A comparative study of the needs & challenges of volunteering in urban and rural communities

volunteer centre
Ionad d'Obair Deonach an Chláir
CLARE

volunteer centre
Ionad d'Obair Deonach Corcaigh
CORK

volunteer centre
Ionad d'Obair Dheonach Ciarraí
KERRY

volunteer centre
Ionad d'Obair Deonach Luimneach
LIMERICK

volunteer centre
Ionad d'Obair Deonach Thiobraid Árann
TIPPERARY

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Foreword

An ethos of volunteering and engaging with fellow citizens continues to be an integral part of community life in Ireland. The power of volunteering was most evident in the recent community response to Covid-19, which highlighted the critical role of citizen action and collective working in the face of a national and international emergency. During the pandemic, volunteering, and our reaching out to our neighbours and community, has been a powerful expression of citizenship. It has provided a legacy that we must now work together as a country to preserve, build upon and sustain through continuing to invest in our volunteer support infrastructure.

Despite the significant contribution of volunteers to Irish society, our volunteering support infrastructure is operating below capacity and remains underfunded. A nationwide network of full Volunteer Centres is yet to be established. An analysis of funding to the sector showed an average decrease of 24% in funding to VCs in the period 2008–2016 (McLaughlin, 2017). Community cohesion, and the contribution of Volunteer Centres to this, is not something we should take for granted. Indeed, the recent examples of divisiveness in other western democracies is cause for reflection and taking stock of the fundamental importance of voluntarism in creating a healthy democratic society. The centrality of volunteering to the government's response to Covid-19, behoves us to invest wisely in a world-class volunteering support system that will help to assist our local authorities and regions to address future national crises with an effective community response.

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Professor Fred Powell,

Dr Martin Galvin

University College Cork

Abbreviations

CEDRA	Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas
CFI	Call for Input CSO
CSO	Central Statistics Office
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
IYV	International Year of Volunteers
NCV	National Committee on Volunteering
NYCI	National Youth Council of Ireland
SICAP	Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme
VC	Volunteer Centre
VIO	Volunteer Involving Organisation
VIS	Volunteering Information Services
VLT	Volunteer Leadership Training

Executive Summary

This detailed study, carried out by researchers at University College Cork was commissioned by Volunteers Centres in Clare, Cork, Kerry, Limerick and Tipperary. The research set out to explore further the findings of 31 focus groups conducted in January and February 2019 to inform their input into the National Volunteering Strategy's Call for Input process. These five Volunteers Centres (VCs) are part of Ireland's wider volunteering support infrastructure comprising 22 VCs, 7 Volunteering Information Services (VIS) and Volunteer Ireland.

The research specifically set out to explore volunteer recruitment and retention and the role of Volunteer Centres in supporting volunteering and volunteer involving organisations (VIOs). The principal aim of the project was to provide evidence-based insights and recommendations that would:

a) Inform the government's Draft Volunteering Strategy.
b) Enable Volunteer Centres to respond to the concerns and needs of volunteers and VIOs.
c) Inform current policies and strategies aimed at supporting and developing volunteering in rural Ireland.

The interim findings (based on a survey of over 500 VIOs) were reported to the Volunteer Centres in January 2020 to coincide with the call for submissions on the draft National Volunteering Strategy; the findings advised the VCs commentary on the draft strategy prior to its publication on the 5th December 2020. The findings also advised the VC's October 2020 submission into the DRCD Statement of Strategy 2021-2023 call for submissions, issued on 28th September 2020. This research investigation was completed in October 2020, its production was finalised in December 2020.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

The research findings indicate that volunteers play a key role in the provision of health and caring services, in community development and rural regeneration and in combating rural isolation and social exclusion.

It is clear that volunteer involving organisations respond to local needs and often provide services that would otherwise not be available, particularly in rural areas. There were numerous examples of VIOs leading the way in the provision of services to the local community including youth work, sports and fitness, social and leisure activities and community development projects.

The research indicates that volunteers are active in a range of caring and health-related roles including, for example, the provision of counselling services and respite for people with long-term illnesses. A recurring theme in the interviews was that volunteering initiatives help to combat against social isolation and loneliness, particularly for older people and those living in rural areas. Volunteer-led initiatives have also helped promote social inclusion for Ireland's growing migrant community. It was clear from the research that the services provided by volunteers benefit a number of marginalised groups, including older people, people with disabilities, vulnerable children and adults. Volunteer-led services have stepped in to fill the gaps in provision left by the state.

What are the pathways into volunteering in different areas?

The research identified that for the majority of people their pathway to volunteering is through person-to-person contacts, local networks and relationships. It would appear that being asked directly to volunteer is an important motivating factor in engaging in the first instance and in sustaining commitment over time

69%

of VIOs in rural areas recruit volunteers through **person-to-person contacts** using word of mouth, compared to 53% of VIOs in cities and large towns. Registration with a Volunteer Centre and advertising through online platforms and social media is more prevalent in urban areas.

40% of VIOs advertised vacancies **through a Volunteer Centre** in the previous 18 months. However, only 20% of rural VIOs advertised vacancies.

Rural VIOs often regard person-to-person contact as a more effective means of recruiting volunteers than advertising through VCs, which are based in large towns and cities. Rural VIOs expressed a need for volunteers to be from the local area and were doubtful as to whether these could be recruited through the online national volunteering database system. Some VIOs are not aware of the recruitment service provided by the Volunteer Centres, which has a broader reach other than an online service.

What challenges do VIOs face in recruiting, retaining and supporting volunteers?

The majority of VIOs (67%) reported some level of difficulty in recruiting volunteers. Smaller populations in rural localities would seem to limit the pool of potential volunteers available and a lack of public transport makes it difficult for those on low incomes, students and young people to participate in volunteering. Retaining volunteers appeared to present fewer difficulties than recruitment; just over one third of survey respondents reported having difficulties in this regard and there were only minor variations by location.

>75% of organisations in rural locations find it **difficult to recruit volunteers**, compared with just over half of those in cities.

Barriers to recruitment include a lack of awareness of volunteering opportunities or how to get involved, increased regulation and an unwillingness to commit to volunteering on a regular basis. In addition, certain roles require specialist skills and expertise which can exclude some people. Smaller VIOs may also struggle to recruit sufficient volunteers because they are not as well-known as other more established or high-profile organisations. The findings indicate that the legal and regulatory requirements introduced in recent years have significantly increased the volume and complexity of the work undertaken by boards and committee members and consequently made it more difficult to recruit people for these roles.

59% of VIOs face a challenge in **recruiting volunteers for governance roles** as board or committee members. This was more acute in rural areas, with 71% reporting difficulties.

Furthermore, the capacity of VIOs to manage volunteers presents an additional challenge, given that 40% of VIOs report that they 'struggle to keep up with the regulations and paperwork involved in recruiting volunteers and do not have 'the resources to adequately support and train new volunteers' (42%) or 'existing volunteers' (39%). Again, there were significant differences depending on location – VIOs in rural areas were more likely to experience challenges, compared with their counterparts in urban areas.

Almost 75% indicated that they **'rely heavily' on their current volunteers**, while nearly half indicated that volunteers within their organisation are overburdened.

What are the training and support needs of VIOs, and how might Volunteer Centres develop their services to respond to these needs?

Volunteer Centres provide vital supports to VIOs, adding value, particularly in the area of recruiting volunteers, volunteer leadership training and supporting VIOs to meet regulatory requirements.

In addition to volunteer recruitment (40%), the most frequently used VC services were: telephone/email enquiries (41%), followed by Garda vetting (35%), VC website resources (23%) and training courses (23%). There were some variations in terms of location, for example, the service most frequently used by rural organisations is the Garda vetting service. Participants who had availed of VC services clearly saw the benefit or 'added value' of working with a Volunteer Centre, reporting that the VCs had helped them boost their volunteer numbers, had provided valuable training on volunteer management and insightful guidance in relation to governance and regulatory requirements. However, VIOs also identified a number of barriers to accessing VC training and supports including lack of awareness of what supports and training are available, the distance to travel to a VC, the amount of time it takes to attend meetings and training and the cost of training courses.

In relation to making VC services more accessible, there was considerable support for additional outreach services including local offices or pop-up centres.

83% of VIO's in rural areas and small towns indicated that they **would avail of VC services** if they were available locally.

The findings also point to the need for online training and more consultation with VIOs on their training requirements.

Just Under **50%** of respondents **identified the need for support on the preparation of funding applications and financial guidance.** They also require support in governance, developing/reviewing volunteer roles and policies and volunteer leadership.

Participants indicated that there needs to be greater recognition at national level of the contribution that volunteers make to Irish society.

What more can be done at a local, regional and national level to promote volunteering and support volunteer involving organisations?

The five overarching recommendations and priorities that emerged from the research are listed below and described in full in chapter 8.

1	**Address the principal deterrents to volunteering including time commitment, growing regulation and bureaucracy, and lack of awareness of volunteering opportunities.**

Time is one of the main barriers to volunteering. VIOs and VCs need to consider ways of addressing this barrier, for example, by developing short-term, flexible volunteering roles and one-off projects to appeal to those who are interested in volunteering but do not want to commit on a regular basis.

At a policy level, a more proportionate and enabling regulatory environment would help voluntary groups use their time effectively and focus their energy and resources where needed most.

There is also a clear need to raise awareness of volunteering opportunities and how to get involved (identified as a barrier by nearly a third of survey respondents).

2	**Recognise that organisations in rural areas and small towns operate in a very different context to those in urban settings.**

There is a clear need to develop strategic policies, incentives and long-term supports that reflect the unique context of volunteering in rural regions. These should be linked to wider policies on rural regeneration.

3	**Invest in building capacity within VIOs for volunteering and enable VCs to provide enhanced professional development support.**

Examples of capacity building include training in key areas (notably the preparation of funding applications and good governance), one-to-one consultations and tailored supports to VIOs and VC outreach services to VIOs in rural areas.

4	**Continue to develop the national evidence base in support of volunteering.**

Ongoing research into volunteering is key to developing an evidence-informed policy and practice environment.

5	**Encourage both formal and informal volunteering as a means of building social capital.**

The focus in Irish policymaking up to now has been upon fostering volunteering within the third sector as part of a voluntary group. Rather than focusing on organised volunteering alone, a focus on informal volunteering is also required that seeks to further bolster the ability of people to engage in one-to-one and neighbour-based mutual support.

CHAPTER 1: Introduction and Research Approach

Background to the Research

Volunteering is embedded in the Irish culture and is the bedrock on which community life in Ireland is built. It has been estimated that over 560,000 people formally volunteer their time every year in Ireland's 11,500 community and voluntary organisations, 8,500 of which are registered charities (O'Connor, 2016). In economic terms, the 2013 Quarterly National Household Survey estimated that the value of Irish volunteering amounted to over €2 billion annually, applying the national minimum wage at that time (CSO, 2015). Volunteer involving organisations (VIOs) have led the way in the provision of a range of socially beneficial activities including youth work, sports, culture and heritage and informal education.

The importance of volunteering has been particularly evident in the community response to the Covid-19 pandemic. From March 2020 there was an upsurge of formal and informal volunteering, especially in the provision of support to older people and vulnerable groups at a local hands-on-community based level. (discussed in Chapter 4).

The announcement in 2018 that the Department of Rural and Community Development planned to develop a National Volunteering Strategy provided an important opportunity to reflect on a range of issues pertaining to volunteering in Ireland, including how it is defined, its purpose, how it should be supported and so forth.

The process of developing the National Volunteering Strategy involved a two-phase consultation: an initial Call for Input (CFI) from stakeholders, followed by consultation on the Draft Volunteering Strategy. Volunteer Ireland and the network of Volunteer Centres and Volunteering Information Services had advocated for a National Volunteering Strategy for many years and took an active part in providing input into the consultation process.

To inform their submission to the Draft Volunteering Strategy, Volunteer Centres in Clare, Cork, Kerry, Limerick and Tipperary hosted a series of 31 focus groups with volunteers and VIOs throughout the region (see Chapter 2 for details). They also commissioned researchers at University College Cork to undertake a study of the potential challenges faced by VIOs in their collective area and how Volunteer Centres

could develop or adapt their services to meet their needs. The interim findings (based on a survey of over 500 VIOs) were reported to the Volunteer Centres in January 2020 to coincide with the call for submissions on the Draft Volunteering Strategy.

Aims of the Research

The research set out to explore volunteer recruitment and retention and the role of the Volunteer Centres in Clare, Cork, Kerry, Limerick and Tipperary in supporting volunteering and volunteer involving organisations. The principal aim of the project was to provide evidence-based insights and recommendations that would:

a) Inform the Draft Volunteering Strategy.

b) Enable Volunteer Centres to respond to the concerns and needs of volunteers and VIOs.

c) Inform current policies and strategies aimed at supporting and developing volunteering in rural Ireland.

Based on an online survey and interviews, the study addressed the following key research questions:

- What are the routes/pathways into volunteering in different areas and how might these be strengthened or expanded?
- What challenges do VIOs face in recruiting, retaining and supporting volunteers in rural and urban locations?
- What are the training and support needs of VIOs, and how might Volunteer Centres develop their services to respond to these needs?
- What more can be done at a local, regional and national level to promote volunteering and support VIOs?

In recognition of the significance of 'place' to volunteering patterns (Rutherford, 2019) there was a strong geographical focus to the study, whereby the experiences of VIOs in rural and urban areas were explored and compared.

Research Methodology

The research reported here is based on quantitative and qualitative fieldwork comprising; an online survey of 511 representatives from volunteer involving organisations in the Munster region - December 2019 and 15 semi-structured interviews with representatives from the voluntary and community sector carried out in early 2020. Details on each of stage of the research will now be outlined.

Online Survey

The survey was designed to provide a broad overview of VIOs' experiences of recruiting and retaining volunteers, their access to and use of Volunteer Centre services and their views on how these services might be developed to further meet their needs. The questionnaire consisted mainly of closed questions, though a small number of open-ended questions allowed respondents to express their views on specific issues (for example, the barriers to volunteering) in more detail. There were 32 questions in total and the questionnaire took an average of 12 minutes to complete.

Details on the research project and instructions on how to complete the questionnaire were provided on the first page. After reading this information, VIOs were required to provide their informed consent to participate in the survey (by choosing the 'agree to participate' option) before they could proceed to the main body of the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was administered online (using Survey Monkey) at the beginning of December 2019. Using their existing databases, the five participating Volunteer Centres emailed the survey weblink to 3161 contacts from VIOs in Clare, Cork, Kerry, Limerick and Tipperary. The initial email was followed by two reminders. The survey was also promoted through social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) and the Campaign Monitor email marketing service. Five hundred and eleven questionnaires were returned (representing a response rate of 16%) and the survey data was subsequently downloaded onto SPSS for analysis. Responses to open-ended questions were coded and analysed thematically. While 511 questionnaires were returned, there were some variations in the number of responses per question, denoted by the '**N**' number in tables and figures.

