



Volunteer Ireland

Obair Dheonach Éireann

Submission to DRCDG on the Development of a New National Volunteering Strategy

13 November 2025

Table of contents

Introduction.....	2
Context.....	3
Challenges.....	4
Additionality.....	5
What change should the strategy deliver?	6
1. Organisations are better equipped to recruit and retain volunteers.....	6
2. It is easier for people to volunteer	7
3. Volunteering is valued by the public and Government.....	10
4. Volunteers are protected	11
Implementation and sustainability	11
Lessons from the previous National Volunteering Strategy	12
Conclusion.....	13

Introduction

Volunteer Ireland welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of a new National Volunteering Strategy (NVS). This submission draws on extensive consultation with stakeholders across the voluntary sector in 2025, including Volunteer Centres (VCs), volunteer-involving organisations (VIOs), and volunteers themselves representing a wide array of demographics and experiences. These consultations re-affirmed the extraordinary contribution volunteers make across every sector of Irish life but also revealed the pressing challenges that both volunteers and the organisations that depend on them continue to face. This evidence, combined with our extensive experience as the national volunteer development organisation and data from national and international studies, informs our recommendations.

Volunteering is a cornerstone of civic life in Ireland. 1.1 million people volunteer each year¹, contributing millions of hours of service and generating significant social and economic value. The next NVS must be ambitious, inclusive, and practical in delivery. It must make a real change to volunteering on the ground. This document

¹ nfp Research, *Irish Charities Engagement Monitor* (December 2022)

outlines the challenges currently faced by volunteers and organisations, proposes evidence-based solutions, and sets out key priorities for the Government.

Context

Volunteer Ireland is the national volunteer development organisation and a support body for the network of local Volunteer Centres. Our mission is to promote, support, and celebrate volunteering in all its forms, while ensuring that volunteering remains accessible, impactful, and sustainable. 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 the Government and the wider public. We advocate for volunteering so that its value is recognised. We conduct research on volunteering to inform policy and practice.

We support the network of local Volunteer Centres and work closely with them to ensure volunteering thrives at local and national level. We manage the national volunteering database I-VOL, through which volunteer involving organisations and people who want to volunteer can find each other. Together, we provide a nationwide infrastructure to promote volunteering and support both individuals and organisations. Our reach is national, ensuring access to volunteering opportunities in urban and rural communities alike.

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. They provide support and advice to both volunteers and organisations, deliver training, process Garda vetting, and run a range of other projects dedicated to facilitating and enhancing volunteering locally.

At a national level, Volunteer Ireland advocates on behalf of volunteering to ensure it is valued and resourced adequately by policy makers. We raise awareness of volunteering and its impact through targeted communications campaigns along with delivering our flagship events, National Volunteering Week and the Volunteer Ireland Awards. We provide a suite of free and low-cost training throughout the year for VIOs, along with bespoke consultancy and tailored capacity building. We work with global and local partners to deliver our corporate volunteering programme, which offers targeted support for those most in need in our communities. We work with academic partners to develop a body of research on volunteering that ensures our interventions are evidence-based and effective. As experts in volunteering with wide-ranging experience, we provide thought leadership both in Ireland and to our European and global colleagues.

Volunteering contributes significantly to Irish society—socially, culturally, and economically. Volunteering is more than the provision of services; it is a vital expression of solidarity, citizenship, and community. In Ireland, the 1.1 million people who engage in voluntary activity every year contribute millions of hours of service. This collective effort supports vital services, strengthens communities, and promotes wellbeing for volunteers themselves. The economic contribution of volunteering is also significant, with estimates suggesting that voluntary activity saves the State billions annually². Beyond its economic impact, volunteering has social and personal value. It promotes social cohesion, builds cross-community connections, strengthens democracy, combats isolation, increases social capital, and improves wellbeing for both volunteers and recipients of voluntary service. These benefits must be central to the vision and goals of the new NVS.

Challenges

Despite the significant value of volunteering, our consultations identified several persistent challenges. First, VIOs struggle with recruitment and retention, citing competition for people's limited free time and a lack of capacity to provide structured supports. Organisations also find it difficult to incorporate flexibility in their volunteer programmes, to adapt to the growing demand from volunteers for more flexible volunteering opportunities.

Second, across all consultation sessions, participants expressed concern about the limited communication around volunteering and its broader impact. They asked for ambitious communications campaigns to raise the profile of volunteering and inspire new volunteers. Most organisations and volunteers consulted had never heard of the National Volunteering Strategy (NVS), pointing to a need to also improve outreach and awareness efforts about the strategy itself.

