

Submission to the consultation on the national migrant integration strategy

We are pleased to make this submission in response to the consultation to inform the development of a national strategy for migrant integration.

Background

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 migrant integration through volunteering. In 2019, Volunteer Ireland published a research report into [Migrant Participation in Sports Volunteering](#). The report identified that the most popular reason for migrants to volunteer in sport was as a way to get involved in the community. It also identified that many organisations need additional training and guidance to effectively engage migrant volunteers. Volunteer Ireland also delivers a number of trainings for volunteer involving organisations in this area including a bespoke masterclass on ensuring diversity in volunteer programmes and a session on engaging migrant volunteers which was piloted during National Volunteering Week earlier this year.

Volunteer Centres deliver a number of targeted integration projects in their localities such as supporting the delivery of English language classes, befriending programmes and

engaging volunteer community drivers to support migrants who are isolated in their accommodation. Together, Volunteer Ireland and Volunteer Centres deliver the Community Volunteers programme in 19 localities. The programme has been hugely popular with migrant volunteers with non-Irish nationals comprising 44% of Community Volunteers. The programme provides flexible volunteering opportunities, many of which are suitable for those with low levels of English, making it an ideal way for migrants to integrate with their local communities.

Volunteering plays a huge role in migrant integration in our communities and has potential to do even more. We are making a submission in response to the consultation on the Migrant Integration Strategy because we know that volunteering can play a key role in delivering it.

Challenges facing migrant integration and the role of volunteering in addressing them

Lack of understanding of Irish landscape / Isolation

A challenge facing many migrants when they first arrive to Ireland is having little to no understanding of how the Irish landscape works in terms of employment, housing, social benefits, education, etc. Many migrants don't have a network of local contacts or friends that they can ask basic, everyday questions. Volunteering is a unique way for migrants to immerse themselves within Irish communities and get to know people. Through volunteering, migrants can become active members of their new community, meet people and build their own local network. Volunteering alongside existing members of the community means that migrants can learn firsthand about Ireland and ask simple questions about day to day living from how to register for the local school to where the nearest doctor is based.

Migrants also face isolation and loneliness. It is difficult for anyone to meet new people and make friends in a new place. Doing so while not speaking the language, being at higher risk of unemployment, and having less access to resources, is even more challenging. Volunteering helps combat isolation and loneliness because it allows migrants to meet new people, make friends, learn about other things happening in the community, and create a sense of place and belonging. Volunteering can be a lifeline, in particular acting as an important social outlet for migrants who are not allowed to work.

Barriers in communication

While migrants arrive with varying levels of English, some have little to no English when they come to Ireland which makes integration particularly difficult.

Volunteering provides several solutions to this problem. Firstly, there are many volunteer roles suitable for those with minimal English and by taking up these roles, migrants can improve their English while volunteering. Everyday conversation is an excellent way to learn English, especially in Ireland where there are many different dialects and accents. Secondly, volunteers also have a role to play in helping migrants learn English. Both migrant

and non-migrant volunteers play a big role in delivering community-based English language classes and support. For example, Fáilte Isteach is a community project across Ireland involving volunteers welcoming migrants through conversational English classes. Thirdly, volunteers can provide translation and interpretation for migrants, although it should be noted that some such roles (for example in medical or legal settings) should only be provided by trained professionals.

Increase in racism and far right rhetoric

Unfortunately, recent years have seen a rise in racist incidents, hate speech and far right rhetoric in Ireland. While many migrants state that they feel welcome in Ireland, isolated incidents are on the increase and make the lives of many migrants difficult and, in some cases, dangerous.

One way to counter this is simply to facilitate migrants to volunteer. Through volunteering, people get to know migrants, see the role they play in the local community, and are less likely to fall into the disinformation spread by racism, hate speech and the far right. Volunteer Centres across the country are working hard to engage thousands of migrants as volunteers and find them suitable volunteer placements. On the national volunteering database I-VOL, 46% of volunteers who applied for roles on I-VOL in 2022 were non-Irish nationals. The Volunteer Centres' work in this area should be recognised, commended and supported.

A second way to counter racism, hate speech and the far right is to tell the story of the positive impact migrants have as volunteers in their communities. Earlier this year, Volunteer Ireland produced a [video](#) to celebrate National Volunteering Week, which focused on the positive effect volunteering has on newly arrived migrants to Ireland. Late last year, we were also part of a campaign with the Department of Rural and Community Development to share positive stories of integration on social media. This positive communication about migrants has great potential to counter racism and prejudice but it must be done carefully and with a duty of care to those involved.

