

Volunteer Ireland Submission on the Draft National Volunteering Strategy

Volunteer Ireland is pleased to make this submission to the Department of Rural and Community Development as part of the consultative process developing a national volunteering strategy. Volunteer Ireland is the national volunteer development organisation and a support body for all local Volunteer Centres and Volunteering Information Services in Ireland. We advocate on behalf of volunteering in Ireland, volunteers and organisations that involve volunteers. Our vision is an Ireland where everyone who wants to volunteer can volunteer to create a better society. We work with Government and other bodies to make this vision a reality.

The development of this strategy marks a milestone for volunteering in Ireland. As the strategy notes, volunteering is critical to Irish society and to Government Departments. While Ireland has always had a strong culture of volunteering – with over 1 million people giving back each year – the way people want to volunteer is changing. This strategy provides an opportunity to strengthen volunteering in Ireland and future-proof it for years to come.

To inform our feedback on the draft strategy, Volunteer Ireland held two consultation meetings to get the insights of volunteers and volunteer managers. Volunteer Centres around the country also hosted local consultations providing rich and varied feedback.

General Feedback

The draft national volunteering strategy is a comprehensive document that sets out the current state of volunteering in Ireland, recognising the opportunities and challenges within volunteering and laying out ambitious plans for the future. We welcome the Department's understanding of volunteering and commitment to enhancing the volunteering environment. We are pleased that Volunteer Ireland and the network of Volunteer Centres have a leading role in the delivery of the strategy and feel that we are well placed to achieve the desired outcomes given adequate resources are provided.

There are several overall changes that we feel will make the strategy more robust and provide a better chance for its successful implementation.

The breadth of actions included in the strategy is positive. However, many of the actions are vague and unclear. For example, Strategic Objective 1, Action 3.1 National Survey on Volunteering raises the questions: How will that be conducted? Who is responsible for its delivery? Is it a once-off or annual survey? This is also true of the responsible bodies noted for each action. Some are listed as 'all stakeholders' so it's unclear who the lead body is, which means there is a risk that nobody will take ownership of ensuring the action is delivered. Other actions are assigned to specific bodies but without any indication of increased capacity or resources for the body to deliver the action. There are many similar issues with actions throughout the document that need much more detail. Therefore, we propose **adding more detail on actions throughout the document**. We also propose **specifying a single responsible body as the lead for each action, with others supporting if more than one stakeholder is involved**.

The timescale for delivery must be much more specific. Targets of ‘short, medium and long term’ are vague. Ideally, **targets should be set per quarter of the year for the lifetime of the plan as in the Action Plan for Jobs, e.g.: Q2 2020 and so on.** This should also be complemented by a yearly review of the targets against these specific timelines. If such granular detail is not possible then **at minimum, the targets should be altered to year 1, year 2, etc. No timescale target should be more than five years as actions that cannot be delivered within the timeframe of the strategy should not be included.**

The strategy mentions that over half of volunteering in Ireland takes place informally. According to the United Nations Volunteers’ *State of the World’s Volunteerism Report 2018: The Thread that Binds*, 70% of volunteering takes place informally. It is critical that this strategy recognises the importance of informal volunteering and finds a way to facilitate it without over formalising it. Under the definition of volunteering in 2.1, examples are given of the wide range of volunteering that takes place in Ireland. **We suggest reducing the examples to just two – formal and informal volunteering.**

We also feel that **the definition of informal volunteering needs clarity.** It should be noted that the example given of informal volunteering i.e. the jersey washer is not fitting as an example of informal volunteering as it is connected to a club/organisation, contrary to the definition of informal volunteering given. The definition of formal volunteering should recognise that ad hoc volunteering (like this jersey washer example) can happen through clubs and organisations.

It is also important that the strategy recognises the civil and political dimensions of volunteering, which would send a strong message about the importance of volunteering in not only contributing to existing structures, but also in making and shaping our society.

Finally, the implementation of this strategy will only be possible with adequate funding to support it. The strategy is an ambitious document with the potential to provide effective support and development of volunteering in Ireland. However, this cannot happen unless **Government commits suitable funding to deliver the specific actions outlined in the document.** This includes increased funding to Volunteer Ireland and the network of Volunteer Centres who are at the centre of the strategy’s delivery. We cannot commit to taking on actions that are additional to our current level of delivery, without additional resources.