Background details on responding VIOs are set out in Appendix 1, including the county in which the VIO is based, distance to the Volunteer Centre, number of years that the VIO has been in operation and size of the VIO based on annual income for the most recently completed financial year.

Defining Rural & Urban Areas

One of the key objectives of our research was to compare the experiences of VIOs based in rural and urban locations. A number of definitions of what constitutes rural and urban areas have been used in previous research and policy documents. In its report *Energising Ireland's Rural Economy* (2014) the Commission for the Economic Development of

Rural Areas (CEDRA) defined 'rural' as those areas outside the administrative boundaries of the five main cities (Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford).

This broad definition includes a number of large urban settlements, like Ennis and Mallow and has been criticised for 'not conveying the multiplicity and heterogeneous nature of rural areas and communities in Ireland' (Department of Rural and Community Development, 2018a: 12). The CSO, on the other hand, uses the term 'Aggregate Town Area or Urban area' to refer to settlements with a total population of 1,500 or more, while 'Aggregate Rural Area' refers to settlements with a population of less than 1,500. In some of its reports, the CSO (2016a) makes a further distinction between 'large towns' (10,000 or over) and 'small towns' (1,500–9999).

Participants in the study were asked where their VIO was based. The options presented to them were based on CSO categorisations, with an additional category for cities. The following are the categories that were set out in the questionnaire:

A City
Cork or Limerick
A Large Town (over 10,000 inhabitants)
e.g. Ennis, Mallow, Killarney, Clonmel, Tramore
A Medium / Small Town (between 1,500 & 10,000 inhabitants)
e.g. Kilrush, Listowel, Abbeyfeale, Cashel, Dungarvan
Rural Area
Village or other settlement of under 1,500 inhabitants.

The same categories (city, large town, small town and rural area) are used in presenting the data in this report. Table 1.1 shows the percentage and number of survey responses from each location. Overall, there was a reasonably even spread, ranging from 21–27%, with an almost identical number of responses from cities and rural areas.

Table 1.1: Location of VIO

Location	%	N
A City	27	135
A Large Town	21	101
A Medium / Small Town	25	123
Rural Area	27	131
Total	100	490

Research Interviews

In addition to the online survey, 15 semi-structured interviews were carried out with representatives from the voluntary and community sector to explore the key issues in greater detail. Purposive sampling was used to provide a range of experiences and represent different sectors.

The majority of interviewees (11) were volunteers in leadership roles, e.g., chairpersons, board/committee members and (in a few cases) founding members of volunteer involving organisations and initiatives. In addition, interviews were held with, the manager of a Family Resource Centre, a manager with a national youth-work organisation and representatives from organisations that work with and support VIOs, including a HSE community worker and a development officer with the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP). The interviews were held from February to April 2020. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically.

In the final part of this chapter, we will briefly profile the five Volunteer Centres that were involved in the research. Further details on the wider volunteering infrastructure and the policy context in which they operate, are provided in Chapter 2.

The Five Volunteer Centres

The five Volunteer Centres, that commissioned this research are part of a wider volunteering support infrastructure comprising 22[1] VCs, 7 Volunteering Information Services (VIS) and Volunteer Ireland, the national development agency for volunteering, all of which are funded by the Department of Rural and Community Development (2019).

Each of the 22 Volunteer Centre's in Ireland have the same four core objectives:

1) Increase Access to Volunteering by offering a Support Service to the Public and Volunteering Involving Organisations (VIOs).
2) Increase the Quality of Volunteering.
3) Increase Awareness of Volunteering by Marketing and Promoting Volunteering.
4) Ensure the Organisation is Sustainable through Good Governance and Management.

Volunteer Centres provide a suite of services to Volunteers and Volunteer Involving Organisations in the attainment of these four objectives. Services to VIOs include brokerage between members of the public considering volunteering and VIOs seeking volunteers,

[1] At the time of this research the Volunteer Information Services were not yet full Volunteer Centres

support and capacity building of the VIO in the development of their volunteer opportunities, advertising a VIOs volunteer needs, Garda Vetting, volunteer management training, mentoring and bespoke training.

In addition, they campaign and respond to legislation that may impact on volunteering and seek to inform planning and policy at regional and national level. As we shall see in Chapter 2, the VCs and Volunteer Ireland advocated for a volunteering strategy over a number of years and played an active role in the Department of Rural and Community Development's consultation on the draft strategy.

Waterford is the only county in Munster that currently does not have a Volunteer Centre – a VIS operates on a part-time basis hosted by Waterford Area Partnership. Volunteer Information Services provide a volunteer referral service similar to that provided by VCs, but there is no walk-in location with full-time staff. (Volunteer Ireland, 2020).

All five Munster based Volunteer Centres cater for a mix of rural and urban areas although, as Table 1.2 illustrates, there are notable variations in terms of population density. Co. Kerry is predominantly rural with 65% of residents living in areas with a population of 1,500 or less (Kerry County Council, 2015: 6). The county has the lowest population density in Munster at 30.7 per km^2, followed by Co. Clare (34.4) and Co. Tipperary (37.2). Counties Cork and Limerick are home to two of Ireland's five cities, with overall population densities of 72 and 70.7 per km^2 respectively, just above the national average of 70 per km^2 (CSO, 2016b). However, here too, there are substantial rural communities. Cork is the largest county in Ireland by geographical area at approximately 7,5000 km^2, with numerous towns and villages dispersed throughout this area, some of which are in remote locations in the west of the county.

Local factors such as geographic area, population size and population density are significant because they can impact on the capacity of VCs to meet the needs of volunteers, VIOs and local communities (McLaughlin, 2017). For example, in the case of rural areas where people and centres of population are widely dispersed, a VC may have to find ways of meeting local needs through the provision of a part-time service in secondary or additional locations, or using rooms and facilities that are hired or loaned from other organisations, all of which will have significant cost implications.

The rurality of their region has other implications for volunteering and for the work of the five VCs. The 2016 Census found significantly lower levels of broadband access in rural areas that clearly poses a challenge for

access to the online national volunteering database and to online training and other web-based resources provided by VCs. Furthermore, depopulation and an ageing population in rural areas are likely to limit the number of potential volunteers in these communities. A recent report on the demographic and socio-economic profile of Co. Kerry identified several forms of disadvantage in rural contexts, including ageing populations, youth migration, poorer services, lower income levels and higher levels of disengagement from the labour force (North, East & West Kerry Development, 2017: 6).

Similar challenges were raised at a national level in the *Realising Our Rural Potential* report, including: 'difficulties in accessing sustainable employment opportunities, the ongoing trend of migration away from many rural areas, rural crime, rural depopulation…[and] the rise of social isolation in some rural areas' (Department of Rural and Community Development, 2018a: 14). Furthermore, rural society is increasingly pressurised by a lack of services and facilities with the most vulnerable groups often needing additional assistance from community organisations and volunteers (Farrell, 2018).

These issues have significant implications for volunteering and the volunteering infrastructure. The rural context in which VIOs, volunteers and VCs operate will be considered in further detail in the review of policy and previous research (chapters 2 and 3).

Report Structure

After this introductory chapter, the next two chapters explore the policy context (chapter 2) and previous research on volunteering in Ireland and internationally (chapter 3). Chapter 4 looks at the role and impact of volunteering in the Munster region, based on the qualitative interview data. The pathways into volunteering are outlined in chapter 5, while chapter 6 focuses principally on the barriers to recruiting volunteers and board/committee members. In chapter 7 we look at VIOs' usage of VC services, the potential challenges to accessing these services and perceptions on how these services might be developed. The perceived benefits of working with a Volunteer Centre are also outlined. The final chapter (8) brings together the main findings of the research and outlines key issues and recommendations.

Table 1.2 Profile of Munster Volunteer Centres

	CLARE	CORK	KERRY	LIMERICK	TIPPERARY
Year VC Founded	2008	2003	2003	2006 in West Limerick then 2010 full county	2007
Legal Structure	CLG and Registered Charity	CLG and Registered Charity	CLG	Part of a Partnership	CLG and Registered Charity
Staff numbers	1 full time, 1 part time & 1 Community Employment (CE) participant	3 full time, 2 part time, 1 CE	1 full time, 2 part-time. CE: 2. Volunteers:1	2 full time	3 Full-Time 1 CE 2 Volunteers
Size of geographical area (km^2) served	3,450km^2	7,500 km^2	4,807 km^2	2,756 km^2	4,305km^2
Population of area served	118,817	542,868	147,707	194,899	159,553
Population density of area served	34.4km^2	72km^2	30.7km^2	70.7km^2	37.2 km^2
Number of VIOs registered with VC	288	621	437	438	513
Office Locations	Ennis	Cork City	Tralee	Limerick City, Newcastle West	Cashel, Nenagh

The geographical catchment area of the Clare, Cork, Kerry, Limerick and Tipperary Volunteer Centres amounts to 31% of the area of the Republic of Ireland.

CHAPTER 2: Policy Context

Introduction

Volunteering has a long history in Ireland, from the tradition of Protestant philanthropy in the 18th and 19th centuries, to the establishment of the co-operative movement in agriculture and rural regeneration in the 20th century and the more recent emergence of rights organisations, or communities of interest, which have become important domains for self-expression and advocacy (Prizeman *et al.* 2010). At the same time, the voluntary and community sector faces a number of challenges.

There has been a significant increase in the range and intensity of legal, regulatory and funding-related compliance requirements in recent years, without additional funding for the accompanied administrative and finance work (The Wheel, 2018). In rural areas, VIOs are likely to face difficulties arising from escalating insurance costs, a lack of facilities and funding, a dwindling population from which volunteers can be recruited and a consequent reliance on a small number of core volunteers (Farrell, 2018, 2020; Royal Irish Academy, 2019).

Despite the important role of volunteering in Irish society, it is only in the last 20 years that policymakers have intervened in a consistent way to promote, document or regulate volunteering (see Table 2.1 for key developments). The decision taken by the United Nations General Assembly to designate 2001 the International Year of Volunteers was an important turning point, focusing international attention on volunteering and on the responsibility of governments to support volunteering.

As part of its response, the Irish Government published a White Paper in 2000, which set out a framework of support for the community and voluntary sector across government departments and agencies. The importance of fostering volunteering as a means of enabling the community and voluntary sector was highlighted in the White Paper and the potential of Volunteer Centres to act as 'a vital ingredient of support' for community and voluntary organisations at local level was also recognised.

In December 2000, the National Committee on Volunteering (NCV) was established, comprising 38 members drawn from a broad cross section of organisations and individuals with an interest in volunteering nationwide. The committee was set up both in anticipation of the International Year of Volunteers (IYV) and with a view to developing a long-term

strategy to promote and extend volunteering. The NCV organised a range of events during the IYV and published its landmark report, *Tipping the Balance*, in 2002.

Tipping the Balance made two main recommendations: that a national policy on volunteering should be developed and that an infrastructure to support and develop volunteering be established comprising a National Centre for Volunteering and a network of local Volunteer Centres. Although the *Tipping the Balance* report was well received, progress on achieving its recommendations appears to have been slow.

According to a Joint Oireachtas Committee report (2005), many of the voluntary organisations that had participated in the preparation of the White Paper and the *Tipping the Balance* report felt that little had changed in the intervening period. The Joint Committee noted that 'a clear strategy is needed on volunteering', essential to which were agreed objectives, clear targets and a time frame. It further recommended that the existing volunteering infrastructure should be developed and that Volunteering Ireland and Volunteer Centres should be supported and granted long-term funding.

Development of the Volunteer Support Infrastructure

Following on from the *Tipping the Balance* and the Joint Oireachtas Committee reports, the government provided funding to develop an infrastructure of Volunteer Centres nationally and to fund Volunteer Centres Ireland, which later merged with Volunteering Ireland to become Volunteer Ireland. Volunteer Ireland is the national volunteer development organisation and a support body for all local VCs and Volunteering Information Services in Ireland (McLaughlin, 2017).

Support for a national volunteering infrastructure received a further boost in 2007 when the Taskforce on Active Citizenship (2007: 30) gave its backing to the setting up of a Volunteer Centre in every county. However, the development of a comprehensive volunteering infrastructure faced a significant setback following the financial crisis of 2008 and subsequent introduction of austerity measures. From 2008 the setting up of new centres was put on hold due to financial restrictions (Department of Rural and Community Development, 2019: 8). Volunteer Information Services were established as an alternative (albeit limited) service in counties that did not have a VC. By the beginning of 2020 there were 22 Volunteer Centres and 7 Volunteer Information Services (Department

of Rural and Community Development, 2019: 26).

Table 2.1 Volunteering in Ireland: Key Events, Publication & Policies (2000-2020)

2000	Publication of *White Paper on a Framework for Supporting Voluntary Activity and for Developing the Relationship between the State and the Community and Voluntary sector*. Setting up of the National Committee on Volunteering.
2001	International Year of Volunteers. The NCV organises a range of celebratory events. £350,000 is set aside for a grants scheme in which 95 groups were supported to develop projects, focusing on volunteering in their organisation (National Committee on Volunteering, 2002).
2002	*Tipping the Balance: Report of the National Committee on Volunteering* is published (National Committee on Volunteering, 2002). Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs is established. For the first time volunteering is named as the responsibility of a government department (Department of Rural and Community Development, 2019).
2005	Publication of Joint Oireachtas Committee report, *Volunteers and Volunteering in Ireland*.
2006	Setting up of the Task Force on Active Citizenship to review trends in civic engagement in Ireland and start a national conversation on what Active Citizenship means.
2007	Publication of the *Report of the Taskforce on Active Citizenship.*
2009	The Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs issues its Policy on Volunteer Centres. The establishment of new centres is put on hold due to financial restrictions.
2011	European Year of Volunteering. Volunteer Ireland appointed as the National Coordinating Body in Ireland. Hundreds of events, exhibitions, demonstrations and activities take place to mark EYV 2011.
2013	Volunteer Information Services emerge in counties that do not have a Volunteer Centre. I-VOL is launched as the national volunteering database.
2014	Charities Regulator is established as Ireland's national statutory regulator for charitable organisations.
2018	The Charities Governance Code is announced by the Charities Regulator. The code sets out the minimum standards that must be met in order to manage a charity. A Call for Input is issued as part of the consultation on the development of a volunteering strategy (Department of Rural and Community Development, 2018b).
2019	*Working Draft of Volunteering Strategy 2020–2025* goes out for consultation (Department of Rural and Community Development, 2019). The draft strategy includes a commitment to upgrade the seven VISs to full VCs.
2020	Covid-19 and the introduction of lockdown measures pose a significant challenge for the voluntary and community sector. Volunteer Ireland and VCs provide guidelines and other resources to volunteers and organisations, and help mobilise volunteers in response to Covid-19 .

