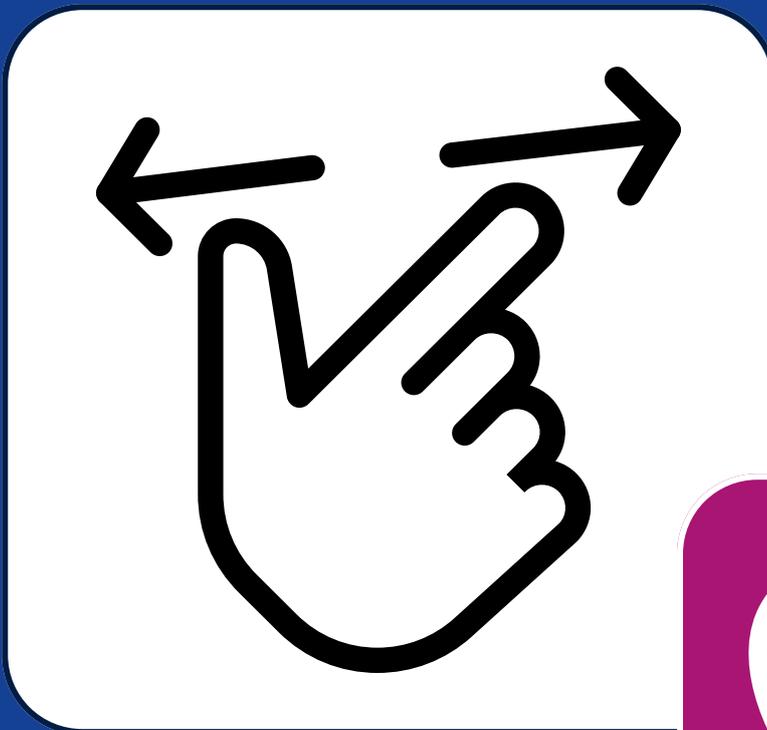
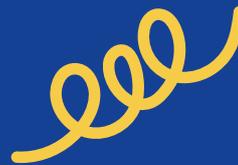


Reinforced Mentorship

Zooming in on Creating Inclusive Environments in European Solidarity Corps Projects

Mentoring under construction



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01

Introduction

The **European Solidarity Corps (ESC)** promotes equal opportunities for all young people, which means providing equal access to programme activities. ESC organisations are called upon to design accessible and inclusive activities, taking into account the perspectives and needs of young people with diverse abilities.

Creating inclusive volunteering projects for young people with fewer opportunities means implementing additional support measures. **Mentoring** – one of the main support measures of the ESC Programme – contributes both to the value of the volunteering project and to the well-being of the volunteer. However, mentoring alone is often not enough to adequately support volunteers with diverse abilities.

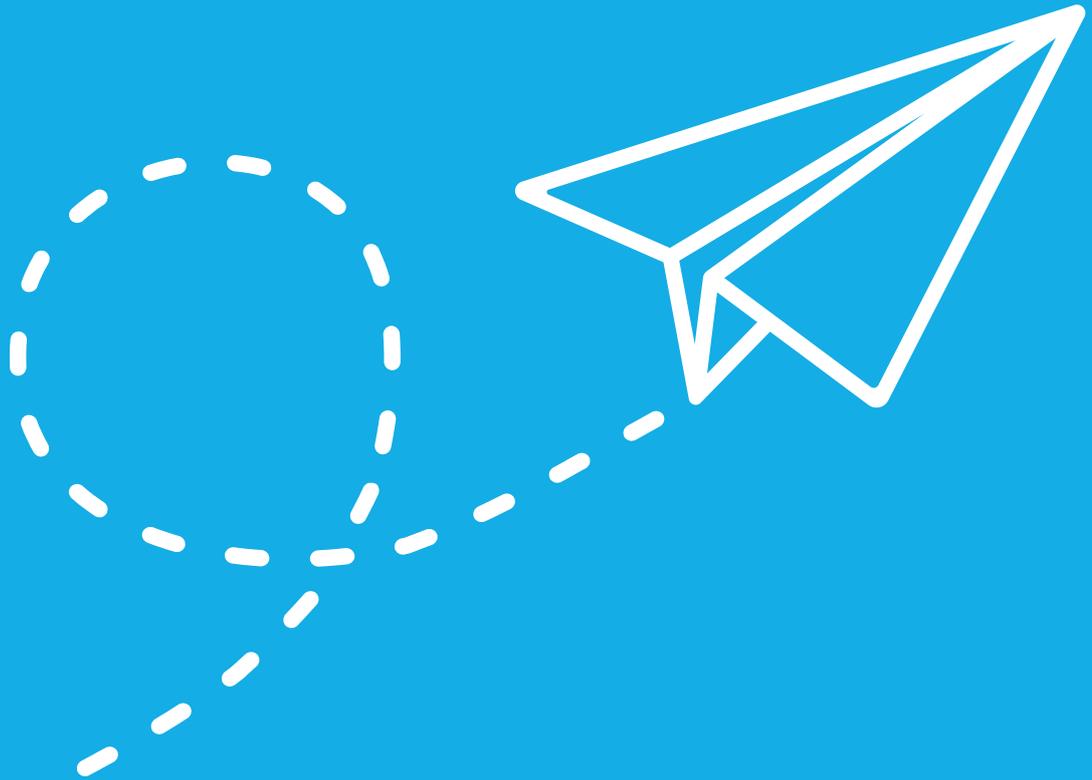
Reinforced Mentorship is an intensified mentoring process designed to provide stronger and more frequent guidance and support for young people with fewer opportunities. This may include closer contact, more frequent mentoring conversations, step-by-step assistance in the implementation of tasks, or more intensive monitoring both during project activities and outside working hours. Reinforced mentorship aims to support volunteers in gaining as much autonomy as possible, while also contributing to the successful implementation of the project.

The **Mentoring Competence Framework** is a key tool for ensuring clear and effective guidance for mentoring practitioners. It supports mentors in developing their mentoring competences and improving their mentoring practice, and it helps project coordinators to set up and offer quality mentoring programmes within their organisations. While the framework provides valuable information about ensuring inclusion, it lacks practical recommendations and hands-on tools for implementing reinforced mentorship in volunteering projects.

This booklet on Reinforced Mentorship is meant to complement the competence framework in this regard. The insights and practical recommendations presented here are based on an in-depth exploration of reinforced mentoring practices within our Mentoring under Construction community. With the help of experienced organisations working with young volunteers with diverse abilities, we are now able to bring greater clarity and practical knowledge about what works in practice. The first chapter **lays the ground for reinforced mentorship**. It outlines the concept and presents the results of a survey summarising key experiences with reinforced mentorship in the field. The second chapter provides **a deep dive into good practice examples of reinforced mentorship**. It explores the needs and barriers for five different groups – young people with reduced mobility, hearing or visual impairments, neurodiverse and LGBTQ+ youth – and offers recommendations for creating inclusive environments and reinforced mentoring practices. The third chapter guides readers through the practical steps that need to be considered when **implementing reinforced mentorship**.

