



A best practice guide to flexibility in volunteering

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**Volunteer
Ireland**

Obair Dheonach Éireann

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Introduction

The volunteering scene is ever-changing, and leaders of volunteers have always had their work cut out to try and keep up. In today's world our lives are full of convenience, from on-demand television to hybrid working; most areas of our lives are full of flexibility and options. The question isn't whether volunteering can be similarly flexible, but instead about how to do it well.

Volunteer Ireland set out to explore how flexibility can be achieved and managed within volunteer programmes, while continuing to maintain best practice in volunteer management. As part of the broader context of volunteering in Ireland, the project aligned with three Actions of the National Volunteering Strategy:

Action 1: Introduce flexible volunteering options through the delivery of a time and needs match programme, including event volunteering, that will facilitate volunteering in local communities without long-term commitments.

Action 13: Support volunteer involving organisations to introduce task-based volunteering as an alternative to role-based volunteering where people can volunteer for a task as opposed to committing to a role.

Action 53: Support Volunteer Involving Organisations to create more diverse roles e.g. short-term, virtual, micro, one-off and episodic volunteering.

Combined, these three Actions cover a key theme in the National Volunteering Strategy, namely the need for *flexible* volunteering opportunities.

This publication is the output of our work on flexibility in volunteering. It is designed as a helpful resource to support leaders of volunteers in their role.



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Most of all, we are grateful to the volunteer involving organisations who contributed to the work of the Steering Group; and participated in planning, developing, and implementing new and creative pilot volunteer roles; and shared their experiences with us. Their openness and courage to experiment with new ways of involving volunteers played a central role in shaping this project. Thank you to: **Ability West, Athlone Community Radio, Barnardos, Blood Bikes East, Brothers of Charity Services Ireland – West Region Galway, Community Games, Depaul, Foróige, FoodCloud, and Victim Support at Court.**



What is flexibility in volunteering?

Flexibility in volunteering is an overarching concept used to describe certain new types of volunteering, as an alternative to traditional volunteering within volunteer involving organisations (VIOs). This can help to attract and engage volunteers whilst enhancing diversity and enriching the organisation.

Introducing flexibility is not the be-all and end-all of volunteer programmes. Some roles, for example befriending, may be more challenging to revitalise. However, our experience demonstrates that being creative not only allows you to engage new cohorts of volunteers, bringing with them new ideas and skills but also that flexibility provides more answers to the needs of your service users and helps your organisation to achieve its goals

Flexibility doesn't just mean time

Flexibility is often misunderstood as simply being about time. When we talk about flexibility in volunteering, we mean adapting to new ways of thinking, creating innovative solutions, and reimagining traditional roles. It can be about short term or once off roles, but it can also be about a different view of older roles, breaking roles up to bite sized tasks, or homing in on specific activities. It is about shaking up stale, often difficult-to-fill roles that leaders of volunteers struggle with.

To emphasise this, often the term dynamic volunteering is used instead of flexible volunteering or roles.

A key aspect of these roles is ensuring that both the volunteer and the organisation agree in advance on what flexibility means in the context of that specific role. This helps avoid misunderstandings and ensures the role or task is carried out to everyone's satisfaction.

Changing mindsets is the hardest step

We understand that it is challenging for VIOs to develop volunteer opportunities that differ from their existing, traditional roles but still serve their goals and fit within the remit and processes of the organisation. It is sometimes hard to imagine how to revitalise volunteer roles specifically designed to support vulnerable people while still ensuring best practice in safeguarding. We sometimes struggle to figure out how to introduce something completely new when in the past all volunteers in the VIO fulfilled the same role. And how do we make sure that the safety and welfare of our service users, our reputation and our goals are not compromised?

The solution is to change the way we look at the possibilities that volunteers can bring. Change is hard, but not changing can be detrimental in our world today. It is essential that leaders of volunteers change their mindset. Nevertheless, we find that this mindset change needs to happen in all areas of the organisation. Buy-in from senior leadership, staff, and existing volunteers is crucial. In order for existing volunteers to understand the importance of these new dynamic roles, it must be emphasised to them that the new roles pose no threat to their current role. Rather, flexibility in volunteering helps spread the burden and can actually improve the experience of long-standing volunteers and their roles. Without all-around support and understanding, new roles are unlikely to take root within the volunteer programme.