Development of the Volunteer Support Infrastructure

Following on from the Tipping the Balance and the Joint Oireachtas Committee reports, the government provided funding to develop an infrastructure of Volunteer Centres nationally and to fund Volunteer Centres Ireland, which later merged with Volunteering Ireland to become Volunteer Ireland. Volunteer Ireland is the national volunteer development organisation and a support body for all local VCs and Volunteering Information Services in Ireland (McLaughlin, 2017). Support for a national volunteering infrastructure received a further boost in 2007 when the Taskforce on Active Citizenship (2007: 30) gave its backing to the setting up of a Volunteer Centre in every county. However, the development of a comprehensive volunteering infrastructure faced a significant setback following the financial crisis of 2008 and subsequent introduction of austerity

measures. From 2008 the setting up of new centres was put on hold due to financial restrictions (Department of Rural and Community Development, 2019: 8). Volunteer Information Services were established as an alternative (albeit limited) service in counties that did not have a VC. By the beginning of 2020 there were 22 Volunteer Centres and 7 Volunteer Information Services (Department of Rural and Community Development, 2019: 26).

Not only has the volunteer support infrastructure developed on a piecemeal basis, but research commissioned by Volunteer Ireland indicates that the sector has been consistently underfunded. According to the McLaughlin report (2017) government funding generally falls short of the actual running costs that a VC incurs in order to exist and operate at a basic minimum level of service. A Volunteer Ireland analysis of funding to the sector showed an average decrease of 24% in funding to VCs in the period 2008–2016 (McLaughlin, 2017).

At the same time, McLaughlin notes, the VCs have had to absorb additional work arising from changes in the statutory and regulatory environment, particularly with the introduction of new requirements, standards and procedures including, for example, the Governance Code. The report also points to inconsistencies in current Volunteer Centre funding and recommends that a funding framework be put in place that establishes an absolute minimum funding requirement for a VC to operate. Furthermore, it is argued that local factors such as geographic area, population size, population density and levels of deprivation should be considered when allocating funding, as these impact on access and service delivery.

National Volunteering Strategy

In 2018 the Department of Rural and Community Development took the first steps towards developing the long-awaited national strategy on volunteering by issuing a Call for Input (CFI) 'to inform and seek views from stakeholders on key topics' (Department of Rural and Community Development, 2018b: 3). A total of 44 questions were posed in the CFI document, covering a wide range of topics including definitions of volunteering, the challenges facing smaller VIOs and the role and funding of the volunteer support infrastructure. It is noteworthy, in the context of the current research, that none of the questions asked in the CFI specifically addressed volunteering in rural areas.

This is somewhat surprising, given the Department's recognition of the unique challenges facing rural communities and its commitment to rural regeneration, as set out in *Realising Our Rural Potential: Action Plan for*

Rural Development (Department of Rural and Community Development, 2018a). Indeed, one of the action points in the report concerns support for the volunteering infrastructure, therefore it might have been expected that rural volunteering would also feature in the Call for Input questions for the National Strategy on Volunteering.

The National Volunteering Strategy published on 5th December 2020 - International Volunteers Day, comprises of 5 high level objectives, with a total of 56 associated actions. The 'National Volunteering Strategy emphasises that it:

- 'builds upon and strengthens the renewed relationship and partnership between government and the voluntary sectors which has developed during the course of its preparation.
- Together with the Strategy to Support the Community and Voluntary Sectors in Ireland and the National Policy on Social Enterprise, the strategy will be the final part of a suite of policy initiatives to support the full range of organisations that are providing services to communities.
- The Strategy is underpinned by the values and principles agreed by the National Advisory Group (representative of all stakeholders established to assist in the development of the Strategy) and includes a range of actions to support volunteers and their representative organisations.

Table 2.2 Munster Volunteer Centres: CFI Summary

WHAT WE HEARD	WHAT SHOULD THE STRATEGY INCLUDE?
• Fear of governance & regulation • Urban and rural challenges differ • Volunteers do not feel valued • Volunteer burnout and well-being is a real issue • Lack of funding is limiting service provision • Restricted access to locally delivered support and information • Frustration with Garda vetting • Limited volunteer management capacity across the province	• A robust volunteering infrastructure • A national volunteering awareness campaign • Assistance to small organisations • Proportionate governance and legislative requirements for C&V groups • Fairness across the urban/rural divide • Opportunity for feedback into the implementation of the strategy

Positively the National Volunteering Strategy acknowledges the importance of volunteering, the contribution of volunteering to society and the phenomenal response of volunteers and VIOs during the Covid-19 pandemic. Reassuringly, the interim findings of this research as inputted by the VCs are recognisable in part within the strategy.

As well as highlighting the importance of volunteering in Irish society, the Strategy acknowledges the barriers and challenges facing VIOs, which were identified during the CFI, including funding levels, governance and regulatory requirements, administrative burden and capacity building. Furthermore, the report notes that, from the volunteer viewpoint, barriers included a lack of flexibility in the way, time and manner in which people could volunteer, a lack of recognition of the contribution made by volunteers and practical issues such as transport costs incurred in volunteering. Looking to the future, the Strategy identified the following five strategic objectives, each of which had linked action points, a timescale and responsible bodies:

1. To increase participation and diversity in volunteering including embracing new trends and innovation.
2. To facilitate, develop and support the volunteering environment so that it contributes to vibrant and sustainable communities.
3. To recognise, celebrate and communicate the value and impact of volunteers and volunteering in all its forms.
4. To promote ethical and skills-based overseas volunteering to deliver results for beneficiaries and to enhance global citizenship in Ireland.
5. To improve policy coherence on volunteering across government both nationally and locally.

The Strategy and the five strategic objectives reflect a number of the issues and recommendations made by the VC's in the Munster region in their submission to the CFI (as listed in Table 2.2). For example, the need for a national volunteering campaign is raised under Strategic Objective 3, in action 37 , which confirms the need to ' develop a national communications strategy to include information campaigns at national, regional and local levels communicating the value, benefits and impact of volunteering to include targeted media campaigns focusing on specific areas of volunteering e.g. benefits for the unemployed, health benefits, community benefits, young people, older people. Furthermore, Garda vetting procedures, which were identified as a challenge to volunteering in the CFI (see Table 2.2), are raised under Strategic Objective 2, action 22 which includes a commitment to 'Undertake an examination of the current Garda vetting process'.

Whilst action 13 recognises the need to 'support VIOs 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.

However, none of the 5 strategic objectives, and related actions, are specifically concerned with volunteering in the rural context. Again, this is a surprising omission in light of government policies on rural regeneration and development and the department's own remit in this area. The strategy acknowledges the importance of volunteering in rural areas but largely overlooks the unique challenges faced by rural VIOs and volunteers.

While welcoming the initial draft strategy, it also raised a number of concerns, for example, the lack of clarity and detail on the implementation and funding of several actions and the designation of a long-term timeframe for some actions (e.g., Garda vetting). Feedback on the strategy called for a number of actions, including:

- An implementation plan that provides a clear and transparent funding model for Volunteer Centres, with each centre receiving additional funding depending on factors such as population and geographical area.

- Multi-annual funding for Volunteer Centres and the community and voluntary sector as a whole to allow for long-term projects and help with staff retention.

- Assistance to volunteer involving organisations that recognises the extent of the legislative and regulatory burden they face.

- Greater recognition of the unique challenges faced by rural volunteers and volunteer involving organisations and the corresponding need for additional support to volunteering in rural areas.

- Greater recognition that some VIOs need 1:1 support, e.g., in developing volunteering roles, meeting regulatory requirements, etc.

- Meaningful opportunities for feedback into the implementation of the Strategy.

In its response to the Draft Strategy, Volunteer Ireland (2020: 1) noted that 'many actions are vague and unclear' and some are 'assigned to specific bodies but without any indications of increased capacity or resources for the body to deliver the action'. It calls for more detail on actions throughout the document and warns that the ambitions set out in the Draft Strategy cannot be achieved unless the government commits suitable funding to the specific actions. Volunteer Ireland also highlighted the importance of informal volunteering and the need for the strategy 'to facilitate it without over formalising it'.

Policy on Rural Ireland

The Irish Government has recognised the unique challenges facing rural communities, as set out in *Realising Our Rural Potential: Action Plan for Rural Development* (Department of Rural and Community Development, 2018a), which outlines over two hundred and seventy actions for the economic, social and cultural development of rural Ireland. Indeed, rural social and economic decline is of major concern in Ireland and across Europe (Irish Government, 2017; OECD, 2006). EU research points to disadvantage in Irish rural areas due to population ageing; remoteness and poor infrastructure; lack of access to health care and social services; and risk of social immobility from lower levels of participation in education and low-income seasonal agricultural work (EU, 2008).

Recent research on rural South Kerry highlighted how recessionary cutbacks to public services have compounded structural issues of rural isolation, peripherality, migration and unemployment (O'Keefe, 2015). Indeed, basic deprivation (Pobal HP Deprivation Index) in rural areas across Ireland has increased from 13% to 21.8% since 2008 (Pobal, 2018).

Studies of social cohesion, social capital and social entrepreneurship, suggest that volunteering and leadership development are crucial aspects of community development, particularly in supporting the capacity of communities to cope with change (Lovell, 2009). The literature highlights the importance of place-based initiatives and, especially, volunteer-based leadership for enhancing resiliency in rural and remote communities (Ryser and Halseth 2010). There has been a growing recognition that by strengthening local capacity to respond to social and economic change, the voluntary sector and volunteers have contributed to the retention of local services (Halseth and Ryser, 2006) and to the achievement of broader community development priorities (Halseth and Ryser, 2007).

Indeed, there is growing evidence to suggest also that volunteers within the voluntary sector are integral to community economic development initiatives, such as social housing and job training programs, where they are seen to ensure that local community needs are recognised and available local assets are mobilized (Markey et al. 2005, 2012). Very often, in these instances, volunteers provide the necessary leadership and expertise to make local development projects happen (Hanlon et al. 2011; Hanlon and Halseth, 2005).

Conclusion

Despite the importance of voluntary activity to Irish society, culture and the economy, it is only in the last two decades that the government has intervened in a consistent way to support volunteering. A significant step was taken, in 2018 when the Department of Rural and Community Development issued its Call for Input for the long-awaited National Volunteering Strategy, followed in 2019 by the issuing of the Draft Strategy for consultation and its publication in December 2020.

CHAPTER 3: Previous Research

To provide a context for the current study, this chapter will briefly review the Irish and international literature on volunteerism and on the challenges currently facing volunteer involving organisations.

The Role and Benefits of Volunteering

Previous research on volunteering (Powell *et al.* 2018; Ruddle and Mulvihill, 1999) and on VIOs (Donoghue *et al.* 2006; Prizeman *et al.* 2010) have highlighted the importance of the work of volunteers across a number of sectors. Research carried out by Donoghue *et al.* (2006), for example, found that the vast majority (83%) of non-profit organisations rated the involvement of volunteers as 'essential', 'very important' or 'important' to their operation, with sports, environment, arts and culture being particularly reliant on volunteers. The study found that 465,624 hours were worked by volunteers annually in participating organisations (N=1,830 organisations), which can be translated to a full-time equivalent of 277 persons (at 35 hours per week and 48 weeks per year).

A more recent report estimates that over 560,000 people volunteer their time every year in Ireland's 11,500 community and voluntary organisations, 8,500 of which are registered charities (O'Connor, 2016). Research has also documented the importance of volunteering for particular services and sectors, notably youth work where the vast majority of mainstream provision in Ireland is volunteer led (Powell *et al.* 2012). Similarly, volunteers are a key resource in the Citizens Information Services, according to figures published in 2010 there were '1,175 volunteers who represent 77.6% of the total staff in CISs' (Prizeman *et al.* 2010: 24).

Voluntary activity is regarded as particularly important in rural areas as a means of working towards social inclusion, improved health and well-being and improved services across a number of sectors (Woolvin, 2012: 39). Research in the Scottish Highlands and Islands, for example, found that voluntary and community sector organisations – most of which were small in size and run entirely by volunteers – contributed significantly to the social, economic and environmental well-being of the region (Woolvin, 2012: 50).

The positive impact of volunteerism in rural Ireland was recently highlighted in a report prepared by researchers at NUI Galway in conjunction with Volunteer Ireland (Farrell, 2018). The findings indicate that a significant proportion of rural volunteering

revolved around sport and sporting clubs, including GAA, rugby, soccer and athletics. As well as the obvious health and leisure benefits, rural sports have a wider social significance, helping to create 'vibrant social networks, which in turn produces social trust, cooperation and collaboration' (Farrell, 2018: 12). A lack of services for more vulnerable groups in rural areas has also meant that VIOs and volunteers are increasingly active in areas of caregiving, particularly with rural elderly, children and young people with special needs.

The key role that volunteerism plays in providing essential and non-essential services in rural areas is a recurring theme in the Irish and international literature, though it has raised concerns about over-reliance on the voluntary sector, an issue we will return to later.

Volunteering is considered to be a highly reciprocal relationship (Volunteering Australia, 2016: 15). In addition to the benefits to organisations, research suggests that volunteers themselves gain from the experience in a number of ways, including improved health and well-being, personal and professional development, a greater sense of connectedness to the community and positive feelings of having made a difference to others (Volunteering Australia, 2016; Collins, 2019; Powell *et al.* 2018; Wilson *et al.* 2017; Woods, 2017).

Research carried out by Smith *et al.* (2010), for example, highlighted the increased feelings of local belonging due to engaging in voluntary activity. Volunteers in the Citizens Information Service felt that they had contributed to society through volunteering and met new people in the process (Prizeman *et al.* 2010: 47). For participants in Low *et al.*'s (2007) research, the most important benefits of volunteering derived from the satisfaction that came from seeing the results of volunteering and the enjoyment of being involved. In addition, volunteering created a sense of personal achievement, as well as increasing social interaction – with many respondents highlighting the importance of making friends in the course of their volunteering.

Pathways into Volunteering

Understanding the routes into volunteering is of considerable interest to both researchers and volunteer involving organisations and has been explored in a number of studies. The international literature suggests that word of mouth and asking people directly are often the principal means by which volunteers are recruited.

A major UK-based study reported that word of mouth was the most common way that current volunteers found out about the opportunity to volunteer with their main organisation,

followed by previous use of the organisation's services (Low *et al.* 2007). An earlier National Survey of Volunteering also found that word of mouth was the principal means by which people found out about volunteering (Davis Smith, 1998). Similarly, a survey of VIOs in Australia found that organisations most commonly use word of mouth (90%) and personal approaches (62%) to recruit volunteers (Volunteering Australia, 2016: 17). Interestingly, research in Canada reported that one of the reasons that people cite for *not* volunteering is 'not being asked' (Volunteer Canada, 2010).

