

Submission to Department of Social Protection on the Successor to Pathways to Work Strategy 2026 – 2030

Volunteer Ireland welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of **Pathways to Work 2026–2030**. Volunteering is a crucial but under-recognised component of supports for people seeking to enter or re-enter employment. It provides skills, confidence, and networks, and is already a direct recruitment pathway for many organisations. This submission outlines the evidence for embedding volunteering in the next strategy and makes practical recommendations.

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 work at local level 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 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.

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 both economic and social value in terms of pathways to work:

- 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 is proven to increase the physical and mental health of volunteers. 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 health as a result of volunteering.³ This improved wellbeing and increased confidence can play a key role for those seeking employment, particularly those who may be long term unemployed.
- 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.⁴ These support networks and social connections are critical for those seeking employment.
- Similarly, 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.⁵
- 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. This support helps build

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

² Irish Charity Engagement Monitor, Winter Report 2022

³ National Survey of Volunteers 2024, Volunteer Ireland

⁴ <https://www.volunteer.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Rural-Volunteerism-Report.pdf>

⁵ National Survey of Volunteers 2024, Volunteer Ireland

capacity and confidence among these cohorts which is a significant benefit when seeking employment.

Volunteering as a pathway to employment

Aside from the broader economic and social value, critically volunteering also acts as a pathway to employment. For many people who are distant from the labour market such as those who are long-term unemployed, young people without work experience, ethnic minorities, or people with disabilities, volunteering offers a supportive environment to engage with work-like activity. Volunteering provides pathways to employment in several ways:

- **Skills development and employability**

Volunteering provides a context for acquiring and practising workplace relevant skills such as communication, teamwork, project management, problem solving, digital literacy and sector specific skills through hands-on experience and supported learning. This learning is often informal but highly job relevant and can complement formal training. Informal and non-formal learning through volunteering has been shown to enhance employability outcomes.⁶

- **Confidence and motivation**

People who volunteer tend to report increases in confidence, wellbeing, and motivation, factors that make job search more effective. Volunteering builds social capital and professional networks that often lead directly to job opportunities. The OECD and national reviews underline volunteering's role in strengthening civic and social ties and improving labour market outcomes, particularly for young people and groups facing labour-market barriers.⁷ For individuals who have experienced unemployment, volunteering helps restore routine and a sense of purpose. This contributes directly to increased confidence and improved readiness to apply for and sustain paid employment.⁸

- **Social capital and professional networks**

Volunteering expands individuals' networks, providing connections that can lead to job opportunities. These networks are particularly valuable for those who may lack access to traditional professional pathways.⁹

- **Direct recruitment channel**

⁶ Giancaspro, M.L. (2021). *Learning to Be Employable Through Volunteering*. Frontiers in Education. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8273427/>

⁷OECD

⁸ Indecon (2018). *Assessment of Economic Value of Youth Work and Volunteering in Ireland*. Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

⁹ OECD (2024). *Promoting Youth Volunteering and Civic Service Engagement*. OECD Policy Brief.

Crucially, volunteering is also a direct recruitment channel. Our 2024 survey of organisations that engage volunteers found that 43% of these organisations hired someone who had volunteered with them in the previous 12 months.¹⁰ This demonstrates that volunteering is not only preparatory but can actively lead to paid employment opportunities. This also underlines the direct pipeline from volunteering to paid employment in the community and voluntary sector. International research confirms this trend: the OECD highlights volunteering as a tool for improving employability, particularly among young people and those facing barriers to work.¹¹

- **Evidence from policy and practice**

International and national reviews show voluntary activity can improve employment chances for people who volunteer for employment reasons and for groups targeted by activation supports. Policy guidance therefore commonly encourages volunteering as one route into the labour market.¹²

- **Bridging gaps for disadvantaged groups**

People furthest from the labour market, such as those with disabilities, long-term unemployed and those from marginalised communities often benefit more from the flexible, supported environment that volunteering can offer. It allows them to engage in work-like activities without some of the immediate pressures of formal employment.

For these reasons, Volunteer Ireland believes that volunteering must be fully embedded in the successor to **Pathways to Work 2026–2030**, not just as a civic good but as a proven, inclusive, and cost-effective route into employment.

Challenges

While volunteering has been proven as a pathway to employment, challenges to participation among those who would benefit the most still exist:

- **Inconsistent application of welfare rules**

People looking to volunteer and volunteer involving organisations receive mixed messages about whether and how volunteering affects different benefits; in practice many are uncertain and avoid volunteering to not risk payments. We have received reports of people who wanted to volunteer and met the criteria but were refused by their Deciding Officer.

- **Administrative burdens**

Notification requirements, reassessments, or inconsistent advice from local welfare

¹⁰ Volunteer Ireland (2024). *Volunteer-Involving Organisation (VIO) Survey* — internal data.

¹¹ OECD (2024). *Promoting Youth Volunteering and Civic Service Engagement*. OECD Policy Brief.

