



Submission on the Roadmap for Social Inclusion

We are pleased to make this submission to the Department of Social Protection on the next Roadmap for Social Inclusion.

Context

Volunteer Ireland is the national organisation that promotes, supports and advocates for volunteering in Ireland. We work with a range of stakeholders to make volunteering accessible, inclusive and of high quality. We build capacity in organisations and companies to create meaningful volunteering experiences. We celebrate volunteering and communicate its impact to Government and the wider public. We advocate for volunteering so that its value is recognised. We support the network of Volunteer Centres and work closely with them to ensure volunteering thrives at local and national level.

Volunteer Centres are at the hearts of communities across Ireland working to support, promote and celebrate volunteering. They help people who want to volunteer find suitable roles; and help organisations in need of volunteers to find suitable people to fill those roles. Volunteer Centres provide support and advice to volunteers and organisations; deliver training; process Garda vetting and run a range of other projects dedicated to facilitating and enhancing volunteering locally.

Volunteer Ireland and Volunteer Centres have extensive experience supporting social inclusion through volunteering. Volunteer Centres deliver a range of targeted projects aimed at underrepresented demographics in their localities. For example, supporting people with disabilities to volunteer alongside their carer or link worker; supporting the delivery of English language classes to migrants; and meeting with older people in person to reduce technological barriers to volunteering.

Volunteer Ireland delivers several trainings for volunteer involving organisations in how to engage a wider cohort of volunteers including creating inclusive volunteer teams, managing volunteers with additional support needs and family volunteering.

In that context, this submission will focus on volunteering as a tool for inclusion.

Volunteering as a tool for social inclusion

The current *Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020 – 2025* notes that social integration (i.e. a person's sense of "connectedness" with their community) is a factor that contribute to a person's overall sense of wellbeing or welfare.¹ Volunteering plays a key role in social inclusion and wellbeing in several ways. Without volunteering, we would see more division, lower sense of belonging in our communities, and increased isolation.²

'Loneliness and a lack of human connection' was identified as a top concern in national research commissioned by Volunteer Ireland.³ We saw evidence of the importance of volunteering for social connection during the pandemic when many volunteers spoke to us of their increased isolation, as for many, volunteering was their only social outlet.

Volunteering continues to foster social inclusion in our communities in several ways:

- Volunteering plays a significant role in social cohesion and integration by bringing people together, fostering mutual understanding and bridging the cultural divide. Our 2024 survey of volunteers also showed that 83% of respondents reported that volunteering helped them understand different cultures within the community.⁴
- Volunteers themselves experience social and personal benefits as a result of volunteering. Our 2024 survey of volunteers also showed that 90% of volunteers had an increased sense of being part of or belonging to the community as a result of volunteering, while 85% of respondents reported that volunteering improved their personal wellbeing.⁵
- In rural areas, which typically suffer from greater levels of isolation and social deprivation, volunteering has been shown to be a key social connector with volunteers reporting increased access to support networks as a result of their volunteering.⁶
- Local Volunteer Centres play a critical role supporting those most likely to experience social exclusion. For example, people with disabilities or chronic illnesses, people who are unemployed and older people often need extra support to find a suitable volunteer role and the VC is uniquely placed to support them on their journey. They also act as a social hub in the community providing training, support, advice and important services like Garda vetting.
- The services delivered by volunteers across the country are vital to growing our social capital. From critical services like Meals on Wheels to support lines like the

¹ <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/roadmap-for-social-inclusion-2020-2025-ambition-goals-commitments.pdf>

² <https://www.volunteer.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Volunteer-Ireland-Report-FINAL.pdf>

³ Irish Charity Engagement Monitor, Winter Report 2022

⁴ National Survey of Volunteers 2024, Volunteer Ireland

⁵ National Survey of Volunteers 2024, Volunteer Ireland

⁶ <https://www.volunteer.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Rural-Volunteerism-Report.pdf>

Samaritans, volunteers connect our communities in incalculable ways. Initiatives like befriending services, dementia cafes, knitting groups and community choirs, to name just a few, are all part of our rich social fabric.

- The Community Volunteers programme, funded by the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht and Local Authorities, and delivered by Volunteer Ireland and Volunteer Centres, plays a huge role in supporting social inclusion in our communities. For example, over 60% of Community Volunteers list their nationality as being other than Irish, which highlights the critical role volunteering plays in increasing integration, diversity and inclusion in Ireland. It also provides a more flexible way for people to volunteer on an ad hoc basis, making volunteering more attractive and accessible to a wider cohort of people.