Recommendations

Volunteering already plays a huge role in migrant integration and it's critical that this strategy recognises this vital role. Volunteering has enormous benefits for individuals and communities alike at little cost to the State. Volunteering as a tool for integration should be recognised in both policy and funding allocations.

Recommendation one: Deliver training to volunteer involving organisations

There are many migrants interested and engaged in volunteering, but it can be a challenge for organisations to involve migrant volunteers. This can be due to a variety of factors including levels of English, lack of transport, or lack of short-term volunteering roles available for migrants that may move from one county to another. At the same time, many organisations are struggling to recruit the volunteers they need, and there is potential for migrants to step in here if the organisation is better equipped to recruit and retain them.

Volunteer Ireland and Volunteer Centres have a wealth of experience delivering training to volunteer involving organisations including training on involving migrant volunteers. In order to create more opportunities for migrants to volunteer, we recommend that the migrant integration strategy includes an action for Volunteer Ireland and Volunteer Centres to develop and deliver robust training for organisations on engaging migrant volunteers, using our knowledge of good practice in volunteer management, in partnership with an organisation with expertise in migrant integration.

Recommendation two: Develop a toolkit to support organisations to engage migrants as volunteers

To compliment training and to ensure support is accessible to as many organisations as possible, we recommend that the migrant integration strategy also includes an action for Volunteer Ireland, in partnership with an organisation with expertise in migrant integration, to develop a toolkit for organisations to engage migrant volunteers. The toolkit would be in Plain English, accessible and for use by all organisations no matter their budget.

Recommendation three: Create a fund to deliver targeted migrant volunteering projects

Appendix one outlines a number of existing projects run by Volunteer Ireland and Volunteer Centres that support migrant integration through volunteering. We recommend the creation of a fund to support targeted projects like these, so that they can be rolled out in other counties and new projects can be developed based on local needs in each area. These projects would include those in which migrants themselves volunteer, as well as projects in which non-migrants volunteer to help migrants. For example, one Volunteer Centre is exploring the possibility of Integration Advice Hubs which would build a team of local volunteers to act as integration ambassadors to help newly arrived international protection applicants and displaced persons to get involved in in local community, arts, sports and environmental activities.

Recommendation four: Deliver a communications campaign focused on sharing positive stories of migrants volunteering

As noted earlier in this submission, Volunteer Ireland and Volunteer Centres have been involved in a number of successful communications campaigns sharing positive stories of migrant integration through volunteering. We believe that there is potential for a larger communications campaign sharing these stories not just to counteract negative sentiment but to show the value of integration and acceptance in our communities. We recommend that the migrant integration strategy includes a communications campaign telling the positive story of migration and volunteering.

Conclusion

This submission has outlined the many ways that volunteering supports integration. We know from experience that volunteering can play a significant role in supporting migrant integration, and we believe that volunteering has a key role to play in the Migrant Integration Strategy. We hope to play a part in delivering this work, and we are keen to be part of the working group developing the strategy.

Submitted on behalf of:

Carlow Volunteer Centre

Cavan Volunteer Centre

Cork Volunteer Centre

Donegal Volunteer Centre

Fingal Volunteer Centre

Galway Volunteer Centre

Kerry Volunteer Centre

Kildare Volunteer Centre

Kilkenny Volunteer Centre

Leitrim Volunteer Centre

Louth Volunteer Centre

Mayo Volunteer Centre

Meath Volunteer Centre

Monaghan Volunteer Centre

Offaly Volunteer Centre

Sligo Volunteer Centre

Tipperary Volunteer Centre

Waterford Volunteer Centre

Wicklow Volunteer Centre

Volunteer Ireland

Appendix one

Please find below examples of successful integration projects run by Volunteer Ireland and local Volunteer Centres across Ireland.

Community Volunteers Programme

Diversity and inclusion have been a real cornerstone of the [Community Volunteers](#) programme and was deliberately planned this way in order to take full advantage of the benefits that a diverse group of people bring. Delivered by Volunteer Ireland and Volunteer Centres, the programme is committed to communicating and upholding an ethos of openness and inclusion and with this we broaden the group of volunteers who can be called on to support the community in times of urgent need.