Research carried out in Ireland with student volunteers and with volunteers in the youth-work sector also points to the importance of word of mouth and pre-existing links with VIOs. Student volunteers most commonly find out about volunteering opportunities through their friends (Powell *et al.* 2018), while volunteers in youth-work organisations are often former members, or the parents of current members (Howlett *et al*. 2014). In a study with young people carried out by the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) (2011), research participants frequently indicated that they became involved in volunteering because they had been asked to do so.

On the other hand, some commentators have argued that a reliance on word of mouth and personal/organisational networks may contribute to difficulties in finding volunteers by limiting the pool of potential candidates. Based on research carried out with charities in Scotland, Harper and Doyle (2013: 6–7) maintain that while networks and direct contact are proving effective, they are not effective enough to tap into a wider pool of people interested in volunteering.

Linking services (such as Volunteer Agencies) should in theory make recruitment easier by broadening reach beyond established networks. However, the data suggests that the use of these linking services was relatively low among Scottish charities, 19% used local VAs to find suitable volunteers. Furthermore, smaller charities, those in rural areas and those with no paid staff were the least likely to use local VAs. In contrast with this, research carried out in Australia found that nearly half of participating organisations utilised their local Volunteer Centre or volunteer support organisation to recruit volunteers (Volunteering Australia, 2016: 17).

Notwithstanding the primacy of word of mouth, new recruitment methods have emerged in recent years, most notably the internet and social media. Powell *et al*. (2018), for example, found that over one quarter of students used the internet and social media to source information on volunteering, compared with only 7% who found information through

traditional media, such as newspaper and TV advertisements. This may be because students increasingly rely on new media for information and could also reflect the different ways in which organisations publicise volunteering opportunities. Previous research also indicates that there are generational differences in the use of online sources (Low *et al*. 2007).

Challenges Facing Volunteering and Volunteer Involving Organisations

The difficulties that organisations experience in recruiting volunteers has been highlighted in international literature. For example, when charities in Scotland were asked to identify the top three challenges, =hey were likely to face in the next 12 months, the second most reported challenge was 'finding suitable volunteers' (Harper and Doyle, 2013: 5). Similarly, nearly 70% of organisations surveyed by Volunteering Australia (2011: 22) reported that they needed more volunteers, a figure that increased to 85% of organisations in a later survey (Volunteering Australia, 2016: 16). Research has identified a number of potential barriers to volunteering, including lack of time, insufficient information on volunteering opportunities and lack of confidence in making the first step (Rutherford et al. 2019: 31–2).

Time commitment was the main challenge to participation in volunteering identified in Powell et al.'s (2018) study with university students in Ireland. Academic work, part-time jobs and, in some cases, a lengthy commute to and from college made volunteering challenging and curtailed participation.

Increased bureaucracy and regulation may also deter potential recruits, particularly in the case of administrative and management roles. In their study of community facilities in rural Scotland, for example, Skerratt et al. (2008) found that the majority of committees had difficulty in recruiting and retaining volunteers for the management and running of the facility. Survey respondents expressed concern at the 'amount of red tape' experienced in relation to risk assessments, energy audits and health and safety audits, for example. The authors conclude that volunteers are expected to operate within an increasingly complex funding, legislative and regulatory context, which can be difficult for them to negotiate.

Other studies have highlighted the challenges to volunteering posed by funding cutbacks to the voluntary sector over the last decade. Research in the UK suggests that sustained economic uncertainty and public spending cuts significantly weakened the support structure for volunteering and VIOs during this period. Bashir et al. (2013: 5–6) found that Local Authority cuts, which were introduced as part of austerity measures, have seen core funding

for some sections of the volunteer infrastructure scaled back or stopped altogether. Volunteer Centres, some of which had shed staff or were under threat of closure, found it increasingly difficult to provide support to VIOs at a time of declining resources.

Furthermore, public-funding cuts meant that many VIOs, particularly those operating at the community level, increasingly relied on volunteers to deliver services previously provided by paid staff, placing additional burdens on over-stretched services. As Rutherford (2019: 51) has pointed out, 'it is not only "volunteering policy" that affects volunteering, but also broader government policy in relation to the provision and funding of services that involve volunteers, both within the public and voluntary sectors'.

A lack of public services is regarded as a long-standing problem in rural areas. It has been argued that this has led to a reliance and in some cases an over-reliance, on volunteers and VIOs to provide services. Rural participants in a study in England, for example, reported that community groups were increasingly filling the gaps left when statutory services withdrew (Philimore et al. 2010: 5). Similarly, research carried out in the Scottish islands found that local people became involved in volunteering because of the lack of public service provision, voluntary service delivery was 'most commonly substitutional rather than additional to statutory provision' (Timbrell, 2007 cited in Woolvin, 2012: 25). Writing in the Australian context, Davies et al. (2018: 173) argue that the increased reliance of rural communities on volunteers to deliver essential and non-essential services has heightened concerns regarding the sustainability of volunteering, particularly in light of outward migration and an ageing population.

The structural ageing of the population, it is argued, will cause increased demand for volunteer-provided services and reduce the pool of labour available to fill volunteer positions. Similarly, Warburton and Winterton's (2017: 135) qualitative study of six Australian rural case-study regions found that while the critical importance of volunteer-run services was recognised by participants, there were also concerns that this alone would not be enough to sustain key rural social institutions, particularly as people age. Writing in the Scottish context, de Lima (2009) notes that there is a small pool of volunteers and staff from which the voluntary sector can draw in rural areas.

Difficulties in recruiting sufficient volunteers in rural areas can mean that organisations rely heavily on existing volunteers, with a risk of burnout associated with the demands of the role (Warburton and Winterton, 2017: 136; de Lima, 2009). It is significant that volunteers in rural areas often volunteer across a range of

organisations (Whittall et al. 2016: 352; Woolvin, 2012: 24, 26–7). Furthermore, while several studies indicate that the rates of volunteering are higher in rural areas (Reed and Selbee, 2000: 4; Rutherford, 2019: 5; Warburton and Winterton, 2017: 136) these figures need to be interpreted in light of the fact that rural communities are generally more reliant on services provided by volunteers.

Research in Ireland found that rural society is increasingly under pressure by a lack of services and facilities, with the most vulnerable groups often needing additional assistance from community organisations and individuals (Farrell, 2018). Furthermore, volunteers and VIOs in rural areas are likely to face difficulties in excess of their urban counterparts, arising from 'a lack of facilities, available funding, ongoing support and available and suitable transport and travel' (Farrell, 2018: 2; Farrell, 2020). The challenges currently facing the voluntary sector and volunteerism in rural Ireland need to be understood within the wider context of rural transformation and restructuring, as well as austerity measures:

> *In the last two decades, rural areas have witnessed unprecedented change and transformations; driven largely by technological innovation, social modernisation and processes of globalisation…Social change has given rise to depopulation on the one hand and counter-urbanisation and new rural dwellers on the other. Issues around commuting, access and mobility are currently widespread in some rural regions, with many others facing problems of isolation, deprivation and poor service provision. The means and support for dealing with such change can often be limited for rural communities, resulting in a reliance on voluntary activities and the volunteer sector. Subject to such change, Irish rural inhabitants have remained steadfast in their endeavour to retain community engagement, build capacity and enhance social capital. The post Celtic Tiger era however, was difficult, with austerity measures severely impacting rural community funding and support services.*
>
> Farrell, 2018: 2

The Rural Conversations report (Royal Irish Academy, 2019) also identified a number of challenges facing rural volunteering, including social and regulatory burdens (e.g., health and safety requirements, GDPR) that stifle the vibrancy and sustainability of volunteer networks. Furthermore, escalating insurance costs are placing undue pressure both on small rural businesses and volunteer groups. The report highlights the pressure on a small number of core volunteers in rural communities but also notes that the value of young people and 'new citizens' as potential volunteers has not been fully realised, which suggests that the base from which volunteers are recruited needs to be expanded.

Much of the research discussed so far has focused on formal volunteering, but informal volunteering also has an important role in Irish society and internationally (Volunteer Ireland, 2020). In the final section of this chapter we will briefly discuss both forms of volunteering.

Organised or Formal Voluntarism Versus Informal Volunteering

Organised or formal voluntarism, as the name suggests, prioritises the needs of voluntary organisations rather than the motivations of individual volunteers (Neville, 2016). Its operational principle focuses on the 'selective recruitment of volunteers' (Scott and Russell, 2001 cited in Ellis Paine *et al*. 2010:. 104; Weeks *et al*. 1996) so as to service a gap, either in personnel or in skills, that exists in the voluntary organisation. Over the past decade, there has been a growing interest in the nature of the socio-economic and spatial variations in formal and informal volunteering (Merrill, 2006; Milligan, 2007; Williams 2003a, 2003b, 2004). One argument to have emerged is that the culture of volunteering in lower-income communities is more grounded in informal volunteering, while in affluent areas it is more oriented towards organised participation in voluntary groups (Williams, 2003b, 2004). Thus, a focus on formal volunteering exclusively, can exclude the contribution made to society through informal volunteering, which is more the norm in working-class communities.

Limiting what 'counts' as volunteering excludes the rich legacy of informal helping and mutual aid that sustains well-being in many marginalized communities. Indeed, research highlights voluntary acts that are not always recognized as volunteering, including being a good neighbour in rural and urban communities (Conley, 2005; Shrestha and Cihlar, 2004); long-standing helping traditions in communities of colour (Martin and Martin, 1985; Smith *et al.* 1999; Stack, 1974); and care work (Fuller, Kershaw and Pulkingham, 2008; Herd and Meyer, 2002). Sundeen, Raskoff and Garcia (2007: 295) note that, 'rather than being misanthropic, these groups [accustomed to informal care giving and mutual aid among relatives and friends] frequently engage in informal ways that are not detected by survey instruments focusing on volunteering to formal organizations'. These themes that fall outside of the traditional definition of volunteering may understate the contributions of individuals engaging in informal helping. In sum, the term volunteering as traditionally applied in scholarly research is limited in its ability to reflect the full dimensions of voluntary participation in diverse communities (Benson,).

Communities with more non-profit organizations have higher volunteer rates

(CNCS, 2010), whereas disadvantaged neighbourhoods often have insufficient infrastructure and resources to create and maintain voluntary associations, which results in fewer opportunities for formal participation (Musick and Wilson, 2008; Stoll, 2001; Wilson, 2012). Living in higher poverty areas may also tax volunteering because of the greater stressors on individuals and families (CNCS, 2010). An unequal distribution of opportunities between disadvantaged and advantaged neighbourhoods could therefore have a disproportionate impact on volunteer activities. In sum, a structural perspective considers not only who engages in volunteering and why, but also the extent to which disparities in access and opportunity may systematically impede participation (Benson).

The literature also refers to how organised voluntarism has rendered the volunteer a blunt 'instrument of policy' (Cromby and Willis, 2013: 5), pushing forward government priorities at the expense of community. That is, the formalisation of volunteering in organised voluntarism ensures that the volunteer subject is no longer an autonomous actor but is subjectified by various bureaucratic responsibilities. The formalisation and professionalisation of volunteering results in volunteers meeting legal and project responsibilities, with their performance increasingly monitored and managed by paid staff (Gaynor).

Conclusion

Previous Irish and international studies have highlighted the importance of the work of volunteers and volunteer involving organisations across a number of sectors. Due to limited local services, rural communities are likely to be particularly reliant on volunteer-led initiatives. While volunteering is clearly well embedded in Ireland and other countries, the evidence also suggests that volunteerism currently faces a number of significant challenges. As we shall see in the following chapters, many of the issues raised in the literature review resonate with the findings of the current study.

CHAPTER 4: Role and Impact of Volunteering

In this chapter we outline the role of volunteers and VIOs in local communities in the Munster region. The data presented here is derived from the qualitative interviews in which participants discussed the contribution of well-established VIOs (such as Tidy Towns and Meals on Wheels) and the emergence of new initiatives to respond to community needs.

Responding to Local Needs

Previous research, both in Ireland and internationally, suggests that VIOs play an important role in responding to local needs and often provide services that would otherwise not be available. This is particularly the case in rural areas where volunteer-led services are 'most commonly substitutional rather than additional to statutory provision' (Timbrell, 2007 cited in Woolvin, 2012: 25).

There were numerous examples in the current research of VIOs taking the lead in the provision of services, including sports and fitness, social and leisure activities and community development projects. The research also indicates that volunteers are active in a range of caring and health-related roles, for instance, organising transport for hospital appointments for rural residents, assisting staff in nursing homes, hospital visiting, counselling services and respite for people with Alzheimer's. The following is one example of where a cancer support group was set up to respond to local needs and bring this service 'out of the city and into community areas':

> *Most people had to go to Cork city for support or had to pay for counselling and psychotherapy in the community which a lot of us wouldn't have had the money for…So we decided that if we did something it would be more community based and available to people without cost so that they could come regularly enough to get support but not have to worry about what it would cost them to do that. So that is how it came about. The idea of bringing a community support group to a local area meant that the people wouldn't have to travel for that – it would have an established base to work from, an established group that they would get to know and they could use that for all of their processes of working through their diagnosis. So I suppose we provide a service that wasn't here, it wasn't in the community at a local level…It brings it out of the city and into community areas.*

Volunteer-led initiatives have also emerged to address rural decline and isolation. One interviewee, for example, described how a Tidy Towns committee and later a community development company, were established to

address the infrastructural needs of a rural village that was 'being left behind' (see Box 4.1). The setting up of a community-owned tearoom and shop in another village was a response to rural isolation and a lack of services. In this case, the closure of shops and businesses had left the village without a focal point and there were few opportunities for neighbours to meet (see Box 4.2). The tearoom has now become a model for others, with 'groups from other parts of Ireland coming wanting to do the same thing in their own parishes'.

Box 4.1: Community Development

Back in 2010/2011, the Tidy Towns reconvened after a 15-or 16-year lapse. The village had been bypassed by the Clare/Limerick motorway a few years before and that had had a devastating impact in terms of the physical appearance, broken roads, footpaths and just the physical fabric looked very, very poor. So the Tidy Towns reconvened a new committee to try and do something to change that. Within about a year, they realised that it would take more than a Tidy Towns' committee to put a structure in place to avail of grant programs and negotiate with local authorities and other stakeholders to make the necessary improvements, particularly in the public realm. So the idea came up then to establish a community development company...Having seen the improvements in neighbouring villages and towns, the funding that went in through sports facilities, community hall and other facilities, it was clear that our village was very much being left behind.

So that community development company then quickly engaged with the local authority in terms of local-area planning and where Clarecastle would be positioned within the local authorities' overall plan for the county. We took on a couple of projects, like a playground, and got grant funding for that, and a Heritage & Wildlife company was established and that really took off. It published a number of books and maps and literature, so that sort of acted as a catalyst for getting projects up and running.