¹² [Digital Education Resource Archive](#)

offices create unnecessary obstacles.¹³ For Disability Allowance and other means-tested payments, the requirement to notify and the fear of reassessment (and potential loss of payment) deter participation.¹⁴

- **Inconsistent information and complexity for people on Illness Benefit**

Intreo Centres and Social Welfare Branch Offices sometimes give contradictory advice, creating confusion.¹⁵ The lack of explicit guidance makes it difficult for recipients to know if volunteering is compatible with their claim. For claimants certified as unfit to work, the rules on volunteering are not always explicit; lack of standardised guidance can mean unnecessarily restrictive decisions or risky volunteering that could lead to sanctions or payment reviews.¹⁶

- **Awareness gaps**

Many jobseekers and benefit recipients are unaware of volunteering opportunities or how volunteering can aid employment pathways.

- **Unequal access to supported volunteering pathways**

People furthest from the labour market (e.g. long-term unemployed, people with disabilities, mental health conditions) may lack personalised supports to translate volunteering into a pathway to employment.¹⁷

Recommendations

Volunteer Ireland welcomes the achievements of *Pathways to Work 2021–2025*, including its emphasis on increasing participation and supporting under-represented groups into employment. We particularly welcome recognition of non-traditional activation methods, such as training, work placements, and community-based supports. However, volunteering has not yet been fully recognised or utilised as part of the activation framework, despite its proven value for skills development, employability, and social inclusion.

Priorities for Pathways to Work 2026–2030

Volunteer Ireland recommends the following actions to remove barriers and maximise volunteering's employment benefits:

- **Explicit recognition of volunteering**

Include volunteering in the successor strategy as a recognised activation and work-readiness option, particularly for those furthest from the labour market.

- **Clear, public guidance and a single DSP information page**

¹³ Citizens Information. (n.d.). *Voluntary work and social welfare payments*. <https://www.citizensinformation.ie>

¹⁴ Disability Allowance [INOU](#)

¹⁵ Citizens Information. (n.d.). *Voluntary work and social welfare payments*. <https://www.citizensinformation.ie>

¹⁶ Operational Guidelines Illness Benefits, [gov.ie](https://www.gov.ie)

¹⁷ [OECD](#)

DSP should publish a single, plain-language page covering “Volunteering while on a social welfare payment — what you need to know” focused on Jobseeker, Disability Allowance, Invalidity Pension, Illness Benefit and other relevant payments. This page should:

- Explain, in simple terms, what volunteering is (unpaid, expenses-only, not employment).
 - State explicitly that **volunteering is allowed** for people on Jobseeker payments provided they remain available for work, with the inclusion of examples.¹⁸
 - Explain the position for Disability Allowance and Invalidity Pension (volunteering allowed but notify DSP; explain what factors may trigger reassessment and give examples of safe/typical volunteering patterns).
 - Provide explicit guidance on Illness Benefit: circumstances in which volunteering (low hours, medically appropriate tasks) can be compatible and the required steps (medical advice, prior clearance where appropriate).
- **Simplified notification & one-stop clearance process**
Introduce a straightforward online volunteering notification form for people on Disability Allowance/Invalidity Pension and a fast-track advisory note for Illness Benefit cases, processed by DSP or Intreo case officers within a set timeframe (e.g. 10 working days). This would reduce fear driven avoidance and administrative delays.¹⁹
 - **Safeguards for health-related payments**
For Illness Benefit, define clear criteria for when volunteering is compatible (e.g. medical practitioner confirms activity is within prescribed capacity, limited weekly hours, tasks that do not exacerbate condition), and ensure decisions are medically informed and applied consistently. Where volunteering is judged compatible, provide written confirmation to the claimant to avoid future sanction risk.
 - **Link activation services with volunteering pathways**
Encourage Intreo/Deciding officers to connect with local Volunteer Centres to promote volunteering as an activity for those who would benefit while seeking employment or unable to work.
 - **Monitor and evaluate**
Collect and publish data annually on the number of people on Jobseeker/Disability/Illness payments who volunteer; the number of volunteers who move into employment; and outcomes from DSP-linked volunteering referrals.

¹⁸ Volunteer Ireland — Resource & Research pages (“Volunteering as a jobseeker”; research hub). ([Volunteer Ireland](#))

¹⁹ Volunteering and Unemployment, [volunteermeath.ie](#)

This could build on Volunteer Ireland and Volunteer Centre data collection. The 43% hiring result from our 2024 VIO survey demonstrates the value of collecting routine employer–conversion metrics.

- **Awareness campaign**

Launch a public campaign to ensure jobseekers, employers, volunteer–involving organisations and benefit recipients understand that volunteering is compatible with welfare and can be a pathway to employment.

Conclusion

Volunteer Ireland welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the development of Pathways to Work 2026–2030 through this submission. Volunteering is not just a civic good — it is a proven and practical, cost-effective pathway into work that develops skills, confidence and networks, and is already a direct recruitment channel for the community and voluntary sector. With clear guidance, simple administrative processes and active promotion of volunteering as a pathway to work, the State can reduce barriers, increase participation, and strengthen the pipeline from volunteering into paid employment especially for those furthest from the labour market and by so doing, support inclusive growth.

By embedding volunteering into **Pathways to Work 2026–2030**, the Department can unlock this potential, ensuring Ireland’s activation strategy is more inclusive, effective, and future-focused. We look forward to working with the Department, community and voluntary sector partners, public employment services and others to implement actionable commitments so that more people benefit. We are happy to discuss or clarify any of the matters above in more detail.