The diversity and inclusion aspect of the programme is particularly empowering for new arrivals to Ireland. The nature of the short-term, episodic roles of Community Volunteers, give people the opportunity to participate in volunteering within their communities and supports their integration. As this population can be moved at short notice, they can pick up volunteering again in their new community easily.

The network of Volunteer Centres also states that providing a letter of reference can be very important for some Community Volunteers. For many, this is their first piece of paperwork from an Irish institution and so the first step on the road for displaced people to getting employment and fully integrating into Irish society.

At the last count, there were 3,547 fully trained and engaged Community Volunteers. Of these 44% of Community Volunteers identify as a nationality other than Irish, with 94 nationalities represented in total. These nationalities are from all across the world including Europe; French, Dutch, Africa; Zimbabwean, Nigerian, Asia; Indian, Chinese and South America; Brazil to name just a few.

Crafting in Carlow

Carlow Volunteer Centre have arranged over 10 hands-on courses for the migrant community ranging from needlework to pottery. Participants have met new friends and learned new skills with 92% of participants stating that what they most enjoyed was being part of a volunteer project. Carlow Volunteer Centre has worked with the Tidy Towns committees to have migrants involved in clean-ups and gardening projects and have teamed up with men's sheds in Co. Carlow to set up woodwork courses and start diverse community gardens where migrants can grow their own herbs, etc. They feel that getting the migrant community involved with other groups in their community is the ideal way to integrate them and knock down any barriers and prejudices people may have.

Monaghan 'Craft & Chat'

Since February 2023 a total of 50 women have taken part in the "Craft & Chat" volunteer project run jointly by Monaghan Volunteer Centre and Women's Collective Ireland Monaghan. They meet weekly and have knitted and crocheted items to donate to range of local and national charities.

A number of the members are experienced crafters and they taught others how to knit or crochet. Google Translate and lots of practical demonstration overcome the language barrier, with help from a Ukrainian volunteer translator in the early weeks.

About 30% of the women involved are migrants from a wide range of countries. Some had no English when they joined, and the group has helped them improve their English and meet and become friendly with Irish women. Even among the Irish women, there is a great diversity, with ages from late teens up to early 80s and a mix of different religious and economic backgrounds. Some of the members, both Irish and migrants, were very socially isolated and the group has benefited them greatly. The group also introduced some of the members, both Irish and migrant, to the services of Women's Collective Ireland Monaghan. WCI has been able to support some with various issues, including homelessness.

The members are so enthusiastic that when Monaghan Volunteer Centre took a break from the project over the summer, many members continued to meet weekly in the library. They are currently producing Christmas gifts for clients of ALONE and Meals on Wheels.

Star weaving in Mayo

Mayo Volunteer Centre are participating in the [Million Stars](#) project with Mayo Women's Support Services. They work with four groups of women living under International Protection in remote locations in Mayo making the stars. Some weeks the Volunteer Centre runs a bus from one location to another so the different groups of women can meet, have a cuppa and weave the stars together. It has become a social outing for them. They also try and get as many local Irish residents as possible to attend to encourage integration and to speak English with the women. They also facilitate the star weaving in the Volunteer Centre office. The Volunteer Centre is planning an exhibition of their work in December and along with a social event.

Making Christmas decorations in Kildare

Kildare Volunteer Centre organised classes of how to make Christmas tree decorations of robins. This is a common activity that takes place in Ukraine. The classes were open and advertised to all Ukrainians, IPAS applicants and the general Kildare public. A Ukrainian volunteer hosted the class and taught people how to make the robins. 28 participants from Ireland, Ukraine and Somalia attended the classes and made 187 Robins which were

donated to a local charity to sell in the lead up to Christmas. Friendships and contacts naturally formed in the classes between the participants as they bonded over a shared activity and project. A robin and an explanation of this project was presented to President Higgins on a trip to Áras an Uachtaráin by Kildare Volunteer Centre.

Volunteer recruitment and support in Cavan

Cavan Volunteer Centre have made a targeted effort to recruit migrant volunteers in the county by running a volunteer training needs assessment and volunteering information sessions across the county. This has led to volunteers from many countries, including Botswana, Algeria, Guatemala and Ukraine, getting involved in their local community. They have taken part in charity bucket collections; a sleep out for the homeless' and acting as marshalls at Cavan Arts Culture Night. The Volunteer Centre also hosts appreciation nights and Christmas parties for volunteers giving them another opportunity to meet people and get to know each other.