Box 4.2: Community Facilities

Well, we started [the tearooms and shop] in 2012 and it was set up specifically to deal with the rural isolation and the lack of services in the village. Like we had seven businesses in this village at one stage and of the seven businesses there is only one left; so everything closed down and we had nothing – for years and years and years there was nothing…Our population here is about 800 in the whole parish and there are about 300 houses in the parish, but you would have to travel to Thurles, which was six miles away, or Templemore, which is four miles away, to get anything you needed, any groceries, bread or milk, or whatever; so there was a huge need to have a service in the village.

But then people had nowhere to go, there was no focal point unless you were going to the church or the school you didn't meet your neighbour; so there was nothing in the village to draw people into the village. Again, this is why we set it up – to deal with those two huge big problems that we have in the parish. So we formed a co-operative and we asked the people in the parish to become shareholders in it. So they are all shareholders in the business and it is their business.

It is set up on a not-for-profit basis, but any profits we make go back into either enhancing this or doing something in the parish. Like we help out the school, we help out the hall, we help out loads of different organisations in the parish…It has made a huge difference. It really is the hub – it is the heartbeat of the community now – it really is, and like it is a focal point and everything that happens, happens here, you know, it is great. It seems to be like a magnet for the whole parish as a hub. It is a lovely way to work together and bring people together…We thought initially when it was a tearooms that it might be perceived as somewhere the ladies would come to lunch or whatever but no, it is not – the men use it just as much – and the children use it, and we could have a baby a few weeks old come in with his mam and you could have the oldest person in the parish; so it is everybody.

Promoting Social Interaction and Inclusion

The research findings indicate that volunteer-led initiatives provide a bulwark against social isolation, particularly for older people and those living in rural Ireland. One community worker, for example, described initiatives such as Active Retirement as 'a lifeline for people in rural communities' as they provide an opportunity for people 'to get out and socialise…and catch up with what's happening in the community'. Similarly, another interviewee noted that voluntary groups 'provide a really very important basis for social interaction and for some people it is about the only kind of interaction they may have during the course of a week'. Even initiatives that do not ostensibly have a social function can provide social and mental-health benefits for both volunteers and service users:

> *A lot of the volunteering in Ireland I would see as having a real social element. Like, for the Meals on Wheels, a lot was about people coming in, having the chat, having the cup of tea, having the bit of banter, you know, and all that. Same with the Thrift Shop because there is the element of meeting the customers, negotiating sales – all that kind of thing. There is a huge benefit to mental health with all of those types of volunteering initiatives.*

Volunteer-led initiatives have also helped promote social inclusion for Ireland's growing migrant community. Fáilte Isteach, for example, is a volunteer-led project that was established in 2006 to provide free conversational English classes in venues throughout Ireland. One interviewee described how the branch, which she had helped establish, in Limerick expanded its original service (for adults) to cater for the needs of young people who had not yet secured school places and who were, therefore, outside the formal education system:

> *One year, was it 2015 or 2016, we had a big group of Afghan people, some of whom were under age and we said, 'Well you can't come if you are under 18.' And these lads just kept coming…because they wanted to learn so in the end we formed a group for under 18s and, again, that was run with volunteers. They eventually got school places and we thought our work was done there. Then we got a load of Muslim young women who were finding it difficult to get school places; so, they could have been from a variety of different countries, like Pakistan. They eventually got places. It is still running…It does work very well and that really is a testament to the volunteers – they are amazing people.*

Another participant reported that young migrants from a village in Tipperary had become more involved in their local community through health and fitness groups, initially as members and later as volunteers. Over the last decade, there has been an increased focus by academics and

policymakers on the role of sport in promoting social inclusion and integration (Collins, 2019). The National Sports Policy 2018–2027, for example, states that 'active and social participation by migrants and ethnic minorities can help combat the social exclusion they often experience' (Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, 2018: 13). The need to explore 'the potential of sport in the integration of migrants' is also identified as an action point in The Migrant Integration Strategy – A Blueprint for the Future (Department of Justice and Equality, 2017: 34).

There were other examples in the research of voluntary activity promoting inclusiveness and greater understanding between different groups who might otherwise have few opportunities to interact. For example, the founder of a social group for children with disabilities described the contribution that student volunteers make to the group, and how the students themselves learn from the experience:

> *The students are actually brilliant – they are really an exceptional part of the club because the children coming, especially the older children, see them as their peers…whereas we are the grannies and the mammies minding them. And it really makes an awful difference to the students as well, because they really get to learn what it is to interact with people with disabilities – I think that is a very important thing in today's world.*

The findings indicate that volunteer-led initiatives benefit a number of different groups, including older people, people with disabilities, and vulnerable children and adults. According to one interviewee, volunteer-led services have 'stepped in to fill the gaps' in provision left by the state:

> *There are services that are being provided by volunteers throughout Ireland that I think the government probably takes for granted. Projects like delivering a hot meal to an older person three times a week – I mean that is invaluable. You know, fundraising for activities for people maybe with disabilities or vulnerable adults – there is just a whole array of services that the government – they are able to take their 'eye off the ball' because the volunteers have stepped in to fill the gaps within communities, you know.*

Community Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic and Lockdown

Although not part of the original remit of the research, the interviews provided an opportunity to look at the response of volunteers and VIOs to the Covid-19 emergency and the lockdown from March 2020 onwards. The roles played by volunteers in emergency and disaster management have been well documented in international research. According to Whittaker *et al.* (2015) this research challenges the popular

perception that disasters and emergencies 'unleash chaos and disorganisation, with citizens becoming passive victims, panic-stricken, or engaging in antisocial behaviours'. Instead, individuals and groups have generally been found to become more cohesive than in 'normal' times, commonly working together to overcome challenges. Indeed, Whittaker *et al*. (2015: 359) argue, ordinary citizens are usually 'first on the scene' and remain long after official services have ceased.

The response to Covid-19 in Ireland and in other countries, exemplifies the idea of citizen action and collective working in the face of a national and international emergency. There has been an upsurge of formal and informal volunteering to provide support to older people and other vulnerable groups. Volunteer Centres have reported a sharp increase in the number of volunteers registering with them in response to Covid-19. Cork Volunteer Centre, for example, reported that by June 2020, 1603 people had registered an interest in volunteering directly in response to Covid-19.

To put this figure in context, a total of 1714 people had registered to volunteer in 2019. Between the 12th March and 12th June 2020, Kerry Volunteer Centre processed the online registration of 473 volunteers, 412 of these were Covid-19 Response Volunteers. In the same three-month period in 2019, they dealt with 127 volunteers and for the whole of 2019 the number of volunteers was 416. As such, over a year's volume of volunteers were recruited and processed within three months, largely in response to Covid-19 (Kerry Volunteer Centre, 2020: 1).

Voluntary organisations across Ireland have mobilised their members to help assist those most at risk during the pandemic. Burren Community Meitheal based in Clare is an umbrella group of 25 separate organisations. It is one example of how communities have responded to the emergency, set up to coordinate the response of groups across North Clare, the Meitheal provides practical supports (e.g., shopping, collecting prescriptions) to people who may be unable to leave their homes during the lockdown. As well as the tangible benefits to those who avail of the service, the Meitheal has made people feel more empowered, as one representative from the group pointed out:

> *I think it has made the people of the area feel empowered in a difficult time. I think it has made the people in the area feel safer and that people in their area care. I think it has given the people who have become involved in it a sense of, again, empowerment in a time where you would have felt helpless.*

As the final comment above illustrates, volunteering is reciprocal, with volunteers themselves deriving indirect benefits (in this case a sense of empowerment) from the experience. Although it was beyond the scope of the current study to consider in any detail

the role of volunteers and VIOs during the on-going pandemic, this is clearly an issue that warrants further research, for example in relation to the extent and impact of both formal and informal volunteering, and the challenges that social distancing presents for volunteering.

Recognising the contribution of volunteers

An important theme in the interviews was that there needs to be far greater recognition – at national, local and organisational level – of the huge contribution that volunteers make. Some participants felt volunteers were currently not receiving the credit that they deserved, and that this needs to be rectified. The following were typical comments:

> *It would be good to see the volunteering element recognised more, valued more, and I am not even talking about a monetary value – but that the volunteers are valued and recognised I think is the most important thing.*

> *And to recognise volunteering. I think an awful lot of the work that is done in this country is done through volunteering, you know, and to recognise it for what it is.*

In light of these findings the government's commitment to recognise, celebrate and communicate the value and impact of volunteers and volunteering in all its forms as contained in the National Volunteering Strategy it is welcome and builds on work already being carried out to recognise volunteering, for example, the Volunteer Ireland Awards organised by Volunteer Ireland in conjunction with the local Volunteer Centres.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the extent to which volunteering builds social capital across citizens, communities and organisations was illustrated through a series of brief case studies drawn from the qualitative interviews. It is clear that volunteer involving organisations play an important role in identifying and addressing local needs, often providing services that would otherwise not be available. The research shows that volunteers are particularly active in the areas of health and caring, community development and rural regeneration. Furthermore, volunteering initiatives help to address the problems of social isolation and loneliness, particularly amongst older people and those living in rural communities. The social inclusion of Ireland's growing migrant community has also been facilitated by volunteer-led initiatives. In the following chapter we will consider the pathways into volunteering, drawing on the survey and interview data.

Box 4.3: Community Response to the Covid19 Pandemic & Lockdown– Burren Community Meitheal

We brought 25 clubs together, community groups and various interests: tourism and centres as well of the area. They came together under one umbrella.

We have one central number for that entire region. Logistically this region – which is a large area across North Clare – we have divided into four manageable sub-regions with appointed leads in those areas…Most of the calls that we have gotten to date have been from elderly people who are cocooning and have been asked to stay home, or people who have disabilities and are also at a high risk of this thing, and they would be looking really for the simplest things: getting their weekly shopping, or picking up their prescriptions from the chemist, or maybe their fuel – those kinds of calls. And we will make phone calls to people to see how they are getting on…A lot of services have closed down, like the Day Centre in Lisdoonvarna where a lot of people from around North Clare would go to was closed at an early stage. They used to come and get their dinners there, so what is going on now is that the local hotel is cooking dinners and the volunteers, or some of the volunteers who were already working with the Day Centre, will bring hot meals to the people who don't have the Day Centre to go to anymore because it is closed…

I think it has made the people of the area feel empowered in a difficult time. I think it has made the people in the area feel safer and that people in their area care. I think it has given the people who have become involved in it a sense of, again, empowerment in a time where you would have felt helpless – it has occupied their minds. I think it has brought – certainly in terms of the Voluntary Centre and a couple of other agencies who would have played a big role in it – agencies together. And it helps – it has the potential and it is doing it at the moment – it shortcuts solutions and it prevents the duplication [of services]. If it can be maintained, I think it creates a different way of thinking that I think should be very beneficial in that you maximise everything that you have, which is really important everywhere but in rural areas it is important in a different way…

We are looking at using that model and that connectivity that people have re-established, if you like, to see how can this be used for good through all the challenges that are coming, because we are not through this – we won't be through it for quite some time. There are economic challenges coming – maybe we can look at supporting local businesses through it through networks, maybe we can…We have a few counsellors volunteer to help with issues that are coming up with anxiety and worry; so there are a lot of resources in it. So, if nothing else, it has actually been I suppose good – even for myself I would say – it has kept me busy and kept me feeling like I am not helpless. For everyone that is involved in it, they had something, if you like, to occupy them that they could feel like they were doing what they could.

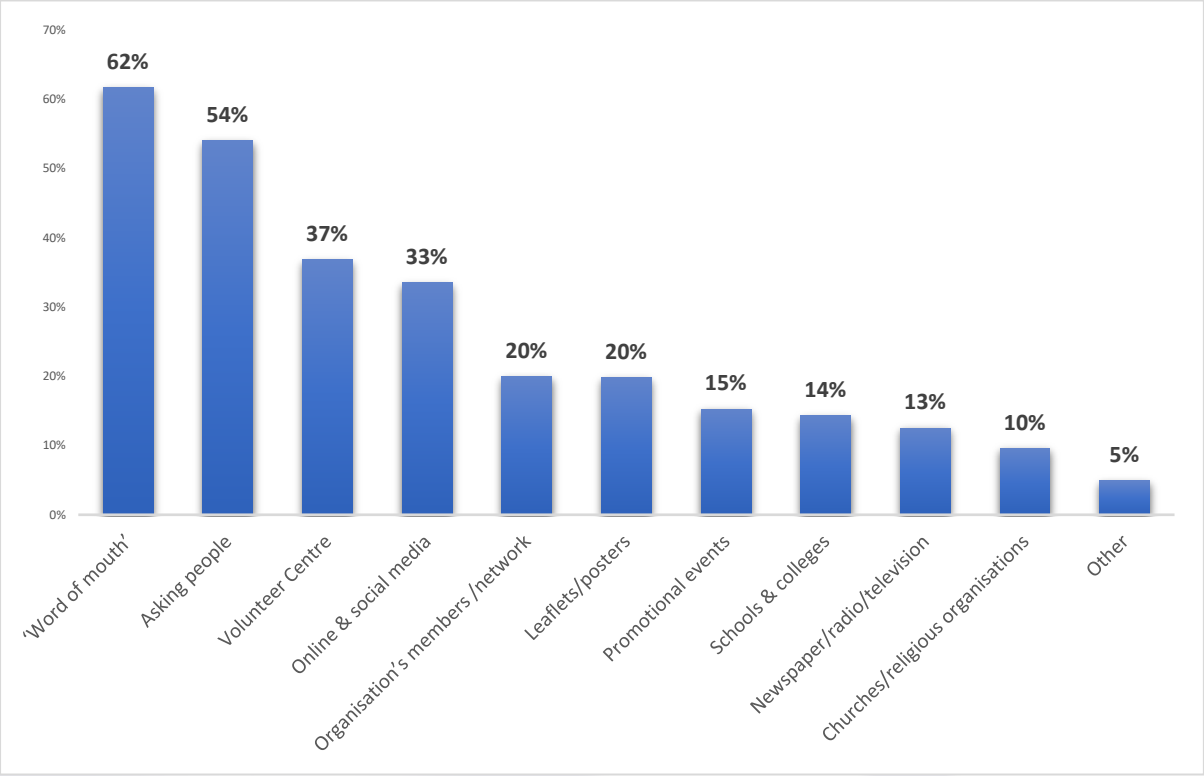
CHAPTER 5: Volunteer Recruitment

Understanding the routes into volunteering is of considerable interest to volunteer involving organisations, Volunteer Centres and policymakers in the voluntary and community sector. This chapter explores the principal routes into volunteering identified by VIOs and why certain methods of recruitment are perceived to be particularly effective. The recruitment of volunteers through the Volunteer Centres' national volunteering database is considered in the second part of the chapter.