Terminology

Commonly used terms in flexibility in volunteering

Flexibility in volunteering is used as a collective concept for creatively developed roles and may involve some of the below categories. There can be an overlap and/or a mix of these descriptions within any one role. For example, a task-based role can be short term and virtual at the same time. The terms below are used to better define and understand the roles many organisations already have, whilst the new language aims to build greater awareness of the many facets of volunteering.

Event volunteering: offers volunteers a chance to contribute to various causes by assisting with event organisation, event guidance and event ambassadors or many other tasks in events such as local festivals and fairs. This type of volunteering can be a one-time engagement or a more regular commitment, depending on the event and the volunteer's availability.

Example: Storyteller.

Task-based volunteering: where volunteers sign up to a specific task rather than committing to a long-term role. The focus is on completing a particular objective or task, often with a clear start and end date, rather than maintaining a continuous, regular volunteer commitment.

Example: Poster designer.

Short-term volunteering: involves committing to volunteer activities for a limited time, typically ranging from a single day to several months. This type of volunteering is ideal for individuals seeking to contribute without a long-term commitment. The specific time can vary depending on the organisation and the nature of the project. It can also be a way for new volunteers to get to know the organisation and decide if they want to commit to a longer-term role. Once off, periodic, and microvolunteering are all part of short-term volunteering.

Example: Website page translator.

Virtual volunteering: volunteers complete their role off site, usually through a digital platform. It is sometimes known as online volunteering or cyber service. The emphasis in virtual volunteering is on the digital nature of it.

Example: Online forum assistant.

Remote volunteering: volunteer roles relating to other non-digital tasks that take place off site, often in the volunteer's own home, are referred to as remote volunteering.

Example of remote volunteering: Baby blanket and hat knitter.

Microvolunteering: describes a volunteer, or team of volunteers, completing small tasks that may only take a few minutes to a few hours. Microvolunteering roles are bite-sized, on-demand, no commitment actions that benefit your organisation. Benefits of these opportunities are that they are often available remotely; provide access to more diverse groups; are cost-effective and require low admin; and can build relationships with new, potential longer-term volunteers. Good microvolunteering is short, flexible, accessible and convenient.

Examples: Donating clothes or food; liking or sharing social media posts.

Once-off volunteering: involves the volunteer taking part in just one burst of an activity, such as campaigning, or an event, and the involvement is short-term. Volunteers who are new to the organisation or to the area may choose once-off volunteer roles so they can try different options before deciding whether to commit to further involvement.

Example: Website tester.

Episodic volunteering: refers to volunteering on a periodic or recurring basis, as opposed to in an ongoing capacity. It could include people who are engaged in project or task-based volunteering or people who want to have a “taster” to experience volunteering with that organisation. Some people prefer episodic volunteering as it suits their schedules better, such as students or teachers who may have more time during the summer and holidays.

Examples: Pen pal; Bucket shaker.

Family volunteering: involves more than one person from a household or extended family, volunteering together or alongside each other. Here, ‘Family’ is considered in its broadest, most inclusive sense. It has multiple benefits, including parents being able to bring their children to educate them about the importance of volunteering, while also spending quality time together. Different generations working together is fun, creates memories, and get things done more quickly. Different ages and abilities may need different roles or tasks, so family volunteering is really built on flexibility!

Example: heritage volunteering such as ticketing or gardening.

Time and needs match programme and time banking: in time and needs match volunteering, volunteers take on small scale tasks in their local community for individuals, such as putting up a shelf or picking up groceries. Time bank is similar to a bartering system, where people exchange services for credits based on the hours they volunteered, and they can use these credits to avail of services provided by others within the community.

Example: volunteer cuts the grass in a neighbour's garden for 1 hour and avails of 1 hour of a Spanish language tutoring within the community.

Informal volunteering: volunteering that is not coordinated by a volunteer involving organisation. Many of us may be involved in informal volunteering without even thinking about it. We often call it “lending a hand” or “helping out.”

Example: driving a neighbour to a hospital appointment.

There are many alternative approaches to volunteering that offer greater flexibility and, in turn, make it more accessible to a broader audience. Diverse and accessible organisations tend to make better decisions, reach more people in their communities and are more credible.



A note on informal volunteering

Informal volunteering has always been part of our society. It becomes most visible in emergency situations and usually on a community level, but its impact is very much part of the fabric of our society. Taken away we would live in a poorer, less connected and less vibrant world.

The role of informal volunteers became more visible during the Covid-19 pandemic, when people helped their communities without involvement from any formal organisations.

However, informal volunteering is everywhere, around us every day, not only during a time of emergency: from those picking up the rubbish on their laneway to dropping an elderly neighbour to their appointment, it is alive and well.