Strategic Objective 1

The ambition to increase participation and diversity in volunteering is welcome. However, it cannot rely on simply raising awareness of the volunteer roles available to diverse groups. The supports and structures need to be in place to allow organisations to engage volunteers from diverse backgrounds. If awareness campaigns are effective in encouraging more people to volunteer but there are no roles for them, it will have a negative impact on volunteering.

Firstly, we propose **combining outcome 1 and 2 into one outcome** as they are both essentially the same. **More actions, as per below, can be introduced under this combined outcome to actively increase greater diversity in volunteering.**

Young people are the future of volunteering and the strategy needs greater detail on engaging them under this objective. Currently, many organisations do not have the capacity to engage volunteers under the age of 18 due to the extra measures that need to be put in place, for example around safeguarding and Garda Vetting. While safeguarding and Garda Vetting are welcome and necessary, they can cause an

unnecessary barrier so more needs to be done to support organisations to involve volunteers that are under 18. Some organisations do have the capacity to engage younger volunteers but don't do so because they are unclear as to what structures they need in place to involve them. We propose **adding a new action (under the new combined outcome 1 and 2) to “develop guidelines as to what is required by an organisation that wishes to engage volunteers under the age of 18.”** We also propose an **additional new action to “develop a toolkit and associated training on engaging under 18s in volunteering.”** This will make it simpler for organisations to engage and create roles for volunteers under 18.

Aside from the creation of roles, there is a clear need to embed volunteering within the education system. Currently, it forms part of most transition year programmes but this is not fit for purpose. Aside from the issue raised above of not enough roles being available for under 18s, most organisations do not have the capacity to take students on for one or two weeks at a time and those that do often find they cannot provide the young people with meaningful roles for such a short time period. As it stands, volunteering as part of transition year in many cases risks putting young people off volunteering. There are some existing positive programmes for transition year students to engage as volunteers and active citizens such as those run by Young Social Innovators. We believe that action projects like those offered by YSI could form part of a new transition year volunteering programme if properly supported. **We propose that an action be added to “review the volunteering element of the transition year programme.”**

It is vital that young people are introduced to volunteering at an early stage (from primary school through to leaving cert) and this could be achieved through a dedicated educational programme on volunteering through every stage in schools to make students aware of the scale of volunteering already taking place within their own communities. While it is important to get young people involved in volunteering, it's also important to make them aware at a young age of what goes on in their local communities and how volunteering is critical to Irish society. **Therefore, we suggest adding an action to “develop a dedicated educational programme on volunteering at primary and secondary level.”**

In relation to increased diversity in other areas, event volunteering is a unique way to volunteer that taps into the need for short term, once off opportunities that many people now seek. It allows people to volunteer without making a long-term commitment and also gives them the chance to be at the heart of local community events. Volunteer Ireland runs a very successful Event Volunteers programme that has engaged volunteers of all ages from over 96 nationalities along with several volunteers with additional support needs. Many Volunteer Centres also run similarly successful event volunteering programmes known as Volunteer Corps. Therefore we propose **adding an action under the first outcome as follows: “support the delivery of event volunteering projects, as they have a proven record of engaging diverse audiences and acting as an effective entry point to volunteering.”**

A final addition to Strategic Objective 1 is to address the barriers to volunteering. The challenges facing volunteers are well laid out earlier in the document but there are no corresponding outcomes and actions to address every challenge noted. We propose **adding an additional outcome that in five years' time we will see “a reduction in the barriers to volunteering.”** Actions under this outcome could include **addressing rural transport and broadband issues, supporting organisations to pay volunteer expenses and supporting organisations to create short term, flexible volunteering roles to address one of the biggest barriers to volunteering – time.**

Strategic Objective 2

The first outcome under Strategic Objective 2 is confusing i.e. in five years' time we will see the National Volunteering Strategy, when in reality the strategy itself will be created at the start of the timeframe. We suggest **changing the wording of the outcome to “the successful implementation of the National Volunteering Strategy” and that the timescale be 5 years as per the lifetime of the strategy.**

While we accept that informal volunteering is by its nature harder to capture and support, given that over half of volunteering in Ireland takes places informally, it must be reflected in the actions of this strategy. It is vital to find a way to support informal volunteering that doesn't change its very essence by adding structure and red tape. Instead we must find a way to facilitate informal volunteering in a way that enhances and supports it. We propose another action under outcome 2 as follows: **“Explore the development of a matching database for informal volunteering where people needing support can be matched with those willing to volunteer to provide it.”** Volunteer Ireland is happy to act as the lead body on this action.