Pathways into Volunteering

Survey participants were asked to indicate how their organisation usually recruits volunteers. As Figure 5.1 shows, word of mouth (62%) and asking people directly (54%) are the principal means of recruitment, followed by registration with a Volunteer Centre (37%) and advertising through online platforms and social media (33%).

Figure 5.1: How Volunteers are Recruited



Further analysis of the data (by location) indicates that VIOs in rural areas are far more reliant on recruiting through word of mouth and asking people directly, than organisations in urban areas. 69% of VIOs in rural areas and small towns usually use word of mouth to recruit volunteers, compared with 53% of VIOs in cities and large towns. Similarly, 63% of VIOs in rural areas indicated that they approach potential volunteers directly, compared with 41% of those in cities. A picture emerges of rural organisations relying largely on word of mouth and asking people directly, whereas urban organisations are more likely to utilise a range of methods to recruit volunteers.

The importance of word-of-mouth and asking people directly was also highlighted in the interviews with VIOs, most of whom said that these were the principal means by which their organisations recruit volunteers.

A Volunteer Coordinator, from a national youth-work organisation that uses several different recruitment channels, explained why word of mouth is seen as being particularly effective:

> *Word of mouth – I don't think you can beat it because you are hearing a positive story from someone you know is engaged in a volunteering capacity. So if you know someone down the street from you who says, 'Oh you should come and do this, it's great,' you kind of go, 'Ok,' because they're the ones that told you. It's not something on TV, or social media, or the paper, or whatever.*

Another interviewee – who had a wide range of experience in both rural and urban volunteering – suggested that word of mouth is especially prevalent in rural settings "because people have those contacts, they have those long-lasting contacts, they have those relationships and they have the goodwill of embedded relationships if you like that have been there for quite a long time". She went on to say that there can be 'a reciprocal arrangement' between projects and VIOs in rural areas, whereby they help each other at different points.

In some cases, the confidential or challenging nature of the service may lead VIOs to approach potential volunteers directly. An interviewee from a cancer support group, for example, explained that,

> *"We would have to sit and think carefully because everything is very discreet and you wouldn't want to have anyone who would be talking about it…so we really, really think about who we have helped or who is out there that we know?"*

Aside from word of mouth and asking people, interviewees identified a number of other means through which volunteers are recruited, including local radio and newspapers, parish newsletters, social media (particularly

Facebook[2]) and the Volunteer Centres. Several organisations also recruited volunteers through schools and colleges. For example, one VIO offers placements for trainee counsellors. In another case, school students (aged 16+) are given the opportunity to volunteer with a social club for children with disabilities. By recruiting through secondary schools, the club was able to bring in a younger volunteer cohort, which was seen to be particularly valuable when working with children.

There were variations in the extent to which VIOs in the interview group utilised different methods of recruitment: while some used several methods, others appeared to rely almost entirely on word of mouth and asking people directly. Overall, the interview data was in line with the survey, indicating that VIOs, particularly those in rural areas, tend to rely primarily on word of mouth and asking people directly in order to recruit the bulk of their volunteers.

Recruitment of Board Members

In the case of vacancies on boards and committees, potential candidates are usually asked directly to take up these positions. The interviews suggest that this is partly due to a particular skill set may be required (e.g., financial or legal knowledge), but also because people tend not to put themselves forward for these types of management/administrative roles, in the way that they might for other volunteering vacancies. As the manager of a Family Resource Centre explained:

> *When we talk about specifically our board of management which is a huge challenge – people really don't want to volunteer for boards of management – it is too much responsibility, they are the legal employer – so we have tried many recruitment drives for that unsuccessfully. Now, what we have taken to doing is we have just gone on recommendation and we personally ask somebody. General recruitment for our board of management – always unsuccessful.*

While the interviewees felt that word of mouth and asking people directly are generally the most effective means of recruiting volunteers, one participant cautioned that this can limit the profile of the group:

> *Well the downside, I think, is that what you then tend to get is a replication of the profile of the people who are in it already, because we tend to ask those similar to ourselves…I do think that is one of the downsides – you tend to get, maybe, the friends of the friends coming on board, and then maybe you don't get a cohort of people as*

[2] One youth-work organisation, for example, used a targeted campaign on Facebook to reach a particular cohort, young men, who were under-represented in their volunteering base.

willing to challenge and as willing to look critically at the organisation, you know…You can end up with cliques and all of that developing within a community – that is the other downside of it, you know.

He went on to suggest that this may be slowly starting to change, particularly in the case of board/committee membership where a wide range of skills are needed: 'We are now being pushed to look at skill sets and that kind of thing and what do we need to bring on board in order to make this work properly.' However, as the role of board members becomes increasingly complex, VIOs face challenges in recruiting people to these roles, an issue we consider in chapter 6.

Advertising Volunteer Vacancies through Volunteer Centres

As outlined in chapter 1, a primary role of the Volunteer Centres is to assist VIOs in recruiting volunteers, principally through advertising on I-VOL. I-VOL is the national searchable database of volunteering opportunities in Ireland and is owned, managed and administered by Volunteer Ireland and the network of Volunteer Centres (Volunteer Ireland, 2020). Members of the public who register on the national volunteering database can apply for volunteering roles advertised on the database. The individuals contact details are then forwarded, by the local Volunteer Centre, to the VIO that advertised the volunteer opportunity. The volunteer centre acts as the link between the individual wishing to volunteer and the organisation seeking volunteers.

The survey set out to investigate potential regional variations in the use of this recruitment service by VIOs across Munster and to identify the reasons why some organisations might choose not to avail of this service.

Survey participants were asked if their organisation had advertised volunteering vacancies through a VC in the last 18 months. As Table 5.1 shows, 40%[3] advertised through a VC, while a further 47% did not. However, there were significant differences between locations: only 20% of rural VIOs advertised, compared with 49% of city-based organisations, 46% of organisations in large towns, and 43% of organisations in small towns. The figures suggest that the more urbanised the location, the more likely it is that VIOs will recruit through a Volunteer Centre.
Not surprisingly, a similar pattern emerges in relation to distance from the VC: while 56% of

[3] This is a slightly higher figure than the 37% who said that they *usually* recruit through a volunteer centre (see Figure 5.1). The difference is likely to have arisen from the way in which the questions were worded – 40% of VCs may have recruited through the Volunteer Centres in *the last 18 months*, but a slightly smaller proportion (37%) recruit through them on an on-going basis.

those within a 5km radius of the VC said that they had advertised vacancies with them, this figure drops to 39% for those at a distance of 5–20km, 27% for those at a distance of 21–35km and 22% for those based over 35km from the VC. Furthermore, there were variations depending on the size of the organisation: 36% of small organisations (those with budgets of under €25,000 per year) advertised with a VC, compared with 44% of medium (€25,000–€250,000) and large (€250,000+) organisations. Differences here may be due to the fact that larger organisations recruit more volunteers and are therefore more likely to use a range of recruitment methods, including advertising with a VC.

Table 5:1: Advertising Vacancies through a Volunteer Centre

Advertised vacancies	%	N
Yes	40	192
No	47	226
N/A, we didn't have any vacancies	5	25
Not sure	8	37
Total	**100**	**480**

Reasons for not recruiting through the national volunteering database

Interview participants reported that their organisations had used the Volunteer Centres' recruitment services to varying degrees. Some had recruited significant numbers of volunteers through this channel, others rarely or never availed of the service, or used it in a limited way, for example, to fill short-term or one-off vacancies (e.g., stewarding an event). In some cases, usage of the national volunteering database had changed over time. VIOs initially relied on word of mouth and their own networks but turned to the Volunteer Centres when they began to expand and needed more volunteers.

In order to meet the needs of VIOs and develop their services, it is important that VCs understand why some organisations might choose *not* to use their recruitment service. In an open-ended survey question and in the interviews, participants from VIOs that generally do not advertise through a VC were asked to say why this was the case. The main themes from both data sets are outlined below

Location of the Volunteer Centre vis-à-vis the VIO

One of the most frequently mentioned reasons for not advertising vacancies through Volunteer Centres concerns their location. Because VCs are based in cities and large towns, some participants questioned whether they would be effective in reaching potential volunteers in more rural areas. As one survey participant pointed out: "The closest volunteer centre is 84.4km away from us and there is no good in recruiting through this as people living locally wouldn't be

checking the website" Other comments suggest that VCs are regarded as a resource for urban rather than rural areas, for example: "I thought we were too far away and that it was only for bigger towns and cities", "The centre is in the city so don't know if its relevant to us".

There is a perception that the people who register with VCs live outside rural areas, in the larger towns and cities where the VCs are based. Although volunteering vacancies are advertised online through the national volunteering database, it was clear that the physical location of the VC was regarded as significant to the recruitment of volunteers.

Preference for Personal and Organisational Contacts

Some VIOs appear to be unwilling to register vacancies on the national volunteering database because they regard the use of an online database as an arbitrary or impersonal way of finding volunteers, compared with more direct approaches. One interviewee explained, for example, that he usually recruited volunteers through his own networks, rather than through a VC, because "the devil you know, at times, is better than the devil you don't know". In this case, the VC was occasionally called upon to help recruit volunteers for one-off events (e.g., stewards for a rally or parade) where large numbers of volunteers were required for a relatively short period of time but, as a general rule, word of mouth and personal contacts were the main channels of recruitment.

Need for Specific Skills and Experience

In some instances, VIOs expressed doubts as to whether the VCs would be able to recruit volunteers with the necessary skill sets: "We need to target specific skill sets and experience from the local community and doubt if the local VC have such individuals in their database". The need for specific skills may, again, lead VIOs to draw on their own networks and ask people directly. While several participants questioned whether the VCs would be able to recruit 'suitable' candidates (in terms of attributes, experience or skills), a few also acknowledged that these doubts were based on their own preconceptions, and could be unfounded:

> *"It would be good to know if there is a match between the role of the voluntary member of our voluntary group and what the Volunteer Centre can provide from its list of candidates. The perception that there is no such match (which could be wrong) prevails".*

> *"To be fair, it may be that the Volunteer Centre has voluntary applicants who would be suitably motivated and willing to become involved in our voluntary group. As matters stand now, we are not aware if this is the case. So, there is a need for communication, probably by our voluntary group, with the Volunteer Centre".*

The need for more communication between VCs and VIOs, mentioned in the second comment above, was raised at several points during the research.

Lack of awareness of VC recruitment services

Some survey respondents appeared to be unaware that Volunteer Centres offered a volunteer recruitment service or were unsure how to access it. Even organisations that had availed of certain VC services (e.g., training, Garda vetting) may not necessarily know about their online recruitment service. One interviewee, who had used the Garda vetting service for a number of years, said that she had only recently found out about their recruitment service:

> *"I didn't realise that they did as much as they did and I have only been more aware of that maybe in the last year, which is a shame because I didn't realise there was a huge amount more than they actually did do".*

A few survey respondents also noted that members of the local community were unaware of the Volunteer Centres, e.g., "don't think people are aware of them"; "I don't think people in [rural town] know much about them". Similarly, one interviewee, from a rural village, expressed doubts as to whether local people would be aware of the recruitment services provided through VCs, adding that "there's probably lots more people out there who would volunteer if they knew". Regardless of whether these participants are correct in thinking that local people do not know about the Volunteer Centres, it is, nonetheless, significant that they perceive this to be the case, as it may influence their decision on whether to advertise through a VC.

Developing Volunteer Recruitment Services

Research participants (including those who had or had not advertised vacancies through VCs) were asked to identify what more the Volunteer Centres could do to improve the recruitment services that they provide to VIOs. The main suggestions are set out below.

- Make greater use of different social media outlets to promote volunteering, e.g. 'more posts on social media', 'highlight a different organisation weekly', 'advertise more – use Facebook and social media'.

- Promote volunteering through traditional media (local newspapers and radio) and events, including volunteer open days/fairs, coffee mornings for existing and prospective volunteers, stands/exhibitions in local shopping centres, information sessions for targeted groups, and taster courses on volunteering. Promotional events and traditional media were seen as particularly important in reaching out to

potential volunteers who are not online or familiar with social media.

It should be noted that Volunteer Centres already undertake the kinds of activities listed above including using social and traditional media, hosting information stands at local and regional events and delivering presentations on volunteering to different groups, for example, retired people, students and unemployed people (see, for example, Cork Volunteer Centre Annual Report, 2019a: 23). Survey respondents were either unaware that the centres undertake a range of promotional activities or think that these activities need to be expanded or developed further. The suggestions above were made both by those who had used VC recruitment services, as well as those who had not.

- Raise the profile of the VCs so that VIOs and the general public are more aware of their volunteer recruitment service. As one respondent pointed out, "Continue to raise awareness nationally about Volunteer Centres so that people know there is a central source for volunteer vacancies."

- A related point is that there needs to be more communication with VIOs, so that the Volunteer Centres are better placed to understand their recruitment needs and what strategies might work best for them. Again, it should be noted that VCs already undertake one-to-one meetings and consultations with VIOs, though this aspect of their work is limited by staffing levels, resources and geographical areas covered (see Chapter 1).

Raising Awareness of Volunteering in the Community

Apart from helping individual VIOs to recruit volunteers, one of the wider objectives of the VCs is to raise the profile of volunteering in the community, for example, by hosting events during Volunteer Week[4], delivering information sessions to different groups, participating in college volunteer fairs and engaging with local media.

Fifty-six per cent of survey respondents felt that VCs were effective or very effective in raising awareness of volunteering in their community (see Table 5.2). The highest rankings were from VIOs in large towns (77% of which indicated the VCs were effective/very effective) and the lowest was from rural areas (45.5%). Furthermore, only 12% of rural VIOs thought that the VCs were very effective, which is notably lower than the ratings from VIOs in other areas, particularly large towns

[4] National Volunteering Week is a week dedicated to highlighting volunteering across Ireland and is run by Volunteer Ireland in partnership with the network of Volunteer Centres and Volunteering Information Services (Volunteer Ireland, 2020).

where 41% of respondents said that the VCs were very effective in raising awareness.

As might be expected, there were significant differences depending on whether or not the organisation had themselves availed of VC services in recent years: 68% of those who had used VC services said they were effective/very effective in raising the profile of volunteering in the community, compared with only 28% of those who had not used VC services.

Table 5.2: Effectiveness of Volunteer Centres in Raising Awareness

Level of Effectiveness	%	N
Very effective	24	111
Effective	32	150
Not very effective	18	83
Not at all effective	3	15
Not sure/don't know	22	103
Total	**100**	**462**

Implications for Policy and Practice

In this section we will consider the implications of the findings on pathways into volunteering for policy and practice.