We hope that this booklet proves to be an inspiration, a practical guideline, and an encouragement to strive for greater inclusion and to create more opportunities for young people with diverse abilities.

Andreea Rabota-Buzec
Michael Kimmig
Miguel Tabera



02

Laying the Ground for Reinforced Mentorship



What Is Reinforced Mentorship and Why Is It Important?

"Reinforced Mentorship' is an intensified mentoring process." - ESC Programme Guide, Version 1 / 2026, p. 98

Reinforced mentorship is a stronger and more frequent form of guidance and support for young people with diverse needs. It is offered to volunteers who face additional barriers and may not be able to participate independently through standard mentoring.

Reinforced Mentorship involves staying close to the volunteer's daily experience, meeting with them more regularly and offering step-by-step guidance whenever needed. This can include supporting the volunteer in understanding tasks and routines, navigating new environments, managing everyday life, communicating with others, or coping with stress and uncertainty.

Reinforced mentorship is flexible, as it adapts to the volunteer's individual needs, abilities and pace. It creates a safe environment that allows the volunteer to participate in activities and learn and grow without feeling overwhelmed.

Reinforced mentorship is essential because some volunteers require more attentive and structured support to succeed in a new environment. For volunteers with fewer opportunities, especially those facing mental, cognitive, social or emotional barriers, the standard mentoring approach may not be sufficient to ensure safety, well-being, engagement and meaningful learning.

This strengthened form of mentoring helps to:

- reduce stress and confusion by offering clear and consistent guidance,
- prevent risks and misunderstandings,
- build trust and emotional security,
- support the gradual development of independence and confidence,
- ensure that every volunteer, regardless of their challenges, can fully participate and feel included.

Reinforced mentorship is not only about solving problems. It is about creating the conditions that allow every volunteer to engage and learn, experience progress and success, feel connected, and develop personally. It helps ensure that participation in the European Solidarity Corps is equally safe and accessible for all.



Mapping Reinforced Mentorship: Insights from a Survey

The insights presented below are based on a survey carried out in 2025 among organisations involved in the European Solidarity Corps. The survey gathered more than 100 responses from 33 countries and reflects the experience of mentors, coordinators and managers of organisations that have supported more than 1,500 volunteers in recent years. The findings are grounded in real, long-term practice across a wide range of contexts.

Reinforced mentorship as a tool for inclusion

The survey clearly shows that reinforced mentorship is most often used to support inclusion. Organisations implement it when volunteers face additional barriers, such as mental health challenges, socio-economic difficulties, language barriers, disabilities, or geographical isolation. For many young people, reinforced mentorship is not an additional layer of support, but a prerequisite that makes participation possible.

Strong impact on well-being, integration and learning

Organisations consistently report a strong positive impact of reinforced mentorship. It is rated very highly for improving volunteer well-being, integration into the team, autonomy, conflict resolution and the overall project atmosphere. When reinforced mentorship is in place, volunteers feel safer, more connected and more confident to learn and grow.

Supporting mental health and preventing drop-out

Mental health is one of the main reasons organisations apply reinforced mentorship. Regular contact, emotional support and clear guidance help volunteers manage stress, regain confidence and remain engaged in the project. In many cases, reinforced mentorship plays a key role in preventing early drop-out and in supporting emotional stability.

A shared and practical approach

The survey shows that reinforced mentorship is rarely carried out by one person alone. It is often a shared responsibility between mentors, coordinators and, in some cases, external professionals. In addition to emotional support, organisations frequently adapt tasks, routines and daily-life arrangements to better match volunteers' needs and abilities.

From intention to structure

Effective reinforced mentorship is usually supported by simple yet clearly defined tools, such as regular well-being check-ins, individual learning plans, Youthpass reflection, and activity supervision. These tools help make reinforced mentorship intentional, consistent and sustainable within organisations.



03

**Good Practice
Examples of Reinforced
Mentorship**



"Do not be afraid to create new opportunities for people with different abilities. It can never be a minus – it can only be a plus." – Kimberly Ren

Volunteering projects are powerful tools for promoting inclusion. At the same time, they can contain subtle yet significant barriers for young people with different vulnerabilities. In a series of five online MeetUPs—interactive sessions that brought together practitioners and guest speakers with lived and professional experience in working with and representing vulnerable groups—we explored these barriers which can unintentionally lead to hidden forms of exclusion. The discussions focused on the realities faced by five different groups of young people with diverse needs: young people with reduced mobility, hearing or visual impairments, neurodiverse young people, and LGBTQ+ youth.

This chapter summarises **key needs and barriers** and **draws recommendations for creating inclusive environments and implementing reinforced mentorship**. Some of the recommendations are specific to individual groups, while others recur across several groups. The list is not exhaustive and does not claim to serve as an ultimate guide. Rather, it highlights important aspects to be aware of and reflect on, while providing practical tips for reinforced mentorship.

While needs and barriers vary across the different groups, several fundamental principles and common challenges emerge consistently across all five groups:

Individual approach. The inclusion of volunteers from vulnerable groups requires highly individualised approaches. The needs of young people, and the barriers they face, vary greatly, even within the same group. A standardised approach cannot adequately respond to individual needs. This is a core theme across all sections, recognising that needs are closely linked to a person's specific situation, degree of impairment, or identity.

Language matters. Language evolves over time, as do the terms communities use to describe themselves. It is recommended to always use person-first language (e.g. young people with a hearing impairment), which recognises that a disability is only one aspect of a person's identity, not its defining feature. Person-first language highlights capabilities and strengths and places the whole person at the centre. When in doubt, ask volunteers directly about their preferred language and how they wish to be addressed.

Addressing 'invisible' barriers. Many barriers and challenges faced by young people with diverse needs stem from assumptions, misconceptions and insufficient communication. These barriers are often subtle, unintentional or linked to 'invisibility' (such as hearing impairments, undiagnosed neurodivergence, or non-disclosed LGBTQ+ identities). We want to encourage organisations and mentors to challenge their own assumptions, reflect on potential blind spots and open a direct dialogue with volunteers.



Young People With Reduced Mobility

Supporting youth with reduced mobility is of great importance in volunteering projects. **The term reduced mobility refers to physical difficulties in movement, which may be caused by disability, injury, illness, or other conditions that affect a person's ability to navigate spaces, routines or activities.** At the same time, terms such as reduced mobility or physical disabilities can carry unintended negative connotations and may draw attention to limitations rather than abilities. Using person-first language (e.g. people with diverse abilities) helps to highlight capabilities and strengths, recognising the whole person rather than a single characteristic.