Third, access barriers such as lengthy Garda vetting deter participation, particularly for one-off or short-term opportunities. Participants also emphasised that the NVS must prioritise inclusion to ensure that volunteering is accessible to all, regardless of age, ethnicity, ability, socioeconomic background, or immigration status. Volunteering must also be accessible to people living in rural areas. These audiences face unique barriers to volunteering. A 2022 Immigrant Council of Ireland report found that 63% of migrants wanted to volunteer but lacked information or faced cultural/language³. Similarly, research by the National Disability Authority highlighted accessibility and support challenges as key barriers for people with disabilities.⁴ During our consultations with young volunteers, many

² Indecon, *Assessment of the Economic Value of Volunteering in Ireland* (2018)

³ Immigrant Council of Ireland, *Indicators for Migrant Local Integration Report* (2022)

⁴ National Disability Authority, *Disability and Participation in Civic Life* (2021)

noted that VIOs want to engage younger volunteers and address their barriers to volunteering through targeted initiatives, language support, and flexible opportunities, but once the young people had been recruited they felt that the VIOs didn't have anything meaningful for them to do. This resulted in young people feeling that their engagement as volunteers was tokenistic. Adequate support and communication were identified as key requirements for younger volunteers. Addressing transport solutions was also repeatedly raised in consultations as a priority. Inclusive volunteering strengthens society by fostering mutual understanding and breaking down social divisions⁵.

Additionality

The forthcoming National Volunteering Strategy should be additional to current work. It should enhance and complement existing efforts, including the work already being carried out by Volunteer Ireland and Volunteer Centres. Volunteer Ireland and the network of Volunteer Centres already provide a strong national infrastructure, including a national volunteering database, tailored volunteer matching, and sector-wide capacity building. For example, in 2024, Volunteer Ireland delivered training on volunteer management for 2,215 people through calendar training, bespoke consultancy, and our national conference. We also delivered research in partnership with DCU and Queens University on inclusion in volunteer programmes and launched a toolkit on this topic based on the research. We managed the national Community Volunteers Programme, which saw 3,178 Community Volunteers representing 110 different nationalities sign up and deliver 41,137 volunteer hours. We secured media coverage on volunteering valued at over €1.6m and had a social media reach of 890k. We engaged over 2,000 employee volunteers, upskilled 209 companies on employee volunteering, and delivered 1,900 kits to under-resourced schools, shelters, and direct provision centres. 84% of organisations that received VI training and consultancy implemented better practice as a result, while 57% implemented changes in policy. 90% of employee volunteers we engaged reported an increased interest in volunteering further. In 2024 alone, the Volunteer Centres supported 20,433 new volunteer registrations and matched 35,489 volunteers (referring 19,605 volunteers to VIOs for volunteer opportunities and placing 15,884 volunteers with opportunities).⁶

Without additional investment beyond what is already being delivered, the NVS risks duplicating current activity rather than addressing structural gaps. Consultation feedback highlighted frustration from VIOs and volunteers that the previous strategy did not significantly raise the profile of volunteering or deliver

⁵ United Nations Volunteers, *The State of the World's Volunteerism Report* (2018)

⁶ Volunteer Ireland, *I-VOL Volunteer Centre Network Statistics* (2024)

transformative change. The new strategy must therefore provide additional resources, including adequate funding, infrastructure development, and expanded supports for capacity building and communications.

What change should the strategy deliver?

The four changes that we recommend that the new National Volunteering Strategy delivers, are:

- Organisations are better equipped to recruit and retain volunteers
- It is easier for people to volunteer
- Volunteering is valued by the public and Government
- Volunteers are protected

The details below lay out how to achieve each of these changes.

1. Organisations are better equipped to recruit and retain volunteers

a. Fund and support capacity building

The Government should create adequate provision for training and capacity building for VIOs, by providing funding to VI to develop and deliver training to VIOs in line with the findings and recommendations from the research on “The training needs of Volunteer Managers in Ireland” delivered during the first National Volunteering Strategy that have not yet been implemented. This included development of a dedicated online hub of resources, development of a suite of on-demand online training, provision of more opportunities for peer-to-peer support for volunteer managers, and upskilling of VCs to deliver training locally. Consultations with VIOs reconfirmed a need for more capacity building to support organisations that struggle to recruit and retain volunteers. Training in volunteer management, safeguarding, and inclusion was consistently requested.

b. Create a dedicated volunteer fund

A dedicated Volunteer Activation Fund should be established to provide funding to VIOs that rely heavily on volunteers to deliver key services to support their volunteer programmes. For example, this fund could be accessed to pay volunteer expenses, attend training, provide recognition to volunteers, etc. International models show that targeted investment strengthens volunteer-led initiatives and improves sustainability⁷.