Raising public awareness of Volunteer Centres and I-Vol, especially in marginalised areas

The findings suggest that some VIOs, particularly those in rural areas, do not use the VC recruitment service due to a lack of awareness or preconceptions about the nature of the service (e.g., that it is focused on urban areas). This points to the need for national and local awareness-raising campaigns on the recruitment role of VCs and the national volunteering database, an issue that was raised in the Call for Input (see, for example, Cork Volunteer Centre, 2019b: 15). -

On the basis of the current research, we suggest that the communications campaign planned under the National Volunteering Strategy include components that, increase awareness of the national volunteering database, highlight the added value of advertising through it (e.g., reaching a wider public) and address possible misconceptions (e.g., that VC recruitment services are for urban rather than rural areas). It is important that campaigns relating to the national volunteering database target both VIOs and the general public.

As we have seen, some organisations do not advertise through VCs because they believe that local people do not know about the service and so are not registered on the national volunteering database at t the same

time, if people are to search the database for vacancies, then local organisations need to post volunteering opportunities. While a national awareness campaign is important, there is also scope for more targeted promotions of IVOL in rural areas where the VC recruitment service is underused. It is noteworthy that the areas that experience the greatest difficulty in recruiting volunteers are often those that are least likely to use VC recruitment services.

Understanding, strengthening and promoting volunteer recruitment via word of mouth, local networks and relationships

Consistent with the international research literature, our research identified that for the majority of people, their pathway to volunteering is through word of mouth, that is person-to-person contacts, local networks and relationships. Being asked directly to volunteer is a powerful motivating and sustaining factor. VIOs can further activate the potential of word of mouth through inviting potential volunteers to be part of a co-productive framework, or to be partners in identifying needs and defining opportunities for volunteering. Co-production, as applied to volunteering, is a practice in which citizens are involved in the conception, co-creation and delivery of volunteer activities. Volunteer Centres could provide support in developing such a framework and over time, build an evidence base in this area.

Conclusion

In this chapter we discussed the different routes into volunteering. In line with international studies, the research found that recruitment is primarily through word of mouth and asking people directly. In relation to the use of VC recruitment services, there were notable differences between rural and urban organisations, only one fifth of rural VIOs had advertised with a VC in the previous 18 months, compared with nearly half of those in cities and large towns. The research indicates that the more urbanised the location, the more likely it is that VIOs will recruit through a Volunteer Centre. These findings are in line with an earlier study carried out in Scotland, which reported that charities in rural areas were amongst the least likely to use local Volunteer Agencies to recruit volunteers (Harper and Doyle, 2013: 6).

As outlined in Chapter 3, national and international research suggests that voluntary organisations often find it difficult to recruit a sufficient number of volunteers. In the next chapter we will discuss the barriers to recruitment identified in the current study.

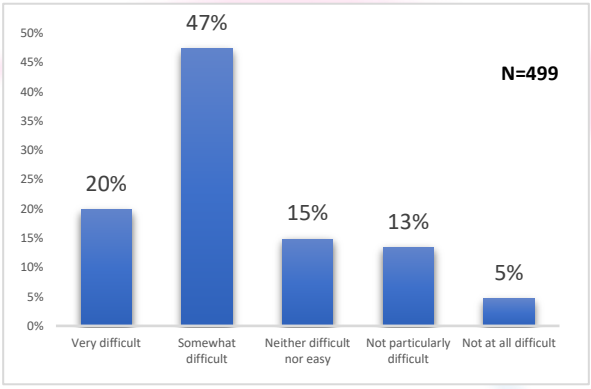
CHAPTER 6: Barriers to the Recruitment & Retention of Volunteers

This chapter focuses on the challenges that VIOs face in the recruitment and retention of volunteers. Survey participants were asked a series of questions about volunteering vacancies within their organisation, how difficult it is to recruit and retain volunteers and board/committee members and the potential barriers to volunteering. As well as statistical data, detailed responses were collected through an open-ended survey question and the interviews.

Recruitment of Volunteers

Previous research suggests that voluntary organisations often find it difficult to recruit a sufficient number of volunteers (Harper and Doyle, 2013; Skerratt *et al*. 2008; Volunteering Australia, 2011 & 2016). Nearly three quarters (74%) of VIOs in the current study reported that they had volunteering vacancies: 53% have a 'small number of vacancies', while a further 21% have a 'significant number of vacancies'. In a follow-up question, participants were asked if they found it difficult to attract new volunteers. As Figure 6.1 illustrates, the majority of respondents indicated some level of difficulty, with 20% reporting that it was 'very difficult' to attract new volunteers and 47% that it was 'somewhat difficult'. Only 18% reported that their organisation had little or no difficulty in recruiting volunteers.

Figure 6.1: Level of Difficulty in Recruiting Volunteers



There were significant differences in terms of location: the data suggests that VIOs in rural areas and towns find it far more difficult to recruit new volunteers than those in cities. For example, 78% of organisations in rural locations find it difficult to recruit, compared with 55% of those in cities (see Table 6.1). Moreover, VIOs in rural areas and small towns are twice as likely as those in cities to find it very difficult to recruit new volunteers.

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Table 6.1: Level of Difficulty in Recruiting Volunteers by Location

Location	Very difficult	Somewhat difficult	Neither difficult nor easy	Not particularly difficult	Not at all difficult
Rural	28%	50%	9%	10%	3%
Small Town	26%	41%	19%	12%	2%
Large Town	13%	56%	13%	10%	7%
City	13%	42%	18%	22%	5%

Recruiting Board and Committee Members, and Trustees

Fifty-nine per cent 59% of survey participants reported that they found it difficult to recruit volunteers to management/administrative roles, e.g., board members, committee members or trustees (Figure 6.2). Again, the data suggest that VIOs in rural areas are more likely to find it difficult to recruit volunteers for these roles: 71% of VIOs in rural areas reported that they had difficulties, compared with 47% of city-based organisations, 58% of organisations in large towns and 61% of organisations in small/medium towns. Moreover, while nearly one fifth of organisations in cities and large towns said that they found recruitment very difficult, the figure for rural organisations was twice this (40%). These figures resonate with previous research, which found that charities in rural areas of Scotland experienced challenges in recruiting board members at a higher rate than those in the rest of the country (Woolvin and Rutherford, 2013: 25).

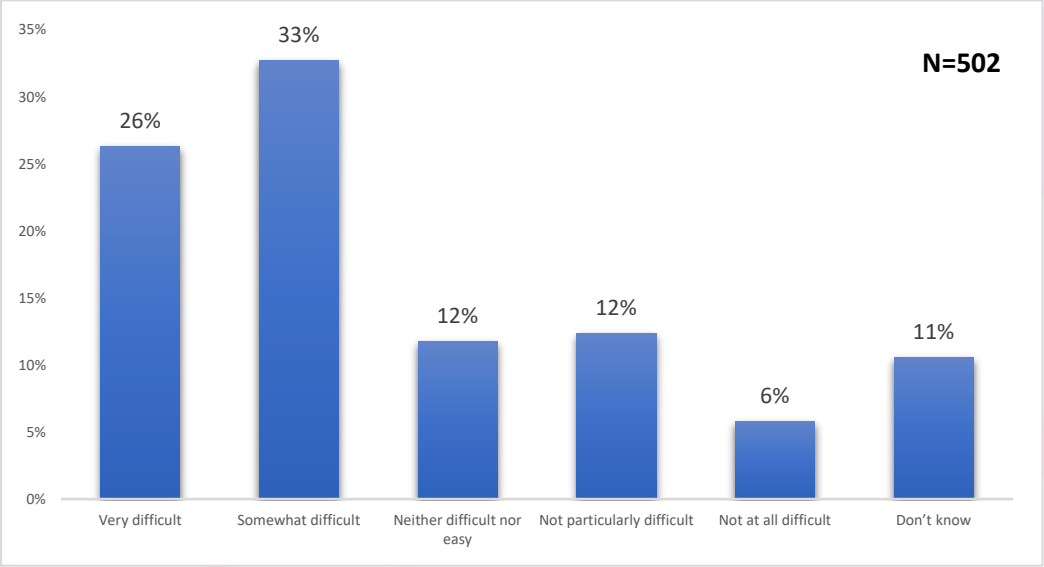
The interview data provided a mixed picture. In a few cases there was a well-established board/committee, so that the issue of finding new members did not appear to be a concern (e.g., 'They are all there since inception…that is solid,'). Others described a gradual, and sometimes challenging, process of building up a committee with the right balance of skills and experience:

> *It was very hard work for us at the beginning, when we started, as our volunteers weren't up for the banking and all of the things that go with the treasurer's job, and the website thing was way beyond us. As time moved on, people have moved into the committee with us and now we are kind of well set up that way.*

However, several VIOs reported significant, ongoing difficulties in bringing in new committee/board members, an issue that we will consider in more detail next.

The increased regulation of the voluntary and community sector has also had significant implications for the recruitment of board/committee members.

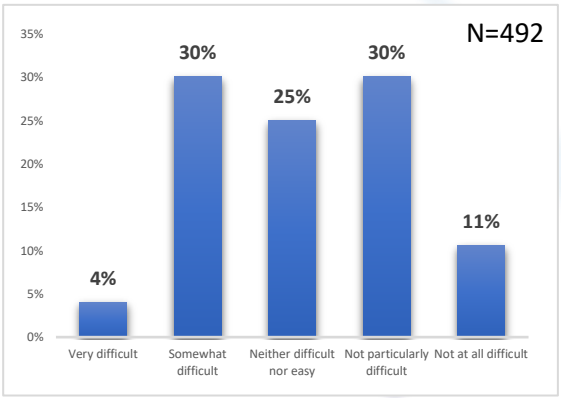
Figure 6.2: Level of Difficulty in Recruiting Board/Committee Members & Trustees



Retaining Volunteers

Retaining volunteers appeared to present fewer difficulties than recruitment, just over one third of survey respondents reported having difficulties in this regard (Figure 6.3). There were relatively minor variations depending on location. Interestingly, city based VIOs were the most likely to report that they had difficulties with retention (37%), followed by rural areas and large towns (34%) and small/medium towns (30%). The data indicates that while VIOs in rural areas are more likely to experience difficulties in recruiting new volunteers, they are in a comparable position to organisations in other areas in terms of retention.

Figure 6.3: Level of Difficulty in Retaining Volunteers



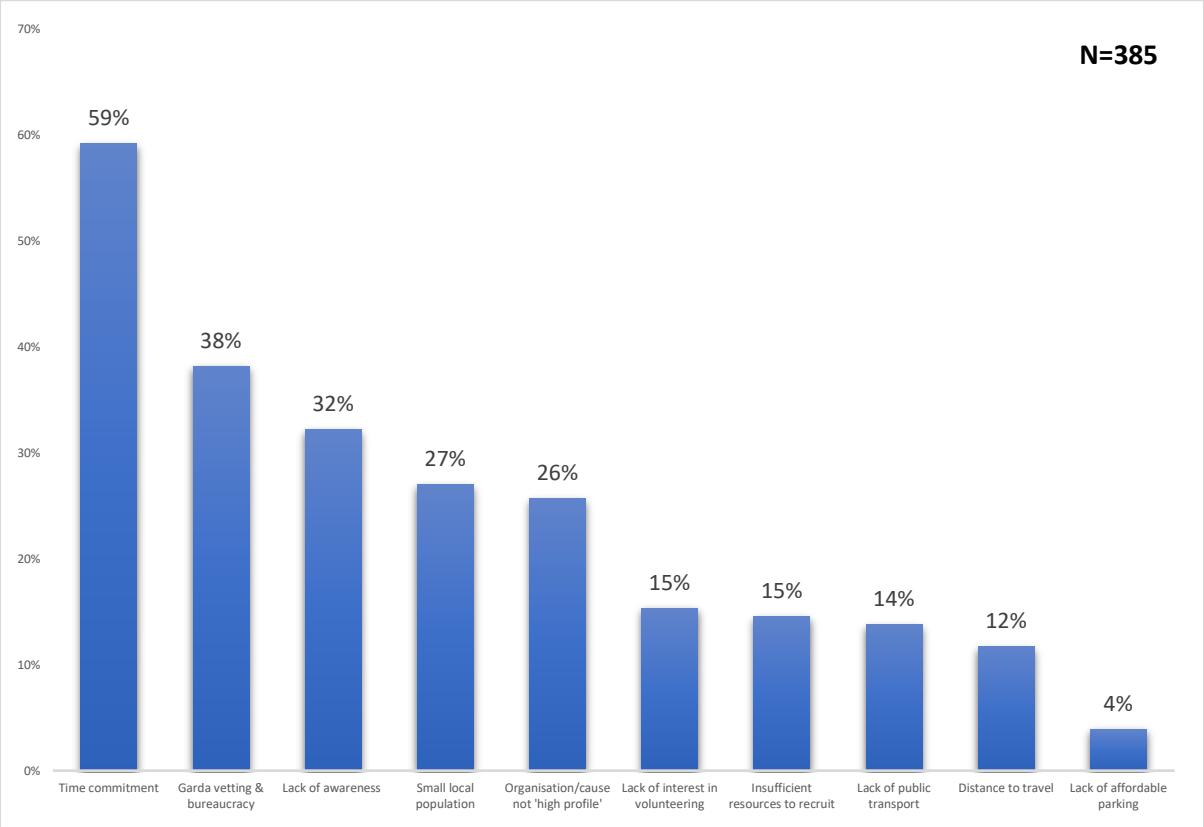
Barriers to Volunteering

Survey respondents who indicated that their organisations have had difficulties with recruitment were asked to identify what they saw as the main barriers to volunteering. As Figure 6.4 shows, time commitment (59%), Garda vetting and other bureaucratic procedures (38%) and a lack of awareness of volunteering opportunities or how to get

involved (32%) were the three main issues identified.

Further analysis by location revealed a number of similarities and differences across the data set. For example, time commitment is seen as the main barrier regardless of location and Garda vetting/bureaucracy featured in the top three barriers across all locations. For rural organisations, a very small local population from which to recruit volunteers was ranked second (after time commitment), with 51% of rural VIOs identifying this as a barrier, compared with only 9% of those in large towns. There were also differences in relation to the availability of public transport and parking. 17% of VIOs in towns and rural areas identified a lack of public transport as a barrier, compared with only 3% of city-based organisations. Finally, VIOs in cities and [all] towns were significantly more likely, than those in rural areas, to identify a lack of awareness of opportunities and how to get involved as a barrier.

Figure 6.4: Barriers to Volunteering



Survey participants had the opportunity to provide further information on the barriers to recruitment in an open-ended question.

Where applicable, interview participants were also asked to identify what they regarded as the main obstacles to volunteer recruitment in

their organisations. The main themes from both data sets are presented below. While some of the issues raised by participants are general in nature (e.g., time commitment), others are specific to rural areas (e.g., depopulation) or to the recruitment of boards/committee members. Because there were additional challenges to recruiting in rural areas and recruiting board/committee members, these will be considered under separate headings below.

