

EUROPEAN BVS PROJECT REPORT FORM – fall 2017

BVS project: **incredABLE**

Location: **Richhill, County Armagh, Northern Ireland**

Part One.

1) In your own words, tell us what your project does. **incredABLE** offers social and learning opportunities for people with a learning disability and/or autism. We aim to give them a good time away from family/carers/school/work and let them make their own choices about what they want to do and how they want to do it. Basically we have a lot of fun and call it work!

The website describes its aims and goals in this way: **incredABLE** is a voluntary organisation creating meaningful social, recreational, and educational opportunities for people with a learning/intellectual disability and/or autism. **incredABLE** individuals are empowered to make choices, discover talents, realise passions, and participate in a community on their own terms. **incredABLE** deliver projects and services in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust Area. We are about respect and the dignity of every person. We are about sustainability and stewardship of all our resources. We are about creativity and making things happen. We are about responsiveness through listening to all those who work with us.

In concrete terms, what this means is that **incredABLE** and its staff and volunteers do everything possible to help our 300+ participants live the lives they want to live. We meet those goals by putting our participants first in every project/service we offer.

What do you do there? I do a little bit of everything, but the short answer is I make sure people have fun, feel independent, and are safe while they're with us. I support people in whatever way they need to enjoy their time away with us. I spend most of my time with participants and minimal time in the office.

2) What prerequisites does a volunteer need for this placement? Technically, none. I think an ability to communicate and work independently would be necessary though.

In 2016 the BVSer wrote: Patience, flexibility, and love! While some volunteers could definitely find lots of hours in the office, there will always be some amount of contact with the participants, and being with them means loving them, in my opinion. Volunteers need to show participants respect, treat them as individuals, and be patient with the quirks that come along with learning disabilities and autism. Plans change all the time, both while you're away with a group and with your schedule, so flexibility is a must. If, for instance, being told on Friday morning that you will be moved from a camping trip to an ASB will frustrate you, you might have trouble here. The staff are 100% respectful of my time so if I have a weekend booked off they won't ask me to change my plans.

What would be useful, but not absolutely necessary? The ability to work outside of normal hours and take charge of your own schedule. You should really love people, and some experience with people with learning disabilities is always helpful, but if you don't have it (I didn't when I arrived), you'll still be welcomed and you'll get plenty of experience here.

What else should a BVSer know before choosing this project? **incredABLE** hours are not 9-5. You'll work evenings, weekends, and some days, but you should be ready for your days off to be Tuesday and Wednesday (or some other combination) rather than Saturday and Sunday. Also because working a weekend means so many hours, you'll have more than two days off some weeks and will be expected to find ways to fill your days off on your own. Staff will be happy to point you in a certain direction, but they expect a high level of autonomy from volunteers. Most importantly, you should know the staff will do

everything they can to make you feel accepted, important, and appreciated! You'll get invited to dinner, asked what projects you'd like to be part of, and offered a lift to anywhere you could want to go, particularly if you're sick. They treat everyone like family.

2016: BVSers should know that their job will be varied and they are unlikely to have two days that look the same (unless those two days are bowling and the cinema, which almost everyone enjoys so we do more often than other activities). It's helpful to know that everyone's learning disability or autism affect them in different ways, so some people might be withdrawn, some might repeat themselves, and some might always be looking to help. It will take time to learn everyone's habits, interests, and abilities, but that's okay. The participants are used to BVSers at this point, and they will be patient with you and also want to help you fit in. As long as you are kind, open, and respectful, you will be fine here. If you need something, just ask and you will be taken care of. This goes for advice, time alone, training, or even a lift to the grocery. The advice that helped me most was to focus on making personal connections with people, and let the rest come to you in time. The final thing I would emphasize is that while everyone we serve has a disability, they also know their age and see their peers being treated a certain way. Remember that adults still want to be treated as adults regardless of their abilities! Sometimes it is a fine line to walk, treating people as adults while still recognizing they are vulnerable, but Enable staff will help you walk that line.

What advice or preparation would be helpful? You don't need to focus too much on the Troubles before coming. It's helpful to have a basic knowledge, and to be careful how you refer to people's nationalities, but this project absolutely has no religious undertones and they keep it that way on purpose to be welcoming to all. If you really want to prepare take three days off in the middle of the country (USA) with limited transportation and see how you fare!