Christmas cultural event in Meath

The Cultural Christmas Event was a big community integration event that was organised by Meath Volunteer Centre and supported by the SICAP team in Meath. The event offered families a fun filled Christmas experience with activities such as meeting Santa, decorating gingerbread men, reindeer food making and arts & crafts, followed by a cup of warm chocolate and some Christmas Cultural performances. The performers were from different community and voluntary organisations in Meath such as The Russian School of Language, Kells Musical Society and Kells Youth reach.

The event proved to be a huge success with 227 children and 223 adults in attendance. Of those who attended 156 were Ukrainian people living in direct provision centres. The event was supported by 26 volunteers (not including all the volunteer performers) and 80% of volunteers were those living in direct provision centres.

Volunteer information sessions in Kerry

Kerry Volunteer Centre developed and delivered 8 Volunteer Information Sessions for Ukrainians between February and May 2023. The sessions were delivered throughout Kerry and attended by 164 Ukrainians. The sessions were developed with an emphasis on engaging non-native speakers, simultaneously translation software was used to translate spoken English to text in Ukrainian whilst a Ukrainian interpreter was also engaged to facilitate questions, understanding and learning. The sessions succeeded in their aim to develop awareness and understanding by Ukrainians, resettled in Kerry, of the many real and practical benefits of Volunteering and provided a pathway for them to become active volunteers in Kerry.

The Volunteer Information Sessions promoted the wide range of supports available to Ukrainians to support their needs and facilitate their integration. Whilst each session was scheduled to last one hour, in all instances once the formal session ended conversation, peer to peer information exchange, questions and answers flowed with the session running to 1.45 to 2 hours. It was a deliberate and premeditated choice by Kerry Volunteer Centre to facilitate the ongoing flow of connections and queries as it resulted in attendees' sense of connection, belonging, supportiveness and networking. Thus, compounding attainment of the Volunteer Information Sessions aim of empowering, informing and facilitating Ukrainians to develop an informed, cultural and community based sense and understanding of volunteering in Kerry and the supports available to aid their progression and integration.

Subsequent to the Volunteer Information Sessions many Ukrainians and IPA have commenced volunteering and moreover we have heard from other stakeholders and front line services providers that there is a tremendous awareness and interest in volunteering amongst refugees and IPA re-settled and currently living in Kerry.

With 46% of all volunteer registrations to date being non-Irish nationals, Kerry VC has undoubtedly succeeded in increasing awareness of volunteering among migrants and in particular Ukrainians (representing a total of 17%) of how volunteering can contribute to their wellness, integration, employability and communities.

Ukraine response – nationwide

Volunteer Centres across the country have been supporting those fleeing Ukraine and helping them integrate into their new community since the war began. Below are some examples of this work. It is not an exhaustive list but provides a snapshot of the inspiring work being undertaken by Volunteer Centres across the country and the benefits of volunteering as a tool for integration.

Recruiting Ukrainian people as volunteers

Volunteer Centres supported Ukrainians in their local area to become volunteers so they could get involved in and feel part of their new community. Examples include:

- Ukrainian and other volunteers taking part in an interculture choir, with events coming up for Christmas.
- Ukrainian volunteers supporting various local events such as family days, Halloween festivals, agricultural shows and family festivals.
- Ukrainian volunteers supporting the local environment by taking part in tree planting initiatives and beach clean-ups.
- Ukrainians volunteering with existing charities like parkrun, Tidy Towns and Team Hope's Christmas Shoebox appeal.
- Ukrainian volunteers speaking with Irish people about Ukraine, with a view to improving Irish people's understanding of Ukrainian people (and vice versa).

- Ukrainian people volunteering as “cultural connectors” or “cultural mediators” who will be available to the community where intervention is needed or beneficial in the integration of displaced people.