"You are a person with a disability, and the disability is just a part of you, but not all of you." – *Kimberly Ren*

1. Specific needs of young people with diverse abilities

The needs of young people with diverse abilities are highly individual and depend on their specific situations, whether they use a wheelchair, crutches, or have issues with arm or hand function. Their needs extend beyond mere physical accommodations and require a more holistic understanding of accessibility. In addition to general accessibility measures, such as ramps, wide doorways, lifts or accessible bathrooms, it is important to consider necessary adjustments to the programme and activities. These may include adaptations related to the type of activities, the time and space required, or the need for regular breaks.

2. Common barriers for young people with diverse abilities

Barriers and hidden exclusion often arise from assumptions, misconceptions and insufficient communication. Creating inclusive environments therefore requires detailed and thorough preparation. One common and frustrating barrier is the so-called 'accessibility trap', where venues claim to be accessible but in reality meet only minimum standards. For example, a venue may have a ramp at the entrance, while the main plenary room is located on another floor without a lift, or the designated accessible bathroom may be too narrow. Such a limited understanding of accessibility creates significant barriers to participation.

The timing and pace of programme activities can also pose challenges. Programme activities and discussions often require more time, particularly when a participant has an impairment that affects speech or relies on sign language interpretation. Planning a programme with insufficient time can force people to rush, creating unnecessary stress.

Communication presents another area where challenges may arise. People may unintentionally use physical commands that exclude some participants, such as 'let's stand up and come to the circle' or 'raise your hand'. In addition, offering support without being asked can feel patronising. Repeatedly asking someone whether they need help may imply an assumption that they cannot manage independently. Young people who use assistive devices daily are often highly skilled at navigating their environment and should be given space to ask for support on their own terms.

Another important communication challenge lies in recognising non-verbal cues. Be aware that certain movements (such as facial spasms or other involuntary movements) may be automatic expressions of a disability and not a reflection of the person's intent or engagement.



Young People With Reduced Mobility

3. Good practice: Recommendations for inclusion and mentoring

Creating an inclusive environment requires intentional steps, open communication and flexibility.

Tips for creating an inclusive environment

Promote accessibility in the recruitment process. Explicitly state in the call for participants that your volunteering project is open to people with diverse abilities and that accessibility has been considered. This helps lower psychological barriers to applying. Use the application form to ask direct, specific questions such as: 'Do you have any accessibility or support needs?' or 'What adjustments would you need regarding accommodation or the programme?'. Gathering information directly from the person who knows their needs best is the least intrusive and the most appropriate approach.

Secure funding for inclusion support. Additional funding can make a significant difference in preparing an inclusive environment. Apply for inclusion support funding within European programmes, even if volunteers with diverse abilities have not yet been confirmed. This ensures that the necessary resources are available when needed.

Verify accessibility. Do not rely solely on a venue's accessibility information. Visit the venue in advance to check key details such as ramps, door widths, stairs and accessible bathrooms. You can provide applicants with pictures or a video of the venue so that they can assess whether the facilities meet their specific needs.

Tips for mentoring

Empower autonomy. Communication should be open, intentional and respectful of a person's autonomy. Let volunteers know from the beginning that you are there to support them if needed. "Let participants know you are here to support them, but you don't need to ask them twenty times a day if they need help." (Kimberly Ren)

Use inclusive language. Be mindful of your language and avoid physical commands that may exclude some participants. Replace instructions such as 'let's stand up and come to the circle' or 'raise your hand' with inclusive alternatives, such as inviting everyone to 'come together', or use alternative signals, like raising a finger or tapping a shoulder. Remember to plan more time than usual for the activities. "Some people simply need more time. Fast discussions can exclude them before they even get the chance to speak." (Kalle Ristikartano).

Be courageous and flexible. Be willing to adapt your methodology as needed, for example, by changing from an oral debate to a written format, or adjusting how participants signal agreement. Focus on abilities rather than the disability. See the individual, their interests and their strengths. As Kalle Ristikartano states: "Stop thinking about what people cannot do. Think about what they can do."

Co-create adaptations. Ask participants how a workshop or an activity can be adapted to better support them. Co-create the process and make adjustments together with participants. This approach respects their expertise and often leads to the most effective and sustainable solutions.



Young People With Hearing Impairment

Hearing impairment describes a wide range of hearing experiences, including hearing loss. However, not everyone perceives this as a 'loss'. For many young people, being deaf or hard of hearing is simply part of who they are. For this reason, the terms deaf or hard-of-hearing youth are often preferred. While many organisations aim to be inclusive, the reality often falls short because the needs of deaf and hard-of-hearing young people are easily overlooked.

1. Specific needs of deaf and hard-of-hearing youth

One of the most essential needs is the proactive acknowledgement of the young person's hearing condition, as signs of hearing difficulties can easily be missed. The needs of deaf or hard-of-hearing volunteers are highly individual, but they generally centre on clear and adapted communication – such as sign language interpretation, lip-reading, or written communication – and on a supportive environment that provides emotional safety and allows young people to engage at their own pace. Inclusion means creating an environment where everyone feels welcome. Volunteers thrive when they are approached with "openness, warmth and a willingness to meet halfway" (Tomasz Olender).

2. Most common barriers for deaf and hard-of-hearing youth

The biggest challenge in creating an inclusive environment lies in the fact that a young person's hearing abilities are often 'invisible'. This invisibility means that specific needs may go unnoticed by mentors, coordinators and other volunteers.

"Deafness is invisible. Only once you start signing do people know that someone is deaf. Otherwise, it's very easy not to even notice." - Tomasz Olender

Another obstacle is the widespread assumption that hiring a sign language interpreter or providing subtitles automatically ensures inclusion. This assumption fails to recognise the need for an individual approach and for directly asking what the young person really needs. Hesitation or inaction may also stem from uncertainty or nervousness when working with deaf or hard-of-hearing volunteers, particularly when organisations are unfamiliar with alternative communication styles.

Certain behaviours may also be misinterpreted. For example, needing more time to process information may be perceived as disinterest, or withdrawing from group interactions may be assumed to be a personal choice to disengage. In reality, these behaviours are often the result of an environment that does not take into account the needs of young people. As a consequence, volunteers may struggle quietly, sometimes even pretending to follow along when they are not, because they feel uncomfortable explicitly stating their needs.



Young People With Hearing Impairment

3. Good practice: Recommendations for inclusion and mentoring

Deaf or hard-of-hearing volunteers need an environment adapted to their communication needs. This helps prevent them from missing key information due to communication barriers, feeling isolated during group activities or hesitating to participate fully.

Tips for creating an inclusive environment

Acknowledge and address invisibility. Be open about your own and your organisation's limited experience and proactively invite volunteers to help you understand their needs and involve them in creating a safe environment.

Prepare for different means of communication. Research, agree on and implement appropriate communication method(s), such as national or international sign language, lip-reading, written communication, or a combination of these. This also means securing the necessary funding in advance.