⁷ Employment and Social Development Canada, *Community Services Recovery Fund Report* (2022)

c. Roll out the Volunteer Friendly code

Support the rollout of Volunteer Friendly as a quality improvement tool that helps VIOs improve volunteer management and demonstrate their commitment to best practice in volunteer management. The Volunteer Friendly model was piloted during the first National Volunteering Strategy and demonstrated that it is effective in improving volunteer management practice and giving Volunteer Centres a useful tool to engage with VIOs, but it has still not been rolled out nationally. Scotland's experience confirms that the Volunteer Friendly model increases retention and satisfaction among both volunteers and staff⁸.

d. Support the volunteering infrastructure

Volunteer Ireland and the network of Volunteer Centres are essential to the success of volunteering in Ireland and are central to delivering on the strategy. Sustainable funding must be provided to this infrastructure to allow us to maintain and expand our support and capacity building for VIOs and volunteers. Without it, the strategy risks being aspirational rather than transformative.

2. It is easier for people to volunteer

a. Reduce barriers to volunteering

Participants identified several barriers to volunteering including the lack of national communications around volunteering, lack of funding for volunteer programmes, expenses, transport issues, and Garda vetting. Participants from smaller VIOs highlighted persistent difficulties in recruiting and retaining volunteers. Many reported challenges in motivating volunteers to complete essential tasks, with some noting that over-reliance on volunteers to deliver key services has led to burnout. Volunteers from rural areas face additional barriers, particularly around transport. The lack of reliable public transport makes it difficult to access volunteering opportunities. One participant shared that it takes them up to three hours to travel to and from their volunteer placement. In many cases, volunteers cannot afford to cover transport costs out of pocket, and VIOs lack the funding to reimburse these expenses. Across all consultation sessions, participants expressed concern about the limited communication around volunteering and its broader impact.

Participants expressed concerns regarding the Garda vetting process, emphasizing the need for it to be reviewed and made more efficient and accessible—without compromising safeguarding standards. They recommended streamlining the system by enabling transferable clearances across roles, which would enhance efficiency while maintaining robust

⁸ Volunteer Scotland, *Volunteer Friendly Award Evaluation Report* (2022)

safeguarding. Garda vetting emerged as a recurring barrier in nearly every consultation, with many noting that the complexity of the process often discouraged continued engagement. Additionally, participants highlighted that the system is not user-friendly, particularly for older individuals who may struggle with technology and for communities whose first language is not English.

b. Review and develop the national volunteering database

The review of the national volunteering database, I-VOL, that began in 2025 and was postponed should be completed to ensure that the national volunteering database remains accessible, modern, user-friendly, effective, and responsive to changing needs. Participants from VCs suggested that the database needs to be innovative and explored the potential for it to be more responsive and reflective of what VIOs and volunteers need now and into the future.

c. Support organisations to introduce flexibility in their volunteer programmes

The issue of flexibility was raised throughout the consultation process; participants told us while they are interested in volunteering it is difficult for them to find volunteering opportunities that suit their busy life schedules. This is supported by an IPSOS survey we commissioned earlier this year, where 28% said the time of day/week of the volunteer opportunity did not suit their schedule.⁹ Additionally, participants noted that the need for flexibility in volunteering remains a significant challenge for VIOs. Rigid structures and limited adaptability in volunteer roles were seen as barriers to engagement, particularly for individuals with varying schedules, caregiving responsibilities, or other commitments. While considerable progress has been made, further work is essential to ensure volunteering remains accessible and inclusive. According to our research, a substantial portion of the population expressed interest in volunteering in ways that fit around their lives—particularly younger people and those with caring responsibilities.

Volunteer Ireland implemented a two-year programme on flexibility, which highlighted that flexible models—such as micro-volunteering, remote volunteering, and short-term or episodic placements—are increasingly vital in today's fast-paced, convenience-driven society. These models not only accommodate diverse lifestyles but also help remove barriers to participation. To meet this evolving demand, VIOs must continue to be supported in developing and implementing dynamic, task-based roles that allow volunteers to contribute meaningfully without long-term commitments. This includes