In order to facilitate Ukrainian people volunteering, Volunteer Centres are also doing a lot of work directly with Ukrainian people to support them to start volunteering and in their volunteering journey. For example, Volunteer Centres are:

- Delivering volunteering information sessions for Ukrainians at the Volunteer Centre to learn about volunteering. There was significant interest from Ukrainian people in this – for example, in one county the VC saw attendance of 10–15 Ukrainian people / week.
- Delivering outreach to accommodations centres to talk to Ukrainian people about volunteering.
- Delivering 1-1 sessions with Ukrainians on how to volunteer and responding to Ukrainian “walk-ins” at the Volunteer Centre – many of whom see volunteering as way to improve English and secure employment.
- Working closely with specific hotels housing Ukrainians, supporting Ukrainians to volunteer for themselves and set up groups such as informal English-speaking clubs, crafts, yoga, pilates, etc.
- Organising volunteer expos, where local organisations can recruit volunteers from the Ukrainian community.
- Organising workshops on volunteering with young Ukrainians currently in Transition Year.
- Organising supported volunteering, where an experienced volunteer is linked with a new Ukrainian volunteer.
- Accompanying Ukrainian people on their first day volunteering, to ensure they feel supported and to help with translation if needed.
- VCs developed and delivered projects themselves, to create volunteering opportunities for Ukrainian people. For example:
 - Team Up to Clean Up – a large scale clean-up day in October.
 - Knitted Together – volunteer knitters created blankets, which were auctioned at local charity shops.
 - One Million Stars – a project in support of a local women’s refuge, where volunteers are creating stars to tie onto a large-scale installation to represent light against violence.
 - Intercultural Skills Share – additional funds secured from the ETB to fund a skills-share project where volunteers are undertaking art workshops with an ETB tutor (ceramics, jewellery making, knitting, cooking).

- VC partnering with the local Skillsnet to provide a 10-day hospitality skills course to support existing Ukrainian volunteers in their search for paid employment.

Developing infrastructure needed to support volunteering with Ukrainian people

In many cases, infrastructure was required in order to facilitate Ukrainian people volunteering. Volunteer Centres are delivering infrastructure activity in the following broad areas:

- Organisational Support – Volunteer Centres are:
 - Delivering training for organisations on community inclusion. For example, working with 20 organisations, one VC is developing meaningful ways of engaging with diverse communities including Ukrainians. After training and development of roles, there will be a volunteer expo with some volunteer roles requiring English and some not.
 - Delivering research on a case study of one particular organisation in a community that has seen its population increase by 120% as a result of arrivals from Ukraine – working with that organisation the VC is building capacity on good volunteer management practice and recruitment of Ukrainian volunteers.
 - Pulling together a network of community groups supporting Ukrainians to see how the Volunteer Centres can support on volunteer management and volunteer recruitment.
 - Support existing “friends of Ukraine” groups with regular check-ins to provide guidance on developing volunteer roles, volunteer recruitment and volunteer management; as well as to ensure no burnout, regular rotation, volunteer reward cards and appreciation for the volunteers’ hard work.
 - Delivering training on volunteer management for local organisations who are recruiting Ukrainian people as volunteers.
- Physical infrastructure – Volunteer Centres are:
 - Setting up “free shops” for Ukrainians, where people can donate items that Ukrainians can avail of – a large part of this work is focused on making it a quality and dignified shopping experience (rather than a “bin bag experience”) for Ukrainian people. This work involves everything from organising the shop and donations, to moving stock from a charity shop to a new centre for Ukrainian arrivals, to recruiting volunteers that support the work.
 - Purchasing books and flash cards required for conversational English classes, in order to make that volunteering possible.

- Purchasing laptops and noise cancelling headphones for accommodation centres so that Ukrainian people can access volunteering opportunities and related training online.
- Providing “GrandPads” – accessible, elderly-friendly technology available through a European project. The GrandPads are distributed to Ukrainian welcome ambassadors and translators, who also received software in Ukrainian, internet access for 1 year and 24-hour support.
- Relationships and connections – Volunteer Centres are:
 - Providing support to host families through a peer-to-peer coffee morning, run by the VC in partnership with other organisations.
 - Linking Ukrainian communities with local groups, e.g. a local swim group, in order to foster relationships that may lead to engagement and volunteering.
 - Making contacts with Ukrainians through existing networks e.g. Telegram.
 - Collaborating and working in partnership with local development companies delivering community development, in order to build volunteering from that.
 - Working with local sport clubs to provide busses to drive Ukrainians in rest centres to sport they want to get involved with and provide second hand gear.
 - Funnelling various offers of supports from groups and individuals to the right place.
 - Focusing on engaging teenagers by including them in activities such as yoga, swimming and wellness Wednesdays.
 - Bringing in different organisations to meet Ukrainians and link them to supporting existing local good causes. For example, Ukrainian people who are knitting were introduced to the Innocent Smoothie Big Knit in support of Age Action