2016: Culturally, know that everyone has a preference about how they like to be identified, as English, Irish, or Northern Irish. They will 'give off' to you for referring to them or their country in the wrong way, but they won't actually get angry at you. They know it's a complicated issue and respect you for trying. After some time, the accents become more distinct and listening to someone talk is a generally good gauge—the accents are slightly different.

Was there an additional application process? No, only an interview with Nigel, the director.

Please describe the personnel structure; who is who? Nigel is the director of **incredABLE**, which is like a CEO or Executive Director. Sharon, Jason, Mark and Gemma are Project Coordinators, which means they are generally office staff who do all the work to make a project happen—they take referrals for participants, rent spaces, book buses, do the budget, etc. Project Workers are usually here on an as-needed basis. We have loads of project workers, and their job is to make the project run smoothly. This is the person who takes the group out for the weekend, plans the activities, dispenses medication, and manages support workers or volunteers to make sure participants have a great time. They also write reports after every weekend or activity to keep coordinators apprised of what's happening. Support Workers and Volunteers are also on an as-needed basis, except the BVS volunteer who is full-time. We support participants in their daily needs, and support the Project Worker in any way needed. Support Workers also do personal care, but volunteers do not.

Describe your job supervision. My immediate supervisor is Jason, who is also the volunteer coordinator for **incredABLE**. He approves holiday, does my reviews, and is there for support if I have an issue. I work across all projects, so I report to all the coordinators for the specific project I'm working. I would go to them with project-specific concerns, but would go to Jason with broader concerns (too many/too few hours, etc). I don't report to Nigel except in special circumstances, but he does check in regularly to see how I'm doing.

3) What are your working hours? How is the day/week structured? Everyone's week will be different at **incredABLE**. If you are working on office work, this takes place 9:30-5:30 Monday-Friday. Youth clubs and individual support happen in the evenings, residentials happen at weekends and sometimes mid-week,

social enterprises and living skills programmes starting in the next month will happen during the week as well, in daytime. My general schedule is 2-3 evenings a week, with either a weekend or mid-week residential.

What are the expectations about working hours, time commitment? BVSErs are expected to work an average of 40 hours, to keep track of their own hours/schedules, and to either take time off as needed or ask for work if they need more hours.

Is there a different summer schedule or summer activities at your project? In past years summer has been slow for Enable, but that hasn't been the case this year. Sometimes we do a summer scheme but it is not currently a regular project.

What amount of vacation do you get per year? Full-time volunteers get the same as full-time workers, which is 28 days.

What holidays (national or religious, etc.) are taken at your project? All bank holidays are taken off in the office, but some projects continue—it depends on the participants. Bank holidays, in case you're wondering, are the national holidays which are simply set by the banks. It's a strange system! So if you have August 28 off as a bank holiday, that's just it. It isn't a named holiday. We are also off over Christmas, Easter, the 12th of July, which is a "Protestant" holiday, and St. Patrick's Day.

4) Is there a "dress code" at your project? No. Dress for your work on the day. Office is very casual jeans are fine. Projects are also casual, ranging from jeans and a jumper to sweats and a t-shirt. It's down to your preference and knowing what you'll be doing. If I'm meeting with a funder I dress up. If I'm going paintballing, I dress down. You get the picture! Basically if you avoid wearing pajamas in the office you'll be fine.

What is the climate like; what kinds of clothing should a new BVSEr bring along to this region?

Is there anything else one should bring? NI is the land of eternal fall! If you live in the Pacific Northwest, just bring your normal clothes. For everyone else, make sure you have an assortment of sweaters and jeans/other trousers. Layers are your best friends, and umbrellas are often a joke in the rain here so if you have a waterproof jacket, bring it! Winter days very rarely get below zero, summer days rarely make it out of the 60s. But be warned, at some point 65 starts to feel hot!

5) What/how are your living arrangements? The BVSEr lives in a caravan on site, beside the **incredABLE** offices.

Did you have to find your own housing? Nope!

6) What is the smoking/no smoking policy at your project workplace? No smoking in the office, there is a smoking shed out back.

At your housing? I would imagine if a smoker comes to **incredABLE**, Nigel would ask that there be no smoking in the caravan to preserve it for future volunteers.

7) Do you do any other volunteering besides your official project? Not at the moment, although I have looked at multiple options. Because **incredABLE** is very evening and weekend-heavy it's difficult to be available for other volunteer work.

8) Is your project faith-based? No, in fact **incredABLE** make a point to not be faith-based so no one feels uncomfortable accessing our services.