New technologies and social media have also enabled citizens to participate in local or community-based activities that aren't necessarily organised by an organisation.

There is a common stereotype of volunteering that assumes that there is an organisational background to volunteering, and that volunteering is a long-term commitment or takes place over a longer time. Often this thinking excludes the idea of non-organised, non-formalised volunteering. Short-term or once off, remote and microvolunteering have often been

dismissed. While there is an increasing understanding of the different types of volunteering, non-conforming, informal volunteering is still often overlooked but it is no less valuable.

Risks, liability and culture in the community and voluntary sector remain the biggest barriers in harnessing the good of informal volunteering. There is no denying that there are risks involved. Let's take the example of the person who offers to drop kids home after training on a regular basis without Garda vetting or safeguarding and child protection training, or the group of people who put up bunting for the village fair without adhering to any health and safety rules. This is why, no matter what type of volunteering is undertaken, it's important that people follow best practice where available and most of all, use common sense.

Informal volunteering should be celebrated and supported, but once we try to tame it, informal volunteering will stop being informal and could get bogged down in process and procedure losing its essence. It continues to contribute in its uncountable and invisible ways to enrich our society, playing a quiet but vital role in building stronger, more connected communities.

Flexibility in volunteering in Ireland and around the world

Ireland

Flexibility in volunteering is not new in Ireland or anywhere else around the world. Some flexibility was always part of volunteer programmes.

Many volunteer involving organisations in Ireland already have flexibility in their volunteer programmes. However, this flexibility must often be “earned” by either the length of service or higher-level involvement with the organisation. A good example of this is that organisations tend to be more flexible with their volunteer trustees. Arts and media organisations and event-focused community organisations tend to have more flexibility built into their practices. Also, the greater the types of roles there are in a volunteer involving organisation, the more flexibility they seem to have.

The emerging professionalisation of leaders of volunteers has tightened some volunteer management practices. Generally, this has led to many positive outcomes, however, if volunteer programmes are “over-professionalised”, their flexibility and agility can suffer.

In recent years, the focus of volunteer leadership has shifted towards the volunteers and their needs. This has brought a change in the relationship between VIOs and volunteers and more for example, short-term, remote, or task based, roles have emerged. I-VOL, the national database for volunteer opportunities, has seen an increasing number of roles advertised that are short-term, event based or offering flexibility for the volunteers in some way.

Creative roles are frequently popping up on I-VOL that can be considered non-traditional and non-regular. Potential volunteers can search volunteer opportunities on I-VOL by short-term / seasonal / once off; event ambassador roles; homebased / virtual; or “quick start” roles. There is space for more than what is available today, but organisations are demonstrating that they are listening to volunteers’ needs, using their imagination, and developing accessible and more inclusive roles. From event volunteers to online survey participants, to volunteers writing cards for residents of local nursing homes, there are many creative choices.

Support and capacity building opportunities are offered by local Volunteer Centres and Volunteer Ireland to volunteer involving organisations on all aspects of developing and managing flexibility in volunteer programmes from start to finish.

International picture

The changes in volunteering are felt around the world, from Kerry to Kenya. Flexibility in volunteering is now discussed at every level from local VIOs to national and international bodies. There is plenty of research and articles are being written all the time by volunteer development consultants to offer solutions to narrowing the gap between the needs of volunteers and the needs of VIOs. Below are some examples from countries with comparable volunteering contexts.

UN Volunteers

UN Volunteers published a report in 2020 called '**Volunteering Practices in the Twenty-First Century**', written by Chris Millora. He stated that just like the changes taking place in the world, like the climate emergency, technological advancements or migration, volunteering around the world is as diverse and ever-changing, responding to these changes. The report identifies 5 factors of volunteer involvement:

Structure	Whether volunteering is formal or informal
Site	Whether volunteering takes place on site or off site
Intensity	How regular (often long-term) or episodic (sporadic, short-term or even one-off volunteering) the volunteer's involvement is
Aspiration	Whether the motivation for volunteering is self-building (focusing on the benefits for the volunteer) or community building (altruistic, sense of obligation)
Category	What the volunteer activity aims at: mutual aid, service, campaigning participation and leisure.

These categories are not exclusive of one another, one volunteering activity could have aspects of each type (www.unv.org, 2020). The report shines a light on factors that influence volunteering in today's world – from the prevalence of individualism to the northern-bias of understanding volunteering and describing it as "global", excluding some of the cultural variations and contexts in the Global South. One thing is certainly emphasised: it is ever-changing.