Challenges in volunteering in Ireland

There is evidence that overall levels of volunteering in Ireland are decreasing. The World Giving Index measures volunteering annually in every country using the same methodology and question year on year. According to the World Giving Index, volunteering in Ireland was at 35% in 2009, peaked at 41% in 2013 and 2014, and then decreased to 29% in 2023.⁷

The 2022 census suggests that there is more work to do to ensure inclusion in volunteering. For example, according to the census 14% of people over the age of 15 volunteer *regularly* in Ireland. However, only 10% of people who report experiencing at least one long-lasting condition or difficulty to a great extent, volunteer regularly.⁸ It also shows that volunteering is higher in rural areas than urban areas, that people who are unemployed are less likely to volunteer, and that only 11% of non-Irish citizens volunteer.

Volunteering is often taken for granted, but it doesn't happen in a vacuum. It takes time and resources to recruit, retain and recognise volunteers. Organisations that engage volunteers and the volunteering infrastructure that supports them need adequate resources in order to meet these challenges and continue to engage volunteers.

For example, research into the training needs of Volunteer Managers commissioned by DRCD and conducted by Pobal identified a need to build capacity in volunteer involving organisations to address some of the key challenges facing volunteering. The report makes a number of recommendations around increased funding for, access to and awareness of training in volunteer engagement.

⁷ <https://www.cafonline.org/insights/research/world-giving-index>

⁸ <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpsr/censusofpopulation2022-summaryresults/healthdisabilitycaringandvolunteering/>

Recommendations

Embracing volunteering as a tool for social inclusion is critical. Volunteering brings a wealth of social benefits to individuals and our communities as a whole. It is uniquely accessible in a way that many other activities aren't, meaning a wide range of people can participate. In order to achieve the Government's ambition to make Ireland one of the most socially inclusive countries in Europe, we recommend the following:

1. Ensure volunteering is valued and funded by all Government departments

Volunteering is the responsibility of the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht and the majority of funding for volunteering comes from this department. While this funding is greatly appreciated, volunteering needs an all of Government approach. From Civil Defence and search and rescue to nursing homes and Tidy Towns, every single Government department relies on volunteers to some extent, to deliver its objectives. Therefore it is vital that volunteering is valued and supported by all Government departments. Each department should have a ringfenced budget to support volunteering in their focus area if we are to achieve true social inclusion. Where charities that engage volunteers are funded to deliver services on behalf of the Government, all associated budgets should include a budget line to support volunteering. This will help ensure that organisations have adequate resources to recruit, retain and support volunteers. Volunteering should be considered when developing Government strategies and policies to ensure it is adequately resourced.

2. Create additional participation targets for specific cohorts of volunteers

We note that the current *Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020 – 2025* includes a target to increase volunteer participation from 29% to 34% based on EU-SILC module statistics. In order to ensure that volunteering contributes to social inclusion, we recommend setting additional targets to increase volunteer participation among specific groups most likely to experience social exclusion e.g.: people with disabilities, people who are unemployed, low-income households and migrants. This will allow Government to have a more targeted view of whether volunteering has increased among groups that typically experience lower levels of volunteering and consider any interventions that might be needed to achieve this.

3. Fund and deliver a successor to the National Volunteering Strategy that addresses identified challenges to volunteering

One of the commitments in the current *Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020 – 2025* is to finalise and publish a National Volunteering Strategy. That strategy is coming to an end this year and it's critical that its successor focuses on addressing the challenges identified through Government-commissioned research and a public consultation

process. As the national development organisation for volunteering, we know that lack of capacity among volunteer involving organisations and lack of public awareness of volunteering are two significant challenges. The new strategy must fund capacity building for organisations as identified in Pobal's research on the training needs of volunteer managers. The strategy must also build on the work done to develop a national communications strategy by funding an external national communications campaign around volunteering.

Conclusion

We welcome this opportunity to contribute to the next Roadmap for Social Inclusion. Volunteering is a cornerstone of Irish society, contributing significantly to public wellbeing, community cohesion, and service delivery across key sectors such as health, youth, homelessness, disability, and sport. Volunteering strengthens communities by building resilience, promoting integration and social inclusion, and contributing to a sustainable future for all. To become one of the most socially inclusive countries in Europe, Government must recognise the key role of volunteering in fostering social inclusion, and that volunteering cannot be taken for granted – it requires investment in order to thrive.