

Volunteer Ireland Submission to CSO on 2027 Census

Volunteer Ireland is pleased to make a submission to the Central Statistics Office's Census 2027 consultation. Volunteer Ireland is the national volunteer development organisation and a support body for the 29 local Volunteer Centres in Ireland.

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 data represents just a small fraction of all the volunteering that happens in Ireland. According to the most recent CSO data (QNHS 2013), over 1 million people in Ireland volunteer annually and with just under 12% of those coming through I-VOL and the volunteering infrastructure each year there has been very little data on volunteering in Ireland as a whole. We were very pleased to see a question on volunteering on Census 2022, and it is now imperative we are able to compare this data in five years to assess trends and future need.

It should be noted that *Inclusion of a question on volunteering as part of the 2022 Census of Population **and beyond*** is listed as a priority action in the Government's National Volunteering Strategy 2021 – 2025.

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. However, volunteering is changing – not just in Ireland but globally as part of broader trends. Increasingly, people want to volunteer in more flexible, one-off and short-term roles – a demand that volunteer involving organisations are struggling to meet. Following COVID-19, many organisations lost their volunteers and they have not returned. At the same time, the age of volunteers is increasing with organisations reporting difficulty in recruiting younger volunteers. All of these challenges present a long-term problem for a country that relies so heavily on volunteering. For these reasons, current and comparable data is vital to ensuring that we can respond appropriately, that volunteering is accessible to all, and that volunteering continues to support the delivery of vital services across the country.

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 have been no such questions in subsequent censuses.

QNHS 2013

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.

2022 Census

In 2022, a question on volunteering was included in the census. Although the results have yet to be released, this data will be hugely beneficial to all organisations that engage volunteers. The question asked was:

Do you regularly engage in helping or voluntary work in any of the following activities without pay?

1. *A social or charitable organisation*
2. *A religious group or church*
3. *A sporting organisation*
4. *A political organisation*
5. *In your community*

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. The 2022 census came two years into the COVID-19 pandemic and just before the war began in Ukraine. Society, and volunteering with it, has changed so much in recent years and will continue to evolve in advance of 2027. 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.

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. We are hopeful that data from the 2022 census 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. However, volunteering is evolving all the time. Combine this with immigration/emigration, a potential recession and demographic changes, the need for this data will be just as important in five years' time.

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 current data on volunteering in Ireland will support them to recruit volunteers effectively and continue to deliver their mission.

International comparisons, especially in England, Scotland and Wales, show that levels of volunteering are decreasing. Anecdotal evidence from our network of 29 Volunteer Centres across the country, indicate that we may be seeing a similar trend in Ireland. In the World Giving Index 2022 (published by the Charities Aid Foundation in the UK), Ireland fell to 21st place in terms of levels of volunteering, globally, having been inside the top ten in 2016. A question on volunteering in the 2027 census would show us if levels of volunteering in Ireland are increasing, decreasing or staying the same when compared with 2022. This will allow us to develop appropriate interventions and help ensure that volunteering continues to thrive.

We propose to keep the wording of the question the same in 2027 to ensure we can compare the data.

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 and 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.