⁹ Ipsos, *Volunteer Ireland Online Research* (2025)

providing training, support, and recognition systems tailored to flexible engagement. The journey to supporting organisations to embrace flexibility started with the two-year programme to investigate the issue and develop resources, but it was just the beginning – VIOs must continue to be supported and challenged to meet the increasing demand for flexibility from volunteers. This is not just a strategic priority; it is a necessary step toward building a more inclusive and resilient volunteering ecosystem

d. Support employee volunteering

Volunteer Ireland should be supported to scale and strengthen Ireland's corporate volunteering infrastructure, enabling more companies and community groups to engage employees in meaningful volunteering and establish long-term partnerships that deliver measurable social impact. This will ensure that the role of the private sector in supporting volunteering is harnessed; as well as help businesses meet ESG (Environment, Social and Governance) and CSRD (European Corporate Social Responsibility Directive) goals and remain competitive. Employee volunteering in Ireland is growing rapidly. In 2024 alone, Volunteer Ireland supported over 2,000 employees to volunteer; increased understanding of employee volunteering with 254 employees from 172 companies through our Employee Volunteering Information Sessions; and handled over 370 enquiries from businesses seeking opportunities. Employee volunteering is an effective route to volunteering: NFP research showed that in 2022 12% of volunteers started volunteering through their employer (a significant increase from 2017 when only 5% reported starting volunteering through the employer).¹⁰ Volunteer Ireland's own surveys of employees who we have supported to volunteer, shows very high demand for employee volunteering: 90% of survey respondents expressed increased interest in volunteering in the coming year, 67% want a comprehensive listing of opportunities, and 65% contribute financially to projects. Yet demand for employee volunteering opportunities now far outstrips supply. Companies struggle to find appropriate, well-prepared opportunities; community organisations lack the time and expertise to host corporate teams; larger charities are already inundated; and grassroots groups often have no direct links to businesses. Without stronger infrastructure, this growing interest risks frustration on all sides — and a missed opportunity to channel substantial skills, time and funding into communities while supporting companies' ESG and CSRD goals.

¹⁰ nfp Research, *Irish Charities Engagement Monitor* (December 2022)

3. Volunteering is valued by the public and Government

A critical element of the new NVS must be recognising and communicating the value of volunteering. This should include:

a. Deliver the communications strategy

During the first National Volunteering Strategy, a significant investment was made to develop a communications strategy for volunteering, which has not been implemented. Our consultations with VIOs and volunteers re-affirmed the ongoing need for a sustained national communications campaign highlighting the social, cultural, and economic value of volunteering. A sustained national campaign is key to highlighting the value of volunteering and inspiring more people to volunteer. Consultation feedback stressed the importance of showcasing diverse stories including migrants, older volunteers, and people with disabilities to demonstrate the inclusivity and breadth of volunteering. As the national volunteer development organisation with a track record of securing extensive traditional and social media coverage of volunteering, Volunteer Ireland is uniquely placed to deliver many elements of the communications strategy.

b. Value volunteering at policy level

All Government funding streams for programmes delivered by organisations that engage volunteers should include a specific budget line for volunteer management programmes. Organisations consistently reported that current funding models overlook volunteer management, despite volunteers being essential to programme delivery. A dedicated budget line for volunteer management and support should be a requirement across relevant Government grants.

c. Ensure policy integration

All national strategies, policies or action plans that rely on or involve volunteers must explicitly address volunteering and recognise their contribution. The state should embed volunteering in national policy and funding frameworks, ensuring volunteer management is adequately resourced across all sectors. Embedding volunteering across policies in health, education, and social care is critical. In Scotland, for example, explicit recognition of volunteering in national health policy increased investment in volunteer roles in hospitals and care settings¹¹.

d. Commission national research

Regular research, including Quarterly National Household Surveys and national Census questions on volunteering by the CSO, as well as Social Return on Investment (SROI) studies, should be commissioned to measure and evidence

¹¹ Scottish Government, *Volunteering for All: National Framework Progress Report* (2021)

volunteering's impact. Scotland provides a strong model of this approach¹². Evidence-based policymaking requires regular and up-to-date data, that allows us to look at trends over time.

4. Volunteers are protected

Several consultation participants raised concerns about lack of comprehensive legal protections and grievance mechanisms. The same issues were raised in 2024 during Volunteer Ireland public consultations on the review of current legal protections for volunteers. The following recommendations were made, and these are reflected in the 2025 report by Volunteer Ireland on legal protections to DRCDG¹³:

a. **Introduce legal protections in cases of racism and discrimination**

Amend Equal Status Acts to explicitly cover volunteers by expanding the current wording of the provision from prohibiting discrimination “in the provision of goods and services, accommodation and education” to prohibiting discrimination “in the provision of goods and services, accommodation, *opportunity to volunteer* and education.”

b. **Create an ombudsman for volunteering**

Create an Ombudsman for volunteering where volunteers can safely raise complaints in relation to their volunteering.