Ensure all information is accessible and plan early. Do not leave accessibility considerations until the last minute. Make sure that young people with hearing impairment receive all key information, guidelines and instructions in a clear and accessible form, using visual tools that support understanding.

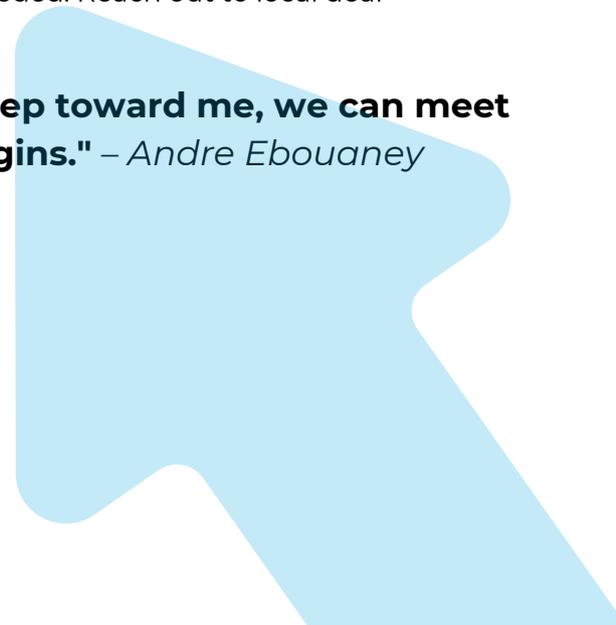
Tips for mentoring

Ask more, assume less. Proactively initiate open and direct conversations about communication preferences, specific needs and the type of support required to best empower young volunteers. Consulting a manual is useful; listening to your volunteers is even better.

Communicate simply and directly. Speak directly to the volunteer and maintain eye contact, even when an interpreter is present. Use clear, easy to understand language, short sentences and gestures. Avoid raising your voice, shouting or over-exaggerating mouth movements.

Embrace a learning mindset. Recognise that fostering inclusion is an ongoing process. Be open to feedback, learn continuously and adapt your approach as needed. Reach out to local deaf associations or seek guidance from experts.

"If I take a step toward you and you take a step toward me, we can meet in the middle. That's where real inclusion begins." – Andre Ebouaney





Young People with Visual Impairment

Visual impairment refers to a decreased ability to see, ranging from mild vision loss to blindness. Visual impairment requires various considerations for creating an inclusive environment and reinforced mentorship in volunteering projects.

1. Specific needs of young people with visual impairment

Successful inclusion begins with recognising the specific individual needs of young people with visual impairment, which can vary greatly depending on the type and degree of sight loss. **Young people with visual impairment need an environment that encourages and empowers them to express their needs and engage in direct communication about their requirements.**

Volunteers with visual impairment primarily need documents, materials and resources in accessible formats such as electronic files compatible with screen readers, large print, or Braille (a tactile system that enables reading and writing through touch).

"Accessibility is a precondition for inclusion. We cannot talk about inclusion if we are not ensuring accessibility first." - Anca David

Support structures, roles and procedures must be flexible, allowing for adjustments to accommodate limitations while maximising the volunteer's strengths and skills.

2. Most common barriers for young people with visual impairment

Volunteering projects often contain subtle yet significant barriers for young people with visual impairment. Many of these barriers stem from a lack of awareness and unconscious biases and are often unintentional. For example, one common barrier is the lack of direct communication. Staff members or other volunteers address an accompanying person instead of speaking directly to the volunteer with visual impairment.

Another obstacle is assumptions. People often make assumptions about whether, and to what extent, a young person can participate. As a result, they change or adjust programme activities without asking or checking back with the volunteer. This type of assumption can lead to over-adaptation of an activity without consulting the participant. The guiding principle here is: better to ask than to assume.

Last, but not least, there are environmental barriers, such as lack of accessibility in the accommodation, workspaces or training venues, as well as unpreparedness of the organisation, such as a lack of knowledge about visual impairment or the assumption that volunteers are prepared for the project when they arrive.

"Most of the participants, especially those with visual impairments, do not know what to expect" - Dorothea Elek

"Don't be afraid to embrace diversity. We all have something different about us. Instead of seeing it as a barrier, see it as an opportunity to learn and grow." – Loredana Dicsi



Young People With Visual Impairment

3. Good practice: Recommendations for inclusion and mentoring

Tips for creating an inclusive environment

Pre-engagement communication. Ask volunteers about their needs in advance. This allows for better preparation, ensures that the right level of support is provided and helps build a trusting relationship.

Check accessibility. Conduct an audit of the accommodation, workplace and transport between locations to identify potential challenges. Make sure that staff members have the necessary information to support the volunteer.

Ensure a budget for inclusion. Inclusion must be factored into project budgets to cover the costs of accessibility tools, training and necessary adaptations.

Awareness training for organisational members. Organisations must take proactive steps to educate their staff and teams and to inform the local community about accessibility best practices. Implement and encourage peer-to-peer support rather than relying on mentoring support alone.

Tips for mentoring

Adjust learning methods and materials. Do not rely solely on visual materials. Use storytelling, pair discussions as well as audible and tactile learning methods to support more inclusive participation in activities.

Encourage self-advocacy. Ensure that volunteers feel comfortable and confident expressing their needs and requesting support without fear. Empower them to speak up for themselves.

Co-create solutions. Inclusion requires effort from both sides. Rather than attempting to remove all obstacles in advance, try to find solutions together with the volunteer. Inclusion is a two-way street where finding solutions together is part of the growth process. This focus on collaboration is vital, as volunteers should not be treated as either 'heroes' or 'victims', but as individuals with unique strengths and needs.

"The moment you consider a person with a disability as just a person like you and me, the whole approach changes. Human connection is more valuable than any adapted material or technology." - Dorothea Elek

"Inclusion is not about removing all obstacles beforehand. It's about finding solutions together." - Loredana Dicsi



Neurodiverse Youth

Human brains develop and function in diverse ways. **Neurodiversity is a term that describes the many ways people experience and interact with the world around them, with no one way being inherently 'normal', 'better', or 'worse'.** Neurodivergent is an umbrella term that includes various neurotypes, such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), as well as other neurological or developmental conditions, including ADHD and learning disabilities (e.g. dyslexia, dyspraxia, and others).

While the term neurodivergent celebrates difference without implying deviation from a norm, the term neuroatypical can unintentionally reinforce the notion of being outside a certain 'standard'. The key is to be mindful of the impact of the language we use. **"[A] neuroatypical development [...] is one of the many possibilities. It's not like an illness, but this is one of the possibilities how the brain is developed."** (Anna Huminiak). Understanding of neurodiversity is continually evolving. Knowledge about, and terminology used for, neurodivergent or neuroatypical development may also vary across communities and cultures.