EU Volunteer initiatives

European volunteering and volunteer development is no stranger to the topic of flexibility in volunteering. Even on a European level there are a myriad of projects looking at and developing solutions and tools to answer current volunteers' and VIOs' needs.

Volunteering is examined from many points of view including how its development can help both the volunteer and the VIO. Flexibility and non-traditional roles are key in these projects. These projects study volunteering and its effect on the individual, on the community and the VIOs in these communities. Excellent examples are the following Erasmus+ projects:

Family volunteering is another not new, but increasingly emerging area. The aim of the project was to assist organisations in deciding how to begin a Family Volunteering programme whilst also providing the tools required to do so.

Flexibility in volunteering also encourages more inclusive roles. **Volunteering as a Tool for Inclusion** aimed to develop and share resources to encourage volunteer involving organisations to embrace social inclusion.

IEWS (Volunteering for Inclusion and Empowerment with Sports) seeks to address the significant gap in awareness and implementation of inclusive volunteering programmes across regular (non-disability specific) sports organisations. By providing resources, raising awareness and facilitating collaboration, the IEWS project endeavours to make inclusive volunteering a sustainable and integral part of the sports community. The project seeks to break down barriers, ensuring that inclusivity becomes not only a trend but an enduring feature, contributing to a more equitable and inclusive future in the world of sports.

The above European projects build on transnational partnerships, mostly funded through the EU's Erasmus+ programme. They focus on developing volunteering, and its role in a modern society. Flexibility is one of the key elements of an accessible and inclusive volunteering space.

The tools and resources developed through these projects are based on local, community level experiences, and they are distributed throughout European countries and assist VIOs to better understand and involve volunteers fit for the 21st century.

Australia

Australia has not escaped the emerging changes either. They face challenges as described in detail in their 2022 research **Volunteering in Australia: The Organisation Perspective, Volunteering Australia**.

This report details that the most reported volunteer roles are trustee and committee roles, administrative roles, and fundraising and events roles. Australian VIOs find addressing the expectations of volunteers and engaging these volunteers in more dynamic roles to be an ongoing challenge. On top of these, advancing diversity and inclusion also poses

difficulties to the volunteer programmes. The ongoing development of technology and volunteers' expectations to volunteer virtually and remotely puts extra pressure on the VIOs to keep up. However, organisations are getting better at overcoming these challenges, and flexibility in the developed roles are on the rise in Australia. Nearly half (49%) of the researched Australian VIOs offered skill-based volunteer roles, 63% offered roles at specific events or activities that occur once or infrequently (periodic volunteering) and over a third (39%) developed short-term, project-based roles.

United States

Volunteer involving organisations in the United States, are also grappling with dwindling numbers of volunteers and heavy demand for their services. There are several initiatives ready to support organisations in upskilling by using technology or aiming at better understanding the needs of volunteers.

Many organisations offered virtual or hybrid volunteer opportunities during the pandemic. In 2023, the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey Civic Engagement and Volunteering Supplement (CEV) asked about virtual volunteering for the first time. The **U.S. Census Bureau and AmeriCorps Research** report stated that hybrid volunteering was relatively common, with 17 percent of formal volunteers reporting their service involved a mix of in-person and online activities, which is a significant move towards more flexibility within volunteer involving organisations.

A leading specialist in volunteer leadership in the USA, Tobi Johnson, recently published an article on flexibility in volunteering which highlights some key themes:



If you remain flexible, you will become resilient. If you are too rigid, you will break.

To stay resilient, it's important to maintain flexibility in your volunteer roles and be sensitive to the fact that people are stressed and overwhelmed.

(www.volunteerpro.net, 2020)

She divides volunteer involvement into four key areas:

Traditional roles – These are generally, longer-term roles of 12+ months where volunteers commit to a specific schedule or minimum number of hours per week or month. They are common in direct service organisations.

Pro-bono/On-demand roles – These highly-specialized roles often require professional training and certifications, and volunteers can contribute time through short engagements or even on a retainer and be called upon as needed. Pro-bono legal assistance is the most common of these, but human resources consulting might be another type of role in this category.
(www.volunteerpro.net, 2020)

Project-based/Skilled-based roles –

These roles are shorter in length and involve projects with a 4-12-week time span. They often engage volunteers with specialist skills that can be put to use in the short term, such as marketing or instructional design.

Event-based roles – These are generally opportunities that involve a day, weekend, or week of service. Also known as “episodic” volunteering, volunteers may serve one time or return year over year to assist with the same event such as fun runs, galas, or other fundraising events.