We also suggest that this is the perfect place to acknowledge the rise of social movements in recent years and, in particular, young people's engagement in these, which can be seen as one very dynamic and emergent form of volunteering. We would be happy to see specific acknowledgment of the importance of informal volunteering and civic engagement within section 2, along with a further articulation of its role in Irish society and how it will be actively supported by the new strategy.

During our consultations with volunteers and organisations throughout the process of developing this strategy, two areas came back as key issues facing the sector – Garda Vetting and the cost of insurance. While the recognition of these challenges is appreciated, the actions to address them need to be much stronger. We acknowledge the positive changes to the vetting system and the advent of online vetting but the major issue of volunteers requiring vetting for each role still exists. It is a serious barrier to volunteering and particularly impacts those organisations that serve the most vulnerable in our society. We suggest changing the wording of action 3.1 as follows: **“Address current issues in the Garda Vetting process, particularly multiple vetting, and explore the possibility of a dated vetting disclosure certificate.”**

We appreciate that the Department of Rural and Community Development is not responsible for regulating the insurance industry but simply raising awareness of the costs of insurance for volunteers is not enough. There needs to be a clear commitment from Government to tackling the cost of insurance which is not only crippling small organisations providing vital services, but has already forced some to close. According to a 2019 PPN survey, 47% of respondents said that their group is in danger of stopping altogether if insurance costs continue to rise. We suggest changing the wording as follows in action 4.1: – **“Commit to reducing the prohibitive cost of insurance for organisations that involve volunteers.”** We also suggest that the best way to do this is by recognising and implementing the cost reduction actions which have been proposed by the Alliance for Insurance Reform.

The codes of conduct referenced in actions 5.1 and 5.2 will provide clarity to both volunteers and organisations, however, **the strategy must be clear that they will be voluntary.** This is based on the overwhelming feedback we received throughout our consultation process that the codes of conduct must not create an extra burden for volunteers and organisations. For people to sign up to a voluntary code, there must be a clear incentive. We suggest that **actions 5.1 and 5.2 detail the creation of a**

badge that organisations can place on their website and volunteers can add to their profile on I-VOL. Adoption of the code could also be a requirement to receive a grant from the bursary fund outlined in action 5.3.

Given the role of the volunteering infrastructure as central to the delivery of the strategy, we welcome outcome 6 around increased capacity. We would also suggest the addition of another action under this outcome namely to **“ensure quality of Volunteer Centre service provision through a quality standards framework.”**

Strategic Objective 3

The development of a national communications strategy led by Government is something that was repeatedly called for during our consultation processes. Volunteer Ireland currently delivers strong media outputs promoting and celebrating volunteering with audited media coverage valued at €1.5 million and circulation of 12 million in 2019, but we are limited by our resources. **If Government wants to develop an effective communications campaign, this must be backed up by funding that includes paid advertisement**, to ensure it reaches as many people as possible. An example of an effective campaign mentioned during our consultations was the Road Safety Authority’s road safety awareness campaign. It is important to note that a successful communications campaign will lead to more people wanting to volunteer, increasing the demand for volunteering roles. So hand in hand with a communications campaign, VIOs and VCs also need to be supported to ensure there is a supply of more volunteering roles and capacity to match and engage more volunteers.

We propose to add another outcome to this objective around the Government’s own recognition of the importance of volunteering. We suggest adding that **in five years' time we will see that “volunteering is recognised by government (national and local) as a critical element for community cohesion, wellbeing and provision of public services.”** The associated action should be to **“encourage all government departments to reflect volunteering, and how volunteers support their work, in department strategies.”**

Strategic Objective 4

The ambition for Ireland to be viewed as an example of international best practice in overseas volunteering is a positive one. However, we believe there should be a further commitment to building on the review of the Irish Aid Volunteering Initiative and **propose a new action 1.2 to develop a new policy on international volunteering**. This should include recognition of the importance of reciprocal volunteering between the Global South and Ireland, and a focus on ensuring child-safe international volunteering.

We welcome action 2.4 around the potential to expand the National Volunteering Database to include overseas volunteering opportunities and look forward to exploring this with our colleagues in Comhlámh. It must be noted that should this action be viable, it will require further resourcing as placing, supporting and administering volunteers on international placements will be required to implement such a change.