"Inclusion starts when you meet the person, not the diagnosis." – Susana Alves

1. Specific needs of neurodiverse youth

Neurodiversity is a very broad term encompassing differences in communication, learning and behaviour, which may manifest differently from person to person. One essential need is to address the specific neurodivergent characteristics of young people, while recognising their strengths, abilities and the challenges they may face.

For some neurodiverse volunteers, specific needs may include: patience and time (allowing as much time as needed to make their own decisions), clear and accessible communication (with support persons always providing clear and understandable information), presence (even in difficult moments), as well as encouragement (through positive reinforcement of key experiences that support exploration and trying out new and unfamiliar activities).

2. Common barriers for neurodiverse youth

Although awareness of neurodiversity is growing, **many neurodivergent young people still face strong pressure to assimilate** – hiding their needs out of fear of stigma, masking their behaviour and adjusting to perceived 'normality' in order to fit in.

Neurodivergent individuals may be very sensitive to their physical environment. Some may experience heightened sensitivity to bright lights, loud noises or echoing rooms, which can be distracting, distressing or even physically painful. On the other hand, under-stimulating environments can lead to feelings of isolation or disengagement. Unclear communication, rigid structures and routines, and an overall lack of flexibility can further contribute to sensory overload and create additional barriers.

Exclusion can also occur in subtle and unintentional ways, such as the tendency to speak about a neurodiverse volunteer rather than with them, especially when communication is mediated through an accompanying person. This form of subtle exclusion often involves assumptions about the volunteer's needs rather than asking them directly, quietly disempowering the young volunteer.



Neurodiverse Youth

3. Good practice: Recommendations for inclusion and mentoring

Creating an inclusive environment for neurodiverse young people requires moving from a model of assimilation, where volunteers are expected to compromise their needs and adapt in order to fit in, towards a model of amalgamation (uniting), in which diverse ways of working and learning are equally recognised, accepted and supported.

Tips for creating an inclusive environment

Build organisational readiness. Inclusion is most effective when it is proactive. Build an environment where all volunteers can thrive, regardless of whether they disclose their diagnosis. Ensure sufficient preparation time (a minimum of one month) to build trust with the volunteer, talk to relatives and prepare staff, work placements and/or the volunteering team.

Create flexible environments. Implement a design that works for a wide range of needs, as some volunteers may be undiagnosed or unaware of the support that would benefit them (universal design). This includes, among others, analysing the project environment for sensory aspects such as sound and light, preparing diverse spaces (e.g. providing quiet areas for meals while still valuing social interaction, offering flexible seating arrangements and creating a corner with fidget tools) or including additional movement breaks.

Be flexible and adjust. Be prepared to respond flexibly to individual needs and invest the time and energy to implement adjustments as they arise. At the same time, aim to give volunteers advance notice when plans are changing and clearly explain the reasons for the change.

Tips for mentoring

Prioritise the volunteer. Do not assume what the young person needs. Always communicate directly with the volunteer when discussing their needs, even if information is also gathered from a support person or the family.

"The assistant's role is not about their own needs; it's about being fully there for the volunteer, 24/7" - Eglė Gudžinskienė

Provide information in multiple formats. Use a variety of communication formats – spoken, written and visual – and communicate in clear and easy-to-understand language.

Normalise conversations about needs. Talking about individual needs should be a natural and accepted part of everyday dialogue, rather than something sensitive, awkward. This begins with asking all volunteers about their preferences regarding light, sound and ways of communication.

Introduce visual signals. Use simple tools such as visual signs or tags for communication (e.g. 'Don't interact', 'I'm working' or 'Ask if I have time to talk'). Make these available to everyone to normalise their use in order to create a more considerate environment.

Ensure positive team dynamics. Pay attention to the atmosphere within the work placement and the dynamics of the volunteering team to ensure a positive and supportive working atmosphere, especially when volunteers live and work together over extended periods.



LGBTQ+ Youth

The acronym LGBTQ+ is an umbrella term referring to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (or Questioning) identities. The '+' represents the many other identities that are not explicitly named in the acronym. In a diverse society, supporting LGBTQ+ youth, regardless of one's own personal beliefs, is fundamental to effective youth work.

1. Specific needs of LGBTQ+ youth

A core need of LGBTQ+ youth is access to safe spaces – environments in which they can be their authentic selves without feeling pressured to disclose their identity. A safe space protects them from being exposed to discrimination, criticism, harassment, or other forms of emotional or physical harm. Creating such safe spaces requires a holistic approach, including advocacy, training and family support.

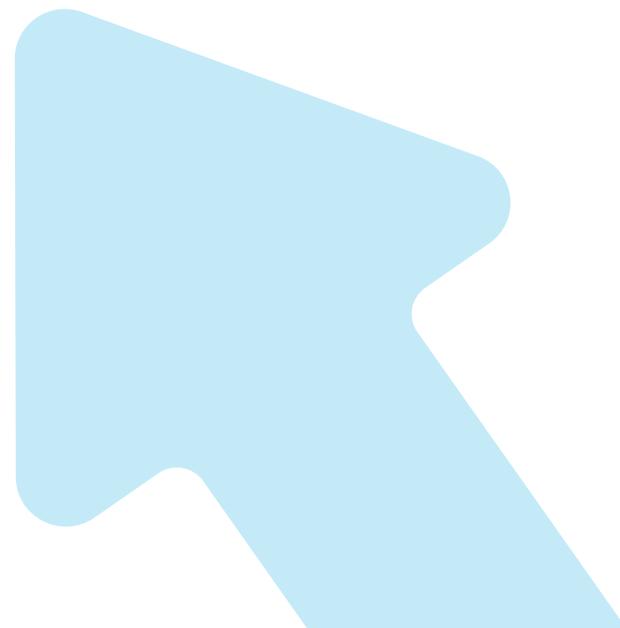
Support for LGBTQ+ youth should also take into account intersectional needs. For example, young people may also be neurodiverse, have a disability, or come from a migrant background. Effective support should therefore be tailored to individual circumstances.

2. Most common barriers for LGBTQ+ youth

Many of the barriers LGBTQ+ youth face take the form of subtle and hidden exclusion. **"Hidden exclusion is often subtle and unintentional" (Carmel Walsh).** One significant form of this is avoiding the language related to LGBTQ+ identities, often because staff members are afraid of making mistakes with names or pronouns.

Another major source of exclusion is microaggressions – subtle insults or behaviours that can easily become embedded in an organisation's culture. These may include negative generalisations or dismissive comments about the LGBTQ+ community, such as a youth worker rolling their eyes at the word 'woke' or using phrases like 'that's so gay'. These small, often unconscious actions can have a powerful impact.

Both avoidance and microaggressions can signal to LGBTQ+ youth that the space is not safe for them. Additionally, organisations with limited experience may take a reactive rather than proactive approach, waiting for incidents to occur instead of addressing potential issues in advance.