Is it connected to a particular church or denomination? No.

If not, do you have other opportunities for church attendance? Yes. There are several churches in Richhill (walking distance) and many of the staff/volunteers have offered to take me to their churches when I have Sundays off.

9) What kinds of social/outside-of-work activities are available? Richhill doesn't have loads, but there is a gym and there are a few pubs there. Portadown and Armagh have lots more happening, and are each about a 10-15 minute bus ride away. Staff will be happy to hook you up with opportunities if they hear about them.

Are local adult-education courses available?

There are some options in Armagh and Portadown, and also occasionally through work.

10) What should one know about this town/area/country? Northern Ireland is a small country, brilliantly friendly, and everyone knows everyone! So people will definitely ask you if you know any American they've ever met. Don't be shocked when the man ringing up your groceries asks you where you live or the person in the shop starts up a conversation—they're just being friendly :)

It is not the norm here to travel any sort of real distance for work or social outings, so when I first arrived I thought maybe I would head to Belfast on a regular basis, but the attitude about travel sort of seeps into your mind without you realizing it, and suddenly one day the hour and fifteen minute bus ride seemed completely unreasonable. Armagh/Richhill are remote by NI standards, so don't expect to see the Belfast BVSers often (although certainly we see each other sometimes!) or expect participants to be as willing to travel as you are for a specific event/activity/experience. We are about two hours from one of the major attractions in NI, Giant's Causeway, and it is never even an option for a weekend trip. This isn't an issue, but it was something that took me by surprise.

Once you familiarize yourself with the Protestant/Catholic 'divide' in NI, you should know that out in the country the community lines are more blurred. There are fewer rigidly Catholic or Protestant towns and estates, although the locals still know where the general lines are drawn. Unlike Belfast, though, for most of the year an American wouldn't know the leanings of a neighborhood simply by driving through it. For instance, Richhill is mostly Protestant, and Armagh seems mostly Catholic. However, both towns have similar Orange Order decorations during marching season. Out here, that is also the time you are most likely to hear negativity between the two groups.

What resources do you recommend in preparation? The BVSer has always helped with the ASD living skills programme, so I would read *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime* by Mark Haddon. It is written from the point of view of an autistic teenager and is fantastic for introducing people to how autism might affect a person. Any trainings or information you need will be provided by Enable, so there is little I can think of in the way of preparation.

11) In your opinion, is this project suited for a married couple? Yes.

For an older BVSer? It should be great for an older BVSer who is young at heart. Mobility issues could present difficulties in keeping up with participants.

For a BVSer with a disability? It would depend on the disability. As long as the BVSer is able to support participants it shouldn't be an issue. You might also be able to get mostly or all office-based work, if a disability made that a better option. Enable are keen to take on volunteers and uniquely suited to understand disabilities.

12) What will always be vague or difficult about this project, in your opinion? The role of every BVSer is based on their strengths and interests, so it will always be difficult to give someone an exact picture. There is another non-BVS full-time volunteer at **incredABLE** at the minute and our schedules are wildly different, as are our responsibilities.

What do you like most about the project? The flexibility and the people.

Would you recommend this project to future BVSers? YES!!! Absolutely. This project is so adaptable and **incredABLE** is so great at truly appreciating their volunteers, playing to volunteer strengths, and making the experience a great one. The work is interesting, fun, and life-changing, so I can't imagine it being anything but a fantastic experience for future BVSers.

Part Two.

1) *What have been some of your “highs” and “lows” during the past year?*

Highs: Taking on the new summer scheme! This was unexpected, something we were asked to do at the last minute, and because of my experience Nigel actually let me coordinate it. It was only three weeks, but I was really grateful to be given the opportunity and the trust to take it and build it on my own (with support if needed!)

Lows: Because the nature of a BVS volunteer is to be here for the organization, I am rarely (but it does happen) moved from one project to another to fill a need, and sometimes that can be frustrating because I tend to put a lot of myself into projects, and I hate to miss them!

2) *What do you anticipate or expect during the upcoming 3 – 6 months?*

incredABLE is starting a new project in the next month or so, with three new youth clubs, a social enterprise, and a life skills programme. I'm excited to be part of one of the new youth clubs and to help out where I can with the social enterprise. Also we did our first ever ASD-specific youth holiday this year and it was fantastic, so I look forward to doing another one in the early months of 2018.