While Tobi Johnson's breakdown of areas has a slightly different focus, her findings are the same as ours. Flexibility is key and helps VIOs to refresh their programmes and reimagine roles to be better at attracting and engaging volunteers.

Case studies

Volunteer Ireland worked with a group of volunteer involving organisations throughout 2023 and 2024 and supported them to develop and pilot different ways to introduce more flexibility into their volunteer programmes. Making changes from their traditional roles made their volunteer programmes more inclusive, enriched them with new perspectives and filled the roles the organisation needed. We have picked three examples of organisations that successfully introduced new roles to their volunteer programme.

Rethinking old roles

Brothers of Charity Services West Region Galway

The Brothers of Charity Services West Region Galway provide a wide range of services and supports to people with intellectual disabilities and their families in Galway City and County. These include educational, day, residential, respite, community outreach, multidisciplinary and family support services.

A core volunteer role, befriending, has become increasingly challenging to fill. The Community and Volunteer Coordinator collaborated with their Digital Accessible Technology Team to create a new “Paired Gaming Volunteer” role, inspired by the interests of some young people supported by the service who were interested in playing video games.

The volunteer was to be matched with a person supported by the service with a shared interest in video games to meet regularly (online or in-person) to play. They developed a detailed role description and advertised it on I-VOL, quickly attracting applicants. Once the roles were filled, the extra applicants were invited to join a panel for once-off or periodic event roles, such as selling raffle tickets at a concert or supporting drama performances and music events.

While introducing these new roles (paired gamer and event volunteer), the organisation maintained its usual volunteer management processes: application forms, Garda vetting, selection process including informal interview and reference checks, induction and training with online modules in Safeguarding and Children First, and disability awareness workshops.

Brothers of Charity Services West Region Galway brought flexibility into their programme by adopting a new way of thinking about their roles. They created something new to involve people they haven’t reached before; they made the role more specific to the needs of the people they support, and they focused on the task and specific skills (video gaming). As a result, they connected with a cohort of people who don’t traditionally volunteer with them and now felt included. The organisation needed to make a big change, a leap of faith – and move beyond their classic befriending in this role. The new volunteers answered the needs of the organisation and the needs of the people the organisation supports. They successfully engaged video game enthusiasts who wanted to volunteer, involving a new demographic as volunteers.

Success: Making befriending roles more specific attracted better-suited volunteers. Additionally, they filled event volunteer roles that had previously been difficult to fill.

Advice: Don’t advertise roles until you are ready to onboard volunteers—ensure equipment, venue, and logistics are all in place. Be bold and brave to think outside the box!



Involving volunteers in new ways

Victim Support at Court

Victim Support at Court (V-SAC) is the only voluntary service in Ireland that specialises in court accompaniment for victims of crime, their families, and witnesses when they come to court.

V-SAC has a very successful volunteer programme supporting their nationwide network of Court Accompaniment Volunteers. However, they have never involved volunteers in other areas of their work. The manager of the service conducted a needs assessment in the organisation and encouraged colleagues to think outside the box. They decided to try a once off, task-based remote role: a poster redesign specialist to redesign their existing posters used on court notice boards around the country. They developed a detailed role description. This prompted them to adjust some of their procedures, since this role was once off and off-site meaning that the volunteer had no contact with vulnerable service users. As such their application and selection process was simplified, no Garda vetting was required, and they made the onboarding process quicker as well.

Success: The 15 eligible applications showed that there were lots of highly skilled volunteers out there who are happy to help. As the volunteer management processes were re-evaluated specifically for this role, the application process and onboarding were quick and easy. It was encouraging to see that short-term and time-bound roles attract people reasonably quickly.

Advice: Have your deadlines agreed from day one and support your once off or task-based and off-site volunteers the same way you would support core volunteers. Volunteers who bring their professional skills still need to feel connected and regular communication is important to maintain the volunteer's interest and to keep the task on schedule.

Making core roles more inclusive

Athlone Community Radio



Athlone Community Radio is a not-for-profit volunteer led radio station. Most of their programme makers are volunteers who carry out roles as producers, presenters and researchers. The radio station currently involves over 60 volunteers.

The role they developed was a “Sports reporter and researcher” for a regular spot in their radio programme schedule. Given the area of work, Athlone Community Radio always had relative flexibility in their volunteer roles, which is often found with arts and media related organisations. Dynamic volunteering is not necessarily about short term volunteering, Athlone Community Radio offered flexibility in the role and made adjustments to better suit the volunteer and that meant they could finally fit the role.