LGBTQ+ Youth

3. Good practice: recommendations for inclusion and mentoring

Inclusion efforts must go beyond good intentions and involve ongoing, critical reflection on inclusion.

Tips for creating an inclusive environment

Review organisational policies and guidelines. Check the organisation's code of conduct, residential policies, and recruitment processes to ensure they are all inclusive.

Develop tolerance and patience within the organisation. Recruit experienced staff who have already worked in LGBTQ+ communities so that they can role-model professional, respectful approaches to working with LGBTQ+ youth.

Implement continuous practical staff training. Ensure ongoing diversity training that addresses practical, real-life scenarios, such as managing safeguarding concerns for a young person who has not yet come out as LGBTQ+ at home, or responding to microaggressions.

Increase visibility and representation. Small but meaningful actions, such as displaying a Pride flag, using pronoun badges, or including pronouns in email signatures can signal to young people that your organisation is an ally and that the space is safe.

Tips for mentoring

"A core principle: Meeting young people where they are." – *Carmel Walsh and Tracy Moore*

Be aware of who is in the room. Check in with volunteers about their identities (e.g. find out about their preferred pronouns) and potential intersectional needs without forcing disclosure.

Give voice and ownership. 'Meeting young people where they are' should be a core principle of your mentoring approach. Let your work be guided by the voices and needs of the young people themselves.

Model inclusive language. Share your own pronouns as a good practice, but do not expect young people to reciprocate. The guiding principle is that "the goal is to allow young people to be their authentic selves without feeling any pressure to disclose parts of their identity they don't want to".

Acknowledge and correct mistakes. If you make a mistake regarding a young person's name or pronouns, acknowledge it and apologise for the mistake. Then move on and do it right next time.



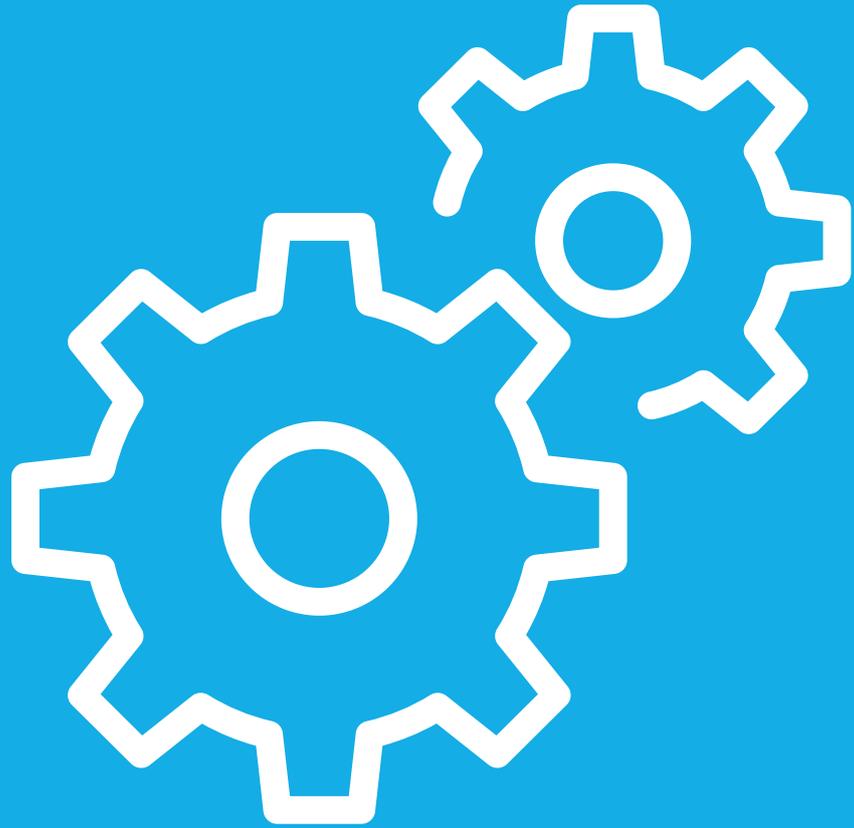
7 Key Principles For Reinforced Mentorship

Effective inclusion in volunteering projects goes beyond good intentions. It is an ongoing process built on intentional steps, open communication and flexibility. The following principles outline the key elements of reinforced mentoring:

- 1. Prioritise the volunteer.** Always place the volunteer at the centre. While you can gather information from accompanying persons, family or social workers, communication should always take place directly with the volunteer and their needs should be discussed with them.
- 2. Clarify the role of assistants.** If a volunteer has an assistant, remember the assistant's role is not about their own needs, but about being fully there for the volunteer.
- 3. Ask, don't assume (the Golden Rule).** Resist the tendency to speak about a volunteer rather than with them, or to assume their needs instead of asking directly. The key principle is simple: instead of making assumptions, just ask.
- 4. Mind your language.** Use person-first language and ask directly about a person's preferred language and how they want to be addressed.
- 5. Focus on abilities.** Stop thinking about what people cannot do. Think about what they can do. Mentoring is about transforming the volunteer's experience by focusing on relationships, clear communication, and co-creating solutions.
- 6. Co-create adaptations.** You do not have to do everything alone. Respect volunteers' knowledge of their own needs, skills and their experience in navigating everyday life. Co-create programme activities and make adaptations together with volunteers.
- 7. Remember: Inclusion is a two-way street.** Inclusion requires effort from both sides. It is not about removing every obstacle in advance, but about working together to find solutions as challenges arise.

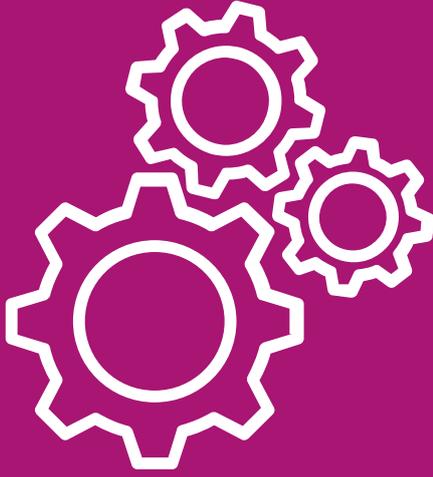
Inclusion and reinforced mentorship require a shift in approach – from focusing solely on technical adaptations to prioritising human connection and open dialogue. This means recognising individuals' unique abilities and strengths and designing environments, structures and systems that respond to a wide range of needs (universal design).

"The moment you consider a person with a disability as just a person like you and me, the whole approach changes. Human connection is more valuable than any adapted material or technology." - Dorothea Elek



04

Implementing Reinforced Mentorship



As outlined earlier, **reinforced mentorship is an enhanced form of guidance and support offered to young people who face barriers that can make participation more difficult.** Some volunteers may need more time, a more structured approach or additional emotional reassurance. Others may need support in understanding tasks, navigating daily routines or feeling safe in a new environment.

