them from session one

We can consider that the points made in relation to "settling in" and "development and involvement" contribute greatly to making the experience great as well as the points below under "saying goodbye".

Saying goodbye:

One club introduces their youth volunteers to SO competition events and gets them signed up to roles. This is a great way to offer an opportunity to retain these volunteers who may not be able to give the weekly commitment due to life phase changes/study but it's still retaining them in the region.

All of the above should support retention of volunteers but we must be realistic that all volunteers are a shared resource in our communities and society and we can't make them stay if they need to leave for college or further study. However, we need to see them as future volunteers, parents, donors, CEOs or influencers and ambassadors for Special Olympics. For that reason, we need to do all we can to give youth volunteers a memorable experience in our clubs.

The following has been offered as examples of how the end of a youth's volunteering term with the club is marked [suggestions shared by club volunteers]:

Thank you cards; vouchers or small token of appreciation; write a heartfelt thank you to the school; invite them to summer activities; give a gift of a uniform or branded top to give a sense of belonging to the club; offer references if they need them. Some have organised whip-arounds when someone gave their time to the club to coach (specific circumstances should inform such actions)

Conclusion

All of the insights and suggestions listed above should support retention of youth volunteers in particular but we must be realistic that all volunteers are a shared resource in our communities and society and we can't make them stay if they need to leave for college or further study. However, we need to see potential youth volunteers as future volunteers, parents, donors, CEOs or influencers and ambassadors for Special Olympics. For that reason, we need to do all we can to give youth volunteers a memorable experience in our clubs.

The Youth Champions group have suggested a central toolkit for clubs to draw from:

This should include templates and guides for recruitment and on-boarding, including schools presentation, posters and guides to developing a social media campaign.

The first version of this toolkit will be available from September 2023 and will be further developed thereafter.

Thanks to the youth volunteers both within and outside of Special Olympics for their input and to Youth Champions for sharing their experience of youth engagement in their community clubs.