

Volunteer Ireland Submission to the Loneliness Taskforce

Volunteer Ireland is pleased to make a submission to the Loneliness Taskforce. Volunteer Ireland is the national volunteer development organisation and a support body for the 21 local Volunteer Centres and 8 local Volunteering Information Services across every county in Ireland. Our goal is to make sure that everyone who wants to volunteer can volunteer.

Volunteering is at the heart of every community across Ireland and affects every member of the population either directly or indirectly. It provides a wealth of benefits to both the organisations that involve volunteers and volunteers themselves. Volunteering is a positive tool in tackling loneliness in two ways – volunteers can help support people who are affected by loneliness, and volunteering is also as a route to social interaction and engagement for volunteers themselves.

Background

In terms of the proportion of the population that volunteers, Ireland is number one in Europe and number eleven in the world ([Charities Aid Foundation 2017 World Giving Index](#)). However, we face a huge challenge for volunteering in Ireland in that the cohort of volunteers is ageing with 40% of volunteers over 55 ([Quarterly National Household Survey 2013 Q1](#)); a high percentage of volunteering is undertaken by a very small percentage of individuals; and volunteer-involving organisations are struggling to keep up with the changing demand from younger volunteers for more flexible, short-term and skilled volunteering roles. At the same time older generations are living healthier and more active lives for longer. While continuing to support older volunteers, we must look at how we can engage volunteers of the next generation or we will face a volunteering crisis in the future.

Volunteering as a tool to tackle loneliness

Volunteering connects people and communities, and is an effective tool for combatting loneliness. In 2018, Volunteer Ireland conducted a survey of 1735 volunteers. The survey found that, following their volunteering experience:

- 61% of respondents felt their range of friendships had increased;
- 53% felt their participation in social gatherings had increased;
- 66% felt that their willingness to get involved in local activities had increased;

- 67% felt their sense of belonging to the community had increased; and
- Most notably, 70% felt that their “feeling of being included and *not alone*” had increased.

One of the main motivations behind individuals’ decisions to volunteer is to meet people and make new friends. These statistics show that volunteering has a very real impact on those that volunteer in terms of reducing isolation and increasing social circles.

Volunteers also deliver a range of services nationally that work to tackle loneliness. For example, rural car schemes, befriending programmes and coordination of local activities all go some way to reducing social isolation in local communities.

Barriers to volunteering

Unfortunately, many of those most at risk of isolation also encounter barriers to volunteering. Often it is people in rural areas without means of transport, people with disabilities or those in unemployment that suffer most from loneliness. It is also these groups that can find it harder to access volunteering opportunities. With limited resources, the volunteering infrastructure works to address these barriers. However, there is scope for a coordinated approach at national level to reduce the dual problem of social isolation and barriers to volunteering.

Volunteer Centres encounter people every day who are socially isolated and engage with the service in the hope of meeting people and feeling less lonely. Volunteer Centres work hard to reach out to groups who have the potential to be socially isolated such as those who may have mental health difficulties; young people with disabilities; people living in direct provision; people who are unemployed; carers, people who are about to retire, etc. However, it’s important to recognise that there are a lot of people who may be lonely and not linked in with services.

Volunteer Centres do not currently have the capacity to reach everyone. Nor do they have the resources to directly address other barriers such as lack of transport. However, the volunteering infrastructure has a key role to play in harnessing volunteering to tackle loneliness as outlined in the proposals below.

Proposals

Short term

- Recognise the value of volunteering in addressing loneliness, in the report of the Loneliness Taskforce and any communications around its work (including its website)
- Promote volunteering as an effective way of making friends and feeling less lonely (Volunteer Ireland and the network of Volunteer Centres currently do this but there needs to be a cross sectoral approach to increase impact)

Medium term

- Fund and deliver research to explore and identify what types of volunteering and conditions, foster connectedness and address loneliness
- Using research findings as a basis, develop guides and deliver training for volunteer-involving organisations, on how to maximise the opportunities for addressing loneliness through volunteering (Volunteer Ireland has a range of popular guides and would be happy to deliver a funded project like this)
- Explore the idea of social prescription – currently effective in other countries but underdeveloped in Ireland, although some pilot schemes do exist. Social prescription is a model where those who feel isolated, stressed, anxious or depressed can self-refer or be referred by their GP to a social prescription coordinator who will link them with sources of support and social activities within the community. This programme would be funded by the HSE and could be rolled out nationally. Ideally, it should work in partnership with Volunteer Centres given that they already have the community connections and knowledge that would be required for such a role.

Long term

- Develop and deliver an inter-departmental national vision and action plan for volunteering in Ireland, which recognises the role that volunteering can have in addressing loneliness, to help ensure that the challenges facing volunteering are addressed and that we sustain and grow volunteering in Ireland for future generations (Volunteer Ireland is currently working with the Department of Rural and Community Development to develop this action plan).

Case Studies

In 2017, Volunteer Ireland conducted [research](#) on the impact of volunteering on the health and well-being of volunteers. The research included a number of case studies, two of which highlight the impact volunteering has on loneliness and social activities.

Rachel, 17

Rachel began volunteering in a local nursing home following the death of her grandfather.

“I was very close to my grandad and I went through a tough time after his death. My aunt had worked at the nursing home years before and suggested that I might get some benefit from volunteering there.

I realised the most important thing for the residents was having someone to talk to. Just taking time to have a cup of tea and a chat really made a difference to their day. I knew it could get lonely for people there and taking the time to talk to them and listen to them is really important. What I didn't realise was how important it would be for me. I really enjoy volunteering there, spending time with people and listening to their stories. It has made

such a huge difference to my life – more than I could have imagined. The residents say I help them a lot but they don't realise that it's them who help me.”

Albert, 75

Albert has been volunteering for 57 years and his passion has always been helping young people. “Young people have so much energy and enthusiasm that it's impossible not to take that on yourself. It comes over you like a wave and there's a wonderful synergy between volunteers and the young people. Volunteering has given me a real zest for life. It's important that you never really retire – when you give something up, you have to have something else to do to replace it. Volunteering has allowed me to do something that I really enjoy, be at the heart of the local community and helps me to 'age successfully'.”