Reinforced mentorship means providing the extra attention and care needed so that volunteers can participate fully, learn effectively and grow at their own pace.

Reinforced mentorship is not about doing things instead of the volunteer, but about staying close enough to guide them step by step until they feel more confident and independent.

The following sections outline **practical suggestions on how your organisation can structure reinforced mentorship before, during and after the activity.** It is important to remember that this is a shared responsibility and does not rest solely with the mentor.



Before The Project

Step 1: Understand the volunteer

Before the activity starts, take time to get to know the volunteer. Ask simple, open questions about what they feel comfortable with and what they find challenging. Use person-first language (e.g. young person with diverse abilities) to recognise that a disability is only one aspect of a person's identity, not the whole of who they are. Some young people may not fully understand or be able to articulate their own needs, so speak slowly, use clear and easy-to-understand language, and invite them to share their thoughts whenever they feel ready. Additionally, you may wish to consult with the sending or support organisation to gain a better understanding of the volunteer's background.

Step 2: Plan the right level of support

Whenever possible, co-create the personalised support plan with the volunteer, respecting their expertise in navigating their own daily life. The support plan may include:

- the type of support the volunteer needs for managing daily tasks,
- how the mentor will monitor well-being,
- what situations may require additional attention or calm explanations,
- how the volunteer prefers to communicate (e.g. in person, messages, short calls, visual aids),
- how often the mentor and volunteer will meet.

Try to anticipate moments that could cause discomfort or stress, such as meeting new people, learning unfamiliar tasks, or adapting to a new environment.

Step 3: Prepare the mentor

The mentor should have sufficient time and emotional space to support the volunteer. Ensure that the mentor is able to focus on the volunteer's abilities rather than becoming overly focused on the disability.

Make sure the mentor is informed, well prepared and comfortable with providing regular guidance and support. Take advantage of the good practice examples in this booklet to help mentors respond to young people's individual needs, for example, by offering additional guidance on how to communicate, how to break tasks into smaller steps or how to offer reassurance without pressure.

Step 4: Create an accessible environment

Check whether the accommodation, workplace and commuting arrangements between locations are accessible. Review procedures and daily routines to ensure they are easy to understand and navigate. If needed, prepare:

- visual schedules,
- simplified instructions and visual signals,
- orientation tours,
- reminders for important rules,
- quiet spaces where the volunteer can rest.

Even small adjustments can make a big difference to a volunteer's sense of safety and ability to engage.

Step 5: Include reinforced mentorship in the project plan

When preparing your application for a European Solidarity Corps project, clearly describe:

- why the volunteer requires reinforced mentorship,
- what specific support will be provided,
- how often the mentor will meet with the volunteer,
- how a supportive and safe environment will be created.

This information helps the National Agency understand your approach and assess the quality of your preparation.



During The Project

Step 1: Maintain clear, gentle and regular communication

During the project, meet the volunteer more frequently than usual. These check-ins can be short, calm conversations about:

- how they are feeling,
- what is going well,
- what feels confusing,
- what support they need at that moment,
- any situations that made them feel uncomfortable.

Make sure the volunteer knows that they can contact you at any time and ask questions, even small ones.

Step 2: Assist and guide volunteers step by step

Some volunteers, especially those with cognitive or mental impairments, may benefit from having tasks broken down into simple, manageable steps. Demonstrate an activity or task slowly, repeat explanations when needed and remain patient throughout the process. Avoid creating a sense of urgency or pressure. Celebrate each completed step to help build confidence.

Be courageous and flexible enough to adapt your methodology as needed. For example, switch from an oral debate to a written format if the environment becomes overstimulating or exclusionary.

Step 3: Encourage participation at one's own pace

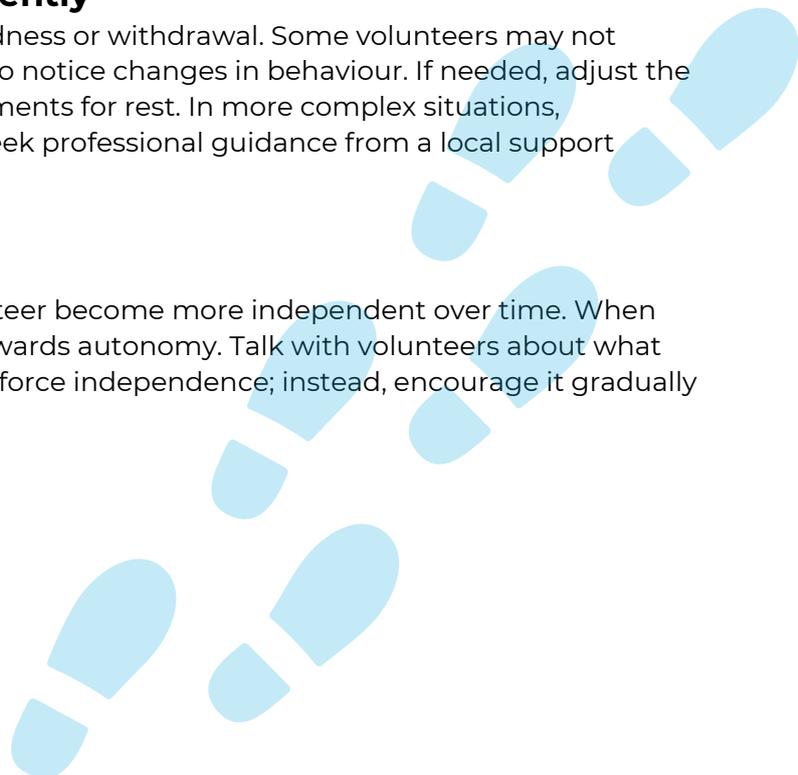
Help the volunteer integrate into the team at a pace that feels comfortable for them. Some may need more time to observe before actively participating. Create safe spaces where volunteers can be their authentic selves by normalising conversations about needs and providing visible signs of allyship, such as pronoun badges or quiet zones. Check in regularly to ensure the volunteer feels safe, included and respected. If any misunderstandings or conflicts arise, support the volunteer and work with them and the team to find constructive solutions. Whenever possible, co-create these solutions together with the volunteer.

Step 4: Monitor well-being consistently

Pay attention to signs of stress, confusion, tiredness or withdrawal. Some volunteers may not express discomfort verbally, so it is important to notice changes in behaviour. If needed, adjust the pace of activities or offer breaks and quiet moments for rest. In more complex situations, coordinate with the sending organisation or seek professional guidance from a local support organisation.

Step 5: Support autonomy gently

Reinforced mentorship aims to help the volunteer become more independent over time. When you notice progress, encourage small steps towards autonomy. Talk with volunteers about what they would like to try out on their own. Do not force independence; instead, encourage it gradually as confidence grows.