Strategic Objective 5

We welcome action 2.4 on governance and note that the adoption of the Charities Regulator’s new governance code will require significant training and support to organisations and their volunteer

trustees. We also note that Volunteer Centres are uniquely well placed to provide that training and support on governance because they bring a local presence, good relationships with local organisations, and trained trainers. Our experience shows that although training is important, most trustees will require a significant amount of hand-holding and support after a one-off training session, in order to become compliant with the CRA governance code. Therefore, **we propose amending action 2.4 to read “provide training and support on good governance to volunteer board members, as well as matching service to recruit new board members.”**

The Sustainable Development Goals are of clear importance to Government policy and addressing many future challenges. This strategy needs to recognise that achieving the SDGs will only be possible with the commitment and dedication of millions of volunteers across the globe. We suggest **adding another action under outcome 3 that “Government recognises that volunteering will be critical to the delivery of SDGs in Ireland and abroad.”**

It is also vital that the contribution of volunteers to achieving the SDGs is recognised and measured. This could be done through the CSO and would enable standardised reporting in line with the principles of the SDG Voluntary National review process, and would be in line with the UN Secretary General’s Plan of action to integrate volunteering into the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/73/254).

Finally, we propose **a new outcome that in five years’ time we will see “recognition of volunteer management as a profession with an educational pathway.”** Actions under this can include the **delivery of the National Volunteer Management Conference** and the **provision of post graduate qualifications in volunteer management such as the current Certificate of Volunteer Management at St. Angela’s College / NUI Galway;** along with **exploring the potential for undergraduate options.** **Action 2.6 around peer-to-peer learning opportunities could also sit under this outcome.**

Implementation and Evaluation

We welcome the establishment of a Volunteering Strategy Implementation Group and stress that **it is vital that Volunteer Ireland and Volunteer Centres are represented on the group given our importance to the delivery of the strategy.** It is also important that the strategy has buy in from all Government departments and as such **the group should be cross-departmental.**

Given that the strategy itself is quite high level, it is critical that **the implementation plan provides greater detail on the actions, baselines and targets** in the strategy. **Actions should be prioritised and given a clear timeline within the implementation plan.** This should then be reviewed on an annual basis as part of the evaluation.

Text Changes

We recommend that **the final document is fully proofed and follows NALA’s Plain English Guidelines.** Aside from this, we propose minor changes throughout the document as follows:

- **Page 8 – the volunteering timeline should include the European Year of the Volunteer in 2011 and Sligo’s time as the European Volunteering Capital in 2017 – both major milestones in volunteering.**
- **Page 10 – we suggest adding the national volunteer hours from I-VOL along with the studentvolunteer.ie hours. 467,842 volunteer hours were recorded on I-VOL in 2019.**
- **Page 19 – under section 2.5 in the second line, it should refer to people, not employees, as skilled volunteering is wider than corporate volunteering.**

- **Page 19** – provide source for statistic in section 2.5, which states that skills-based volunteering has five times the impact as non-skilled volunteering.
- **Page 26** – under section 4.2, again we suggest that the national statistics are included alongside the studentvolunteer.ie statistics. 8,650 organisations and 92,461 volunteers were registered on I-VOL at the end of 2019.
- **Page 29** – under 5.3 it's important to note that isolation is not exclusive to rural areas, it cuts across all sectors and demographics of society.
- **Page 29** – add 'time' under 5.3 as a challenge to volunteers – one of the most common reasons given for people not volunteering.
- **Page 30** – the cost of insurance listed as a challenge under section 5.5 needs to move to section 5.2 as it is primarily a challenge for VIOs.
- **Page 38** – under action 3 the responsible body should read "National Vetting Bureau."
- **Page 46** – under 7.2 in the list of high-level outcomes, the first and second bullet points are saying the same thing. We propose combining them and adding a second outcome around increased diversity in volunteering as an important indicator in measuring the success of the strategy.

Conclusion

We welcome the development of Ireland's first national volunteering strategy and the Department of Rural and Community Development's ongoing commitment to volunteering. This commitment along with a clear engagement with relevant stakeholders throughout the process has produced a comprehensive strategy with the potential to affect positive change on volunteering in Ireland. The changes we have proposed above are intended to make the strategy even more robust and accurately reflect the needs of volunteers and volunteer involving organisations alike.

We reiterate our call that for this strategy to be a success it needs to be backed with a realistic budget and a detailed implementation plan.