After developing a detailed role description, they advertised the role as they normally do. It was important to Athlone Community radio to ensure that the role description reflected their desire to welcome people from all walks of life and demonstrate they are ready to support volunteers based on the volunteers’ needs. The volunteer who was engaged had additional support needs, including the requirement for wheelchair accessible premises, and prospective software purchase (speech recognition software) to support them in carrying out their role. The volunteer was also mostly interested in the research part of the role. Athlone Radio Station took this as an opportunity and offered to upgrade their equipment and ensure as much accessibility as possible. They ensured that staff always gave consideration to

the volunteer’s needs. They also split the role, and the reporter part was taken up by another volunteer. They saw this approach to investment as opening doors for other volunteers with additional support needs, who are ready to share their time, skills and enthusiasm with the radio station.

Athlone Community Radio offered flexibility within the role, and made adjustments to it and to the organisation’s environment to better suit the volunteer. This resulted in finding the right volunteer to fill the role they had previously struggled to fill.

Success: Due to the applicant’s additional support needs, higher level of support and supervision was needed. However, it was well balanced with the volunteer’s enthusiasm and commitment. The radio station, committed to inclusion, approached accessibility as a natural and integral part of its work.

Advice: Advertise the role as widely as possible, and don’t be afraid to change the role slightly to make it the right match. Consider the needs of the volunteer and ensure other staff are ready to do the same too. Have a mutual agreement with the volunteer concerning what they can and cannot do. Split the role if necessary and fill them by two or more volunteers – smaller roles are easier to fill.



Conclusion

In each case the leader of volunteers made changes to just one aspect of their programme. None of them had to overhaul their entire programme and instead shifted their perspective to embrace more flexibility. These thoughtful changes allowed for new people, with new skills and enthusiasm, to join and answered real needs of the organisations. They not only took on new volunteers but made their existing volunteer programmes a better experience.

Managing dynamic roles

– challenges and tips

Managing volunteers in dynamic roles requires solid volunteer management based on best practice, just like in any other more traditional volunteer role. As always, volunteer management practices should suit the individual role and this is the same in roles that may be shorter, once off, or task-based.

Assessment and Planning

Leaders of volunteers often find it hard to carve out time to think more strategically about their volunteer programmes. It takes commitment from the whole organisation – from service delivery to decision making levels – to embrace flexibility in a volunteer programme. However, evaluating existing roles and revitalising a volunteer programme are essential from time to time. It will be worth making the effort. Here are some tips to get you started:

- Think through why you need volunteers
- Involve volunteers and staff in thinking about new ways to fill roles
- Match all roles to your organisation's and service users' needs
- Think outside the box, see what similar organisations are doing
- Split roles so that smaller tasks can be completed by more people
- Drop minimum time commitment or make it less than a year
- Be brave!

Developing dynamic roles

VIOs that participated in this project used innovative ideas to ensure the best recruitment results. While developing the role description, the VIO must think through all aspects of the role so that the selection process, induction, training and support is in place by the time volunteers are recruited. Using clear language and simplifying role descriptions help with the recruitment, especially with once off or short time roles.

Tips for role development

- The better defined and specific the need is, the better response it gets
- Use clear language
- Make roles achievable – with a start, middle and end
- Be specific on the skills needed and the time commitment required
- Clearly express the organisation's openness and commitment to inclusion, but be honest about the organisation's limits (e.g.: lift for disability access, budget for speech transcription software, etc)
- Use technology, including AI, to save time and produce better role descriptions
- Examine your most popular existing roles and see why they work
- Describe roles in a way volunteers see themselves doing it
- Use elevator pitch descriptions (simple, short and to the point)
- Network with other VIOs to collect ideas
- Ask an external person to read your role description and describe to you what they think the role looks like

You can find a sample role description at the end of this guide.

Recruitment and selection

Thinking internally as well as recruiting new people

- Before advertising the new roles externally, consider offering them to your existing volunteers. They may be interested in the new roles, and it might suit them better to take on something on a shorter term or more tailored basis than what they have been doing already. They may also share your opportunities within their networks.
- Include your dormant volunteers in the internal recruitment. Often volunteers go “inactive” when the core role doesn’t suit them anymore. However, they don’t fully resign as they would like to support the organisation. A new, perhaps more dynamic role is a perfect opportunity to re-engage these inactive volunteers. The advantages of “reactivating” or revitalising existing volunteers is that they already understand your values, organisational aims and most internal procedures.