Implementation and sustainability

The new National Volunteering Strategy (NVS) must build on the lessons of its predecessor by outlining clear, actionable steps; defined timelines; and robust accountability mechanisms. It should also incorporate a built-in framework for ongoing evaluation and periodic review to ensure continuous improvement and responsiveness to emerging needs.

To succeed, the NVS must be underpinned by strong implementation structures:

1. **Specific outcomes**

The new strategy must clearly set measurable and realistic outcomes that can be monitored over time.

2. **Clear accountability/assigned actions**

Each action must be assigned to a single lead department, agency, or organisation, with responsibility for delivery clearly defined to ensure accountability. While multiple stakeholders can contribute to the delivery of an

¹² Volunteer Scotland, *Social Return on Investment in Volunteering* (2019)

¹³ Volunteer Ireland, *Volunteering and the Law* (2025)

action, it is critical there is just one named lead for each action to ensure ownership and avoid confusion.

3. Timelines

Actions should have firm but realistic timelines for delivery to ensure progress and transparency.

4. Funding commitments

Sustainable and dedicated funding must be ring-fenced to ensure effective delivery.

5. Evaluation framework

Built-in monitoring and evaluation processes should track outcomes annually and enable course correction where necessary. This should include KPIs with baseline figures and targets.

Lessons from the previous National Volunteering Strategy

The current NVS was a milestone in recognising and elevating the role of volunteering. It provided a platform for structured dialogue and raised awareness of volunteering at a national level. It also allowed for the delivery of excellent work that had a positive impact on volunteering, such as the Community Volunteers Programme, the Volunteer Charter, a better understanding of legal protection of volunteers, and the development of training and tools to support organisations to introduce more flexibility in their volunteer programmes. The following lessons were learned from the 2021–2025 National Volunteering Strategy:

1. Lack of clarity and consistency on how actions were funded and delivered

The list of actions was ambiguous in terms of who was responsible for delivering each action (often more than one organisation was listed) and the timeline for delivery (specifying short, medium or long term with no reference to what that meant). There was a lack of transparency outside those organisations involved in the implementation group and associated subgroups on how the NVS actions were going to be delivered or who could submit a proposal to deliver an action. Some proposals to deliver actions were approved outside the subgroup structure, while other proposals that had support from all stakeholders involved and the relevant subgroup were not approved.

2. Ineffective structures

Subgroups set up to oversee progress under the current strategy did not meet consistently and were often called at short notice. Many subgroups stopped

meeting toward the end of the strategy, with the last meetings of each one as follows: Research subgroup – September 2024; IT subgroup – February 2024; Communications and Awareness Raising subgroup – May 2022; Capacity Building subgroup – February 2024; Youth subgroup – June 2024.

3. Evaluation deficit

Although the current NVS included detail on how it would be evaluated in Section 7.1, an evaluation framework was never developed for it and an evaluation of the impact of the NVS was never carried out. This means that although the NVS delivered several positive actions, we cannot demonstrate or evaluate the impact that it had. The new strategy should have a built-in evaluation framework, reviewed annually, with baseline levels, targets and a final evaluation to assess impact and progress ensuring continuous learning and development.

4. Lack of whole-of-Government approach

Although several Government Departments were represented on the Implementation Group, there was inconsistency in terms of how much each Department engaged and how much time they were able to give the NVS.

The new NVS must build on these lessons by providing concrete actions, timelines, and accountability mechanisms, alongside an embedded evaluation and review plan. We welcome the DRCDG plan to appoint an external evaluator to look at the approach taken in the current NVS and ensure that lessons learned inform the approach taken in the new strategy.

Conclusion

At a time when volunteering faces many challenges, the new National Volunteering Strategy offers a critical opportunity to deepen, strengthen and future-proof volunteering in Irish society. The strategy must build on the existing strengths of Ireland's volunteering infrastructure while addressing critical gaps in funding, inclusion, capacity building, and implementation. By addressing barriers, focusing on embedding inclusion, resourcing organisations, ensuring robust implementation, valuing the contribution of volunteers, and learning lessons from the current NVS, the strategy can create the conditions for volunteering to thrive. With sustained investment, clear accountability, measurable outcomes and strong political support, Ireland can build a stronger, thriving culture of volunteering that benefits individuals, communities, and society as a whole. Volunteer Ireland stands ready to partner with Government and communities in realising this vision.