

Volunteer Ireland Submission to CSO on 2021 Census

Volunteer Ireland is pleased to make a submission to the Central Statistics Office's Census 2021 consultation. Volunteer Ireland is the national volunteer development agency and a support body for all local Volunteer Centres and Volunteering Information Services in Ireland. Our goal is to make sure that everyone who wants to volunteer can volunteer.

Volunteer Ireland manages the national database of volunteering opportunities, I-VOL, which allows us to track volunteering trends based on those volunteers that register with the service. However, this is just the tip of the iceberg. According to the most recent CSO data, over 1 million people in Ireland volunteer annually and with just under 2% of those coming through I-VOL and the volunteering infrastructure each year there is very little data on volunteering in Ireland as a whole.

Volunteering is at the heart of every community across Ireland and affects every member of the population either directly or indirectly. It supports a number of a number of key Government priority areas which currently include homelessness, mental health and labour activation. Current, detailed data is vital to ensuring that volunteering is accessible to all and remains at the core of Irish society.

Background

2006 Census

For the first time ever in an Irish census, a question on voluntary activity appeared in the 2006 Census. Respondents were asked if, in the four weeks previous to census night (Sunday, 23rd April, 2006), they had engaged in any of the following activities without pay:

1. *Helping or voluntary work with a social or charitable organisation*
2. *Helping or voluntary work with a religious group or church*
3. *Helping or voluntary work with a sporting organisation*
4. *Helping or voluntary work with a political or cultural organisation*
5. *Any other voluntary activity.*

Respondents were also asked to note if they had not engaged in voluntary activity.

There has been no such questions in subsequent censuses.

QNHS 2016

In terms of other available data, a module on volunteering and a pilot module on subjective well-being were included in the Quarterly National Household Survey (QNHS) in the three months from July to September 2013 (quarter 3). This included questions around whether people volunteer or not but also how volunteering affects their wellbeing.

The purpose of the user need and analysis required

According to the most recent CSO data, over 1 million people in Ireland volunteer. As highlighted above, the last data available on volunteering is from the QNHS 2013 Q3 report and prior to that the 2006 census. Since the 2006 census, the country has experienced major changes including a recession, high unemployment and immigration/emigration. Up to date data is vital to ensure that

both the volunteering infrastructure and the Government can appropriately address the challenges and opportunities in volunteering in Ireland.

There is currently a dearth of research on volunteering in Ireland. While Volunteer Ireland has undertaken small scale research in recent times, we do not have the resources to conduct research on such a large scale. Nationwide, comprehensive data will allow us to understand the areas where more research is needed to inform practice. For example, knowing whether more volunteering is formal or informal and knowing the ratio of rural to urban volunteers will allow us to direct our resources where they are most required. This type of information can also inform the work of government, particularly in areas such as homelessness and mental health – services currently heavily supported but the community and voluntary sector.

There are over 8,000 charities in Ireland, the majority of which involve volunteers and over half of which would not survive without volunteers. Their work is vital to Irish society and having hard data on volunteering in Ireland will support them to recruit volunteers effectively and continue to deliver their mission.

On a global scale, Ireland has a reputation as a generous nation with a strong culture of volunteering. However, there is no current data to back this claim up. Statistics backing up these claims will help Government promote Ireland abroad as an attractive place in which to invest and live.

International comparisons, especially in England, Scotland and Wales, indicate that levels of volunteering are decreasing. Anecdotal evidence from our network of 21 Volunteer Centres and 8 Volunteering Information Services across the country, indicate that we may be seeing a similar trend in Ireland. In the World Giving Index 2016 (published by the Charities Aid Foundation in the UK), Ireland fell from 10th to 11th place in terms of levels of volunteering, globally. A question on volunteering in the 2021 census would allow us to learn if levels of volunteering in Ireland are increasing, decreasing or staying the same. This will allow us to develop appropriate interventions and help ensure that volunteering continues to thrive.

In terms of the question to be included, it should be similar to the 2006 census with a broader time period (e.g.: 12 months) and more relevant categories of volunteering. It should be broken down to two options:

- Formal volunteering – with an organisation or community group
- Informal volunteering – volunteering as an individual unattached to any group

Also, for those that respond that they have not volunteered in the stated time period, there should be an additional question asking if they have ever volunteered before.

Need for the data at a small area level/small population groups

Local areas and regions have different challenges when it comes to volunteering e.g.: rural isolation, older populations, lack of transport options. Breaking volunteering data down to small areas and population groups will allow us to address these in a targeted and more impactful way.

Small area and population data will allow Government to invest in the local infrastructure based on the real needs of the area.

Requirement for cross tabular analysis

In Scotland, 6% of the volunteers undertake 66% of the volunteering. This represents a huge challenge particularly given a large amount of the 6% are older volunteers. However, this problem can be addressed as they have concrete data to guide their approach. In Ireland, while anecdotal research suggests our position is similar, no such hard data is available.

Cross tabular analysis across age, gender and location will allow for a targeted approach to volunteering strategies and ensure maximum impact.