Advertising

- Use I-VOL and contact your local Volunteer Centre for support. Partner with local community centres, libraries, and groups to reach diverse audiences.
- Advertise widely: brainstorm about specific groups you think would suit the role and reach out to those specific groups as well. Examples: if you need a photographer, reach out to a local photography club. Use a notice board at the beach and email the local swimming group to advertise your next beach clean-up.

Application

- Re-evaluate your application process and ensure it is relevant and appropriate to the role you are advertising. Not every role requires the same processes.
- Simplify your application form and make it easy to apply with shorter and online forms. A Google form or any other quick online form is easy to create and embed in your social media posts or on your website. You can ask more details from your volunteers once they have come on board.
- Respond promptly to applications. Make volunteers feel valued from the start. Limited time commitment might be what attracts people to a dynamic role, so being especially intentional and concise in your application process will demonstrate that you respect their tight schedule and the efforts they have made to make volunteering a part of their busy lives.

Diversity and inclusion

- Encourage people from diverse backgrounds by advertising on diverse platforms such as social media and other platforms of specific interest groups and communities. For example, contact a photography club when looking to recruit a volunteer photographer for your event, or advertise in a local youth group / local college to engage more young people.
- Welcome everybody and embrace a variety of skills and experiences to enrich your volunteer team.

Selection

- The introduction of dynamic and non-traditional roles is not an excuse to forget your volunteer selection process. Focus on finding the right fit without overcomplicating the process but maintain appropriate levels of screening and selection.
- Invite volunteers to informal interviews. Keep these occasions relaxed and conversational to understand their interests and skills. Consider the length and depth of the role and make sure your interview is in line with it.
- Offer taster sessions and let volunteers experience the role before committing.

Garda vetting

- Safeguard all involved. Garda vetting should be completed where prescribed by law. However, not every role needs Garda vetting. Do a risk assessment for the new roles.

Training and support

A well-thought-out onboarding and training process, followed by appropriate support, fosters an inspiring, enjoyable, and impactful volunteer experience.

Consider offering some of the below to make training and support engaging and effective:

Induction and on-boarding

- Greet new volunteers with a warm welcome! No matter how small their contribution is, they chose your organisation instead of many other things.
- Pair them with a buddy or mentor who can guide them through their first shift or project.
- Provide only the essential information about your organisation and the specific role. Make it available digitally too, tailored to the roles. This is an excellent opportunity to renew your existing induction and training package.

Training

- Use short training modules that are easy to digest. Incorporate videos, virtual tours, and hands-on activities.
- Allow volunteers to complete training at their own pace, whether online or in-person. Consider recording your induction sessions and let volunteers learn when it suits them best.
- Offer hands-on training during the first few shifts. Allow new volunteers to learn by doing. Organise support from experienced team members.

Support

- Don't forget to support your existing volunteers as well! Provide additional training when they take on new roles. This ensures everyone feels prepared to contribute.
- Set clear expectations from the very start with agreed deadlines and milestones and stay in touch throughout the process. Regular check-ins and ongoing support will make sure volunteers stay engaged and confident in their tasks.
- Don't assume that volunteers working on skills-based tasks don't need support. Even the most skilled volunteers need guidance, encouragement, and feedback. Support isn't just about task-specific skills—it's about making your volunteers feel valued and heard.
- Use technology: An online scheduling software can help volunteers easily sign up for shifts, manage their commitments, and communicate with your team.

When volunteers are well-prepared and supported, they are more likely to stay engaged and inspire others.

Recognition and completion

Create a culture of appreciation for every volunteer, no matter how short their commitment or what tasks they've completed. Celebrate all contributions!

- Don't forget about your short-term, once-off or episodic, and remote volunteers. Invite them to your annual events, even if their roles have ended before the event takes place.
- Celebrate volunteers both internally and publicly. Use social media, e-zines, and other communications to acknowledge volunteers' contributions. Be specific about the difference volunteers make. Give badges or t-shirts to reward volunteers, mention them at public events, or invite them to celebrate important milestones. The list is endless, but make sure your way of recognition is genuine and appropriate to the role.
- Schedule regular feedback sessions with your volunteers. Involve them in planning ahead to improve the programme.
- When volunteers come to the end of their roles, especially in task-based, once off and short-term roles, make sure that you let them finish up without the pressure to take on a new role. If you have done everything right, many will seek another opportunity to volunteer with you, but pressure is not a good recruitment strategy.