After The Project

Step 1: Reflect on the experience

At the end of the activity, invite the volunteer to reflect at their own pace. Ask simple questions about what they enjoyed, what they learned, and what they found challenging. Keep this conversation calm, supportive and positive.

Step 2: Support recognition of learning

If the volunteer wishes to receive Youthpass, help them identify the knowledge, skills and attitudes they developed. Some volunteers may need the help of the mentor to recognise concrete examples and to translate their experiences into the language of competence.

Step 3: Close the experience safely

Ending an activity can be a very emotional and sometimes confusing process. Allow the volunteer enough time to process the emotions connected to this transition. Offer clear information about what happens next and who they can stay in contact with for support.

Step 4: Ensure continued support when needed

If the volunteer needs further assistance after returning home, coordinate closely with the sending organisation. Reinforced mentorship should not end abruptly. Rather, it should taper gradually to ensure a smooth transition.





How To Apply for Reinforced Mentorship

Reinforced mentorship is not a separate activity within the European Solidarity Corps programme, but it can be included for any volunteer with fewer opportunities who requires additional guidance and support. **To help the National Agency understand your approach and the individual needs of the young person, the following guidelines outline key aspects to be considered:**

1. Describe the volunteer's needs in your application

Reinforced mentorship does not require a separate application procedure. It is part of the standard support measures available for volunteers with fewer opportunities. However, it is essential to clearly describe in your application:

- the volunteer's specific barriers,
- why standard mentoring is not sufficient,
- what additional support your organisation will provide,
- how often the mentor will meet with the volunteer,
- how the working and living environment will be adapted.

The more detailed and clearly justified your description is, the easier it will be for the National Agency to understand and assess your project plan.

2. Request inclusion support funding

Reinforced mentorship is funded through Inclusion Support for Organisations. The grant is calculated as a per-day rate per volunteer with fewer opportunities (please consult the current Programme Guide for the exact amounts). This funding can be used to cover:

- additional mentor time,
- adapted materials,
- increased staff involvement,
- accessibility adjustments,
- enhanced monitoring and follow-up.

3. Ensure mentor training

SALTO European Solidarity Corps within the initiative Mentoring under Construction, National Agencies and other SALTO Resource Centres offer optional (online) workshops, training courses and online resources to support the development of mentoring competences. These training opportunities typically cover topics such as:

- the tasks and responsibilities of a mentor,
- well-being, mental health and safeguarding,
- inclusive communication,
- supporting volunteers with fewer opportunities,
- implementing reinforced mentorship in practice.

Encourage your coordinators and mentors to participate whenever possible.

4. Document your progress and results

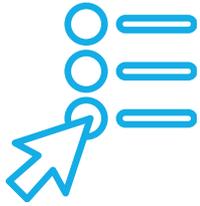
Keep records of your mentoring meetings, challenges encountered, progress made and the adjustments made along the way. This documentation helps to assess the quality of support and helps your organisation and others develop better practices. It is also valuable for reporting back to the National Agency.





05

Recommended
Resources



Recommended Resources

Generally, there is already a wide range of tools and resources available on inclusion. The links listed below offer a useful starting point for further exploration.

SALTO Resource Centres

SALTO-YOUTH European Solidarity Corps Resource Centre

Training materials, tools and research on mentoring, inclusion, and quality ESC projects.

SALTO-YOUTH Resource Centre for Inclusion and Diversity

Tools, training, practical resources to support youth workers, social workers, organisations and NAs.

Mentoring under Construction

Mentoring under Construction (MuC) Community

Mentoring under Construction (SALTO ESC)

A community of practice focused on improving the quality of mentoring within ESC

Resources on Mentoring

A Mentoring Competence Framework for the European Solidarity Corps

A reference framework outlining the key competences required for quality mentoring in ESC projects, including inclusion and well-being.

MuC Content Library | Mentoring under Construction

A platform offering mentoring-related content, including newsletters, blog posts, podcasts and micro-learning resources.

Research on Mentoring

Mapping Reinforced Mentoring, 2026. A survey conducted by Corina Pintea, Romania

Resources on Inclusion and Diversity

Unlock the power of priorities

Practical guide that helps you understand and apply Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps' four priorities so you can meaningfully integrate them into your projects

The power of priorities (linktree)

A collection of some of the resources on the priorities of Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps: [Information for all](#). European standards for making information easy to read and understand.

[Watch it](#). Web Accessibility Tool and Checklist: Implementation and Tips.

[SALTO Inclusion Resources](#) (by SALTO RC for Inclusion and Diversity in Education and Training)

A collection of guidelines, reports, policy papers and tools, for example:

[Planning of inclusive events](#) includes guidelines for organising inclusive events, addressing diverse needs across the planning, execution and follow-up stages.

[Inclusive Communication Manual](#) provides principles, advice and examples for inclusive communication and events, covering diversity in gender, sexuality, culture, language, disability and accessibility.

The Mentoring under Construction Community

Mentoring under Construction (MuC) is a community of practitioners who share a passion for mentoring and/or coaching and are interested in raising the quality of mentoring and coaching practices within and beyond the European Solidarity Corps Programme. The MuC Community brings together mentors, project managers and organisers, coordinators of volunteers, learning facilitators, authors, trainers, as well as representatives of National Agencies and SALTO Resource Centres.

The main activities, events and initiatives of Mentoring under Construction aim to:

- build a vibrant, resourceful and sustainable community of mentoring and coaching practitioners,
- develop high-quality mentoring and coaching content to support the development of mentoring competences,
- contribute to improving the overall quality of mentoring and coaching within the European Solidarity Corps.

Mentoring under Construction was founded by SALTO European Solidarity Corps with the support from the Romanian National Agency.

It is further supported by the Youth and European Solidarity Corps National Agencies of France and SALTO EuroMed. For annual events within the MuC community, SALTO ESC collaborates with different National Agencies.

[Join us on Facebook, Howspace, Instagram and more](#)



Editorial

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About SALTO European Solidarity Corps

SALTO European Solidarity Corps supports National Agencies and organisations in the volunteering field and beyond with the implementation of the European Solidarity Corps programme. The mission is to explore the potential of solidarity as a core value in European societies and to promote the use of the European Solidarity Corps as a tool for understanding and living solidarity. SALTO European Solidarity Corps coordinates networking activities, training, seminars and events that will support the quality implementation of the programme and maximise its impact. By doing this, SALTO European Solidarity Corps contributes to building a European Solidarity Corps community of organisations and Solidarity project teams.

SALTO European Solidarity Corps is hosted by OeAD. The OeAD is the national agency for the implementation of Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps in Austria. SALTO European Solidarity Corps is part of a European network of SALTO Resource Centres with the mission to improve the quality and impact of the European Solidarity Corps and Erasmus+

Find us online at [Talking Solidarity](#) & [SALTO Network](#)

Contributions

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