

Submission to Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht's Statement of Strategy 2025 – 2028

We are pleased to make this submission in response to the consultation on the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht's next Statement of Strategy.

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.

The Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (DRCD) provide core funding to Volunteer Ireland and Volunteer Centres. This submission is

focused on volunteering specifically as DRCD is the Department with responsibility for volunteering and the National Volunteering Strategy.

The importance of volunteering

Volunteering is at the heart of every community across Ireland and affects every member of the population either directly or indirectly. It plays a critical role in strengthening communities, promoting social inclusion, and enhancing individual wellbeing. Volunteers are the backbone of many vital services, from sports clubs and environmental groups to social care initiatives and emergency responses. They also help people develop skills and social networks, which is particularly beneficial for those in unemployment and new arrivals to Ireland.

Economic value

Results from Census 2022 show that more than 700,000 people in Ireland *regularly* volunteer each year¹, which adds up to a significant economic contribution in terms of the value of hours volunteered. In addition, volunteering produces cost savings by delivering services in areas such as homelessness, disability and health that otherwise would need to be delivered by the Government. Volunteering has a real impact that contributes to our economy in several ways:

- As we experience a cost-of-living crisis, existing problems in housing and health are exacerbated. Charities and community groups that respond to these societal challenges rely on volunteers to deliver their critical services. Without the support of volunteers, these services would need to be delivered at a much greater cost by the state.
- Volunteering plays a key role in preparing the workforce of the future, with 70% of those between 16 and 24 saying they volunteer to develop skills to help their career.² Aside from skills development, volunteering also provides young people with a broader perspective and awareness of society making them more well-rounded professionals.
- Volunteering has a significant economic impact in rural areas. According to Volunteer Ireland's research into rural volunteerism, 83% said that volunteering in their area saved on public spending by relieving pressure on public services, while 74% felt that it increased funding coming into the community.³
- Volunteering is proven to increase the physical and mental health of volunteers and, by extension, their communities. Our 2024 survey of volunteers showed that 85% of volunteers reported an improvement to their wellbeing as a result of volunteering, and 95% of volunteers experienced an improvement to their mental

¹ <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpsr/censusofpopulation2022-summaryresults/healthdisabilitycaringandvolunteering/>

² Irish Charity Engagement Monitor, Winter Report 2022

³ <https://www.volunteer.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Rural-Volunteerism-Report.pdf>

health as a result of volunteering.⁴ This represents a significant cost saving to an already overstretched HSE.

Social value

Volunteering offers a wealth of benefits to individuals, communities and society. Without volunteering, we would see more division, lower sense of belonging in our communities, and increased isolation.⁵ ‘Loneliness and a lack of human connection’ was identified as a top concern in recent research commissioned by Volunteer Ireland.⁶ 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 provide social value in our communities in several ways:

- In rural areas, which typically suffer from greater levels of isolation, volunteering has been shown to be a key social connector with volunteers reporting increased access to support networks as a result of their volunteering.⁷ Delivering on the commitments in the National Volunteering Strategy will be key to addressing challenges unique to rural organisations like access to transport and quality internet.
- 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 90% of volunteers had an increased sense of being part of or belonging to the community as a result of volunteering, while 83% of respondents reported that volunteering helped them understand different cultures within the community.⁸
- Local Volunteer Centres (VCs) play a critical role supporting those with additional support needs to volunteer. People with disabilities, chronic illnesses or poor mental health 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 vital 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 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 Local Authorities, and delivered by Volunteer

⁴ National Survey of Volunteers 2024, Volunteer Ireland

⁵ <https://www.volunteer.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Volunteer-Ireland-Report-FINAL.pdf>

⁶ Irish Charity Engagement Monitor, Winter Report 2022

⁷ <https://www.volunteer.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Rural-Volunteerism-Report.pdf>

⁸ National Survey of Volunteers 2024, Volunteer Ireland

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.

Volunteering is critical to strong, sustainable communities and continued support and investment is needed to ensure volunteering continues to thrive.

Challenges facing volunteering

While Ireland has a strong culture of volunteering, it faces a number of challenges. The way people want to volunteer has changed over the last decade. Increasingly, we see people looking for more flexible opportunities, whether that's one off, ad hoc or short-term roles. This poses a challenge to organisations that involve volunteers as many are struggling to adapt to this need. Many organisations tell us that they are finding it more difficult than before to recruit the volunteers they require to deliver their organisation's strategic objectives. Volunteer involving organisations need support not just to recruit but also to retain volunteers. This involves building capacity in organisations to meet volunteers' changing needs and understand how to effectively recruit, manage and value volunteers.

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 2023.⁹

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.¹⁰ 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.

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 these challenges. The report makes a number of recommendations around increased funding for, access to and awareness of training in volunteer engagement.

⁹ <https://www.cafonline.org/insights/research/world-giving-index>

¹⁰ <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpsr/censusofpopulation2022-summaryresults/healthdisabilitycaringandvolunteering/>

Recommendations

Supporting volunteering in Ireland in light of the value of volunteering to the country and the challenges volunteering faces, is more important than ever. These challenges have informed our suggestions around the Department's new Statement of Strategy. Our recommendations focus specifically on the current Strategic Goal 3: "Support empowered, inclusive and resilient communities and a thriving volunteer culture."

Objectives

We propose keeping the current objective related to volunteering to "recognise, support and promote the value of volunteering for individuals and for society as a whole." We also propose adding a new objective to "Build capacity in volunteer involving organisations of all sizes, to engage volunteers through training, communications and a robust national volunteering database".

Actions

We propose including the following actions in the new Statement of Strategy:

- Evaluate and learn from the 2021–2025 National Volunteering Strategy.
- Develop a new National Volunteering Strategy to build on work done to date and address ongoing challenges facing volunteering.
- Develop a comprehensive implementation plan for the National Volunteering Strategy, that is robust and inclusive of all relevant stakeholders.
- Continue to fund and support Volunteer Ireland and Volunteer Centres.
- Support initiatives to increase diversity and inclusion in volunteering.
- Support capacity building in organisations that engage volunteers.
- Support the development of corporate volunteering across the public and civil services.

Conclusion

We welcome this opportunity to contribute to the development of the Department's Statement of Strategy through this submission. Volunteering contributes greatly to community life within Ireland and the economy as a whole. Our proposals for this Statement of Strategy will enable the needs of both volunteers and volunteer involving organisations to be reflected within the Department's strategic objectives and actions. We are happy to discuss or clarify any of the matters above in more detail.