When you prioritise training, support and recognition for all types of volunteer roles, you will find yourself spending less time recruiting and onboarding.

Making support and appreciation regular and genuine will build lasting relationships that benefit both your volunteers and your organisation.

Sample dynamic roles to inspire ideas

Event photographer – periodic, once off, skill-based

Poster designer – once off, task based, remote

Interpreter over phone– once off, remote

Quiz coordinator – periodic

Storyteller; museum guide – event based

Recipe Bank assistant – remote

Community ambassador – short term, skill-based

Volunteer liaison – remote

Social event coordinator – periodic

Data analyst –project based

Periodic exhibition designer – periodic, task based, skill based

Podcast editor – task based

Website tester – once off

Press release, news article or website section editor – project based

Online forum assistant – remote, virtual

Website image descriptor– remote, virtual, task based

Website page translator – task based, short term

Infographic designer – skill based, short term, periodic

Resource researcher for service users – periodic

Blog/content creator– once off

Be My Eyes volunteer – microvolunteering, remote, periodic

Penguin watch – once off, remote, microvolunteering

Flower/insect counter – microvolunteering, remote, once off

Community transcription volunteer – once off, task based, remote

Liking / sharing social media – microvolunteering, remote once off or periodic

Telling a friend about one of your campaigns – microvolunteering, remote, once off or periodic

Filling out a survey – microvolunteering, remote, once off or periodic

Donating clothes/ food – microvolunteering, once off or periodic

Pen pal – microvolunteering, remote

Mentoring – microvolunteering, remote, task– based

Don't just expect people to "know" what you expect or to come forward by themselves. Ask your supporters to share your social media post, do that survey or join a once off opportunity.

Sample volunteer role / task description

There is no “one size fits all” when it comes to role or task descriptions. Use the below as a guide to develop what is best for your organisation and roles.

Your detailed role description is not necessarily the same as your recruitment message. However, the recruitment message should be based on the role description.

About volunteer role and task descriptions

Defining and managing volunteer engagement is fundamental to good practice in volunteer involving organisations.

Volunteers without role descriptions often report feeling unsupported in their work, inadequately trained and without opportunities to participate in decisions that affect them and their engagement. Written volunteer role and task descriptions allow leaders of volunteers and volunteers to document the nature of the agreed roles / tasks.

When it comes to dynamic role and task descriptions, they don't only define the role or task that needs to be performed, but also the amount of flexibility agreed around the role. The below table is a guide to help on areas you should set down before the volunteer commits to the role.

The Volunteer Charter is a two-way guide, designed to create a clear foundation of the relationship between volunteers and the organisation that involves them to clarify expectations from both sides to ensure a positive and rewarding volunteering experience for everyone involved.

Using The Volunteer Charter can be a good starting point for developing your roles and helps the organisation to think through best practice.

Use this guide to develop your volunteer role / task description:

ROLE / TASK TITLE:

What?

- List tasks in order of priority
- Be as specific as you can
- What skills are needed?

When? For how long?

- What is the required minimum and maximum time commitment? How often?
- When does it start and finish?
- How adjustable is time? Is it short term? Is it once off?
- State if flexibility can be negotiated.

Where?

- Place of volunteering including any other sites. Can the organisation be flexible around where the volunteering takes place? State the flexibility you can offer!

With whom?

- Will volunteers work alongside other volunteers or paid staff or will they work alone?

Support and training

- Who will be the designated supervisor/ point of contact?
- What support is available (weekly catch up, regular volunteer meetings, etc)
- What training is provided?

Administration

- What expenses do you offer to cover?
- What other assistance is available?

Expectations and benefits

- What does the role offer? How does the role make a difference in the world? What impact does the role have?
- What can the volunteer expect and what do you expect from the volunteer?

Further resources

- Volunteer Ireland: [online resources for organisations](#)
- Centre for European Volunteering: [resources and project outputs](#)
- Tobi Johnson's podcast on all things volunteering: [Volunteer Nation](#)
- IAVE– International Association for Volunteer Effort: [Research and Insights about Volunteering around the World](#)

Volunteer Ireland's learning and capacity building opportunities

- Training and events for leaders of volunteers: <https://www.volunteer.ie/training>
- Bespoke training and consultancy for leaders of volunteers and volunteer involving organisations <https://www.volunteer.ie/masterclasses-series/>
- National Volunteer Management Conference <https://www.volunteer.ie/nvmc/>
- Local Volunteer Centres: <https://www.volunteer.ie/your-local-volunteer-centre/>



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