Time & willingness to commit on a regular basis

Lack of time emerged as a central theme in the survey. Respondents noted that busy working lives and young families meant that many people were unwilling to commit to volunteering on a regular basis:

> *"I think getting people to commit to a weekly 1–2hr slot on a consistent basis is the biggest challenge. Volunteers' circumstances change, their families grow and it can be hard to stretch time to deliver on all commitments, especially with young children in the house".*

Busy working lives and young families mean that some VIOs rely on retired people, as one participant explained:

> *"Most volunteers are retired people. All young people are either working long hours or rearing families. As people are now travelling long distances to work, they have to leave very early to avoid traffic black spots and they arrive home late, again, due to traffic problems. This leaves them with very little time to do anything in the evenings but a few jobs around the house and to relax. They feel obliged to spend time at weekends with their children and spouses/partners."*

> *"The general public believes that volunteering is a matter of dropping in when it suits, they don't necessarily understand that the commitment has to be, for instance, 3 hours per week on a certain day, between certain hours. People see volunteering as more fluid".*

The need for a regular commitment was seen to result in the loss of potential volunteers, who might otherwise be willing to contribute time on a casual, short-term or ad hoc basis. As one survey participant pointed out, "People want to help, but more so in an irregular pattern". Similarly, several interviewees noted that it is often easier to recruit volunteers for projects with a definite end date:

> *"One of the most successful of the volunteering bodies I would say are the Special Olympics. I think one of the reasons for that is, volunteers are asked to do a very specific thing for a very specific period of time. Once it is done, it is done, and you are finished. I think one of the worries that people have in terms of joining things is they get in, but they will never get out".*

Another respondent noted that there is a vicious circle, whereby people are deterred

from volunteering because they see how overstretched current volunteers are, leading to further reliance on these volunteers:

> *"People see the small group of volunteers and the time commitments on them and will not then volunteer themselves. Ironically, that's why the existing volunteers are overstretched".*

Garda vetting and other regulatory requirements

A recurring theme in both the interviews and survey was that increased regulation and paperwork have placed an added burden on VIOs, which could stifle new initiatives from emerging and deter potential volunteers. The Garda vetting process was a considerable point of frustration, particularly as volunteers have to be vetted separately for different organisations. Several interview participants called for more streamlined procedures including, for example, 'some kind of passport' or similar documentation to prevent the need for multiple vetting. The increased regulation of the voluntary and community sector has also had significant implications for the recruitment of board/committee members, an issue we look at in more detail below.

Profile of the organisation

Some survey respondents reported that their organisation or cause was not as high profile or popular as others, making it more difficult for them to attract volunteers, for example:

> *Because it is a group with an ecological, environmental focus, it does not have broad appeal, so the pool of potential candidates to join is small.*

> *The organisation is not well known – only those families who need to use our services may know about us.*

> *People have busy lives and there are other high profile/louder organisations calling for their time.*

In addition, a few respondents indicated that their organisation did not have a clearly defined target group or cause, making them less attractive to potential volunteers:

> *Our organisation is not well understood (working with disadvantaged communities) and not high profile. There are a number of other organisations in the area with a clearly defined sector or target group that is often more attractive to volunteers.*

> *[There is a] lack of interest in getting involved in a community organisation that operates on behalf of the whole community, e.g. Tidy Towns, as opposed to, for example, a sports club/a particular cause/a hobby club.*

While some VIOs seemed to suffer from a lack of public recognition, one respondent (from a well-known national organisation) noted that recruitment had suffered as a result of negative publicity: 'Public image isn't good at

this time so people [are] not wanting to be involved.'

Nature of the work undertaken by the organisation

Organisations may also find it difficult to recruit volunteers because of the nature of their work, for example, several survey respondents noted that it can be difficult to recruit volunteers to work with people with Alzheimer's and dementia. In the case of youth work, a manager from a national organisation said that it was far more difficult to find volunteers for the Garda Diversion projects than for mainstream clubs, because the projects work with 'high risk young people and that's not for everyone'.

First aid and first response groups also faced challenges because of public perceptions of what the role involves: 'As it is a responder group, people are afraid about what they will see and feel they wouldn't cope,'; 'The line of work we do is not for everyone, we are first responders and deal with people in cardiac arrest,'; 'People think it's all blood and guts, when it's not.' However, the survey data suggests that it can also be difficult to recruit volunteers for more routine tasks, such as fund-raising collections, because, as one respondent pointed out, 'they do not like the idea of holding a bucket on a collection day'.

Skills & Experience

Survey respondents reported that they had difficulty in finding the right people or people with particular skills sets and experience, for example: 'We work in the area of addiction, finding volunteers with the right level of experience can be difficult,'; 'Sometimes volunteers are required with specific skills and this is usually a huge barrier,'; 'Specific qualities are needed that are not easily sourced.' In other cases, it was familiarity with a particular cohort or issue, for example, 'Our LGBT groups need someone who knows about LGBT issues.' Where VIOs required volunteers with particular expertise or knowledge, it became more difficult to fill volunteering vacancies.

Capacity to Support Volunteers

In some cases, VIOs found it difficult to recruit and retain volunteers because the organisation did not have the capacity to support and train them, as the following comments from the survey illustrate:

> *Staff are very stretched, so that when we get a volunteer it takes precious time away from their busy schedule to train and support volunteers. It would be fantastic if we could afford a Volunteer Coordinator – we can't.*

> *We do not have the staff resources to actively manage volunteers as well as we would like.*

Other participants commented on the lack of clearly-defined roles for volunteers, which meant there was little point in even trying to attract new people. As one interviewee pointed out:

> *[In one of the groups I'm involved with] we have never done a real recruitment drive for volunteers…and even if we had them, I am not sure we would know exactly what to do with them. So, I think one of the difficulties also is that people don't have good, clear volunteer frameworks. Like if you join, what exactly will we be asking you to do?*

Similarly, two other interviewees noted that if volunteers 'don't have a meaningful role' or are 'just there to make up the numbers', they are unlikely to remain with the organisation. The importance of developing new and 'imaginative' roles that might appeal to potential volunteers (particularly younger people) was also noted.

Additional Barriers to Recruitment in Rural Areas

As well as the barriers to recruitment outlined above, participants from rural areas identified a number of challenges associated with their location. A recurring theme was that rural areas often have relatively small populations from which potential volunteers can be drawn. The process of rural depopulation has had a significant impact on the civic life of some communities, as one interviewee from a remote, rural area explained:

> *I think what we have identified as being a major problem in our locality here is that – and I am sure it is a problem that is nearly countrywide, or every place bar the east coast anyway – there is a generation that is lost to rural Ireland. That would be the generation from 25 to 40 years of age…The young people – that generation – they are all gone, they are all working in the cities or working outside of the country, working in London, working in Australia, New Zealand, wherever. They are not anchored in the local community like a certain amount of my generation, which was the generation prior to them, was…They are not there for fielding a GAA football team, they are not there for volunteering their services for any voluntary activities in the community. They are part of some other community – they are gone. That is creating major problems.*

Participants also noted that because there is a small pool of potential volunteers in rural communities, the same people often volunteer across a number of organisations, leading in some cases to volunteer burnout:

> *If you live in a rural area that has maybe 500 or 600 people, you have got a very limited pool of volunteers that you can draw from all the time, and you are very likely to be drawing from all the same people to get involved in the different projects in the rural area. So you come across*

scenarios where there is burnout or, you know, volunteer fatigue almost…That can create scenarios then where groups become stagnated, or they just don't get involved in new projects anymore because, well, they don't have the energy for them.

Other barriers to volunteer recruitment linked to locality included the distance to travel to VIOs, as one interviewee from a rural village explained:

It's a headache – because you have to travel. If you are in a town you are only down the road which makes it so much easier. But like here, no matter what you do here, you are travelling into this place. No matter who comes here, unless they are in the village, they have to travel. And they have an expense then at that. If it's no expense to you, it's easier to do it…We always have vacancies. There's not a queue of people coming to volunteer. It's very difficult to get people to volunteer.

Other participants also noted that the cost of travel and lack of public transport make it more difficult for certain groups (the unemployed, those on low incomes, students, young people) to participate in volunteering in rural villages and towns, for example:

If you live in a rural area, and you are in a position to volunteer, but you have no transport – that is going to be a major factor as to why you might not get involved, because you have no access to getting to the meetings or getting to the activities or getting to the festival, you know…And then if you are also in receipt of maybe a social welfare payment, you don't want to end up volunteering and it costing money out of your pocket, whether it is fuel in your car or food or whatever it is or, if you have to pay childcare to get involved in volunteering, you are not going to do that.

It was also noted that some rural inhabitants travel long distances to and from work, which significantly limits the amount of time available for voluntary work. According to one interviewee 'a lot of the rural areas now are just commuter belts and people leave in the morning quite early and are coming back late at night and all they want to do is literally fall into bed'.

Finally, it should be noted that while the data suggests that VIOs in rural areas are more likely to experience difficulties in recruiting sufficient numbers of volunteers, several interviewees also commented on the community spirit in these areas and the willingness of people to get involved. Where difficulties arose, it was attributed to the issues described above rather than to a lack of interest on the part of members of the community.

<u>Barriers to recruiting boards of management / committees.</u>

Interviewees and survey participants consistently reported that the amount of regulatory and legal responsibility now falling

on boards and committees is a significant barrier to the recruitment of new members). It was noted, for example, that the role of committee members had 'changed dramatically over the last number of years', that organisations are now 'consumed in red tape' and consequently 'struggle to achieve the goals/purpose they came together to achieve'.

Board and committee members often felt ill equipped to deal with these changes, as one interviewee pointed out: "the government put this big bureaucratic process in place and they expect volunteers and amateurs to be able to manoeuvre their way through it". The findings suggest that VIOs are operating within an increasingly complex legislative and regulatory context, which can make it difficult to attract volunteers for leadership roles. The challenge can be even greater in rural areas due to a small population, as one interviewee pointed out: "We are struggling to get young people to come in and to get involved and it isn't for want of trying – it is because they are just physically not there".

Another potential barrier identified in the research relates to the longevity of committee/board membership. It was noted that when the membership of committees remains largely unchanged over many years, this in itself can become a deterrent to new people putting themselves forward. According to one interviewee:

> *"A lot of organisations have the same people involved for the past 20 years…and that is a challenge because it can block new people from getting involved in groups, because they see it as nearly like a clique where they are saying, 'Oh we won't get involved with them because that is the same old crowd the whole time,' or, 'You couldn't get involved there, they don't want anyone,' – there is that element".*

Another participant noted that where committees have been in place for many years, it can lead to burnout for the individuals concerned and to 'stagnation' for the organisation, "it's not good for them and it's not good for the organisation". While acknowledging the undoubted challenges of finding new board/committee members, several interviewees recommended that fixed terms of office be introduced and followed and that VIOs take a proactive approach to attract new people.

Box 6.1: Comments on Regulatory and Governance Requirements

The work associated with it from a governance and compliance point of view and so on, has changed dramatically over the last number of years…There is a huge amount of learning involved for people in order to be fully compliant from a governance point of view and so on, and to expect people to do all of that in a voluntary capacity as well as do their other duties as directors, with little or no supports to help them, is a tough matter for people as well. People would be inclined to say, 'Look to hell with it,' you know – 'there is too much involved in that, why would I bother. If I want to volunteer my time, I can do it somewhere else where it isn't that onerous.'

It is because there is a legal responsibility, they are legal employers, you know. If there is bullying in the workplace or if there is a cut in funding, it is the board of management that are responsible for all of those final decisions and it is huge, it is huge on them. I think they just don't want it because they have to sign up as directors, they are notified to Revenue as being directors, they are notified to the Charities Regulatory Authority as being directors – there is a very, very high level of responsibility for boards of management and people really just don't want to go there – they don't want to do it…And we wouldn't be alone in that – you would find that challenge with a lot of Family Resource Centres or a lot of charitable organisations, that challenge would be there for them.

The legal responsibilities now attaching, say, to the company secretary role, filing returns, the bureaucracy, dealing with banks – all quite time consuming and all quite bureaucratic. That certainly can be a challenge to get people into those kinds of roles. To get people into a chair position, to take responsibility for chairing a group – very challenging. People don't seem to have the time or the inclination to take on the more leadership roles, that is probably the best way of putting it. It's difficult to get people to take on leadership roles.

There is an issue with the bureaucracy and legal responsibility that now falls to board members, i.e. audited accounts, strategic plans, business plans, annual projections, policy register, insurances, etc. As an existing board member, if I told a possible new member all of the above they would run a mile from it. These are generally small organisations trying to do the right thing but can get consumed in the red tape and struggle to achieve the goals/purpose they came together to achieve.

Organisational Capacity

As we saw above, organisational capacity (e.g. resources/personnel to train or support volunteers) can impact on the recruitment of new volunteers. The issue of capacity was explored further through a series of statements – on administration, volunteer training and support, and workload – with which survey participants could agree or disagree.

Box 6.1 and Table 6.2 provide an indication of the challenges that organisations face in difficulties with recruitment mean they 'rely heavily' on their current volunteers, while nearly half indicated that volunteers within their organisation are overburdened. Furthermore, a substantial proportion agreed/strongly agreed that they 'struggle to keep up with the regulations and paperwork involved in recruiting volunteers' (40%), and do not have 'the resources to adequately support and train new volunteers' (42%) or existing volunteers (39%).

Table 6.2 Organisational Capacity

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	N
We struggle to keep up with the regulations & paperwork involved in recruiting volunteers	15%	25%	31%	24%	5%	481
We don't have the resources to adequately support and train new volunteers	13%	29%	26%	25%	7%	473
We don't have the resources to adequately support and train existing volunteers	11%	28%	28%	26%	7%	472
Difficulties in recruiting new volunteers mean that we rely heavily on our existing volunteers	34%	40%	15%	9%	2%	475
Our current volunteers are overburdened	20%	28%	25%	23%	4%	477

There were significant differences depending on location. Table 6.3 shows the percentage of VIOs within each location that agreed/strongly agreed with the five statements. In each case, the highest level of agreement came from rural VIOs, followed by those in small towns, large towns and cities. In some instances, there is more than a 20% difference: for example, 63% of organisations in rural locations agreed that their volunteers were overburdened, compared with 37.5% of urban organisations.

In a later question, survey participants were asked if their organisation had a designated Volunteer Coordinator. Just over one third (36%) of respondents indicated that their organisation had a coordinator; 56% said that the organisation did not have a coordinator, while a further 8% were unsure.

There were variations depending on location: only 28% of organisations in rural areas had volunteer coordinators compared with 40% of those in cities and large towns. Not surprisingly, the percentage also varies depending on the size of the organisation: 31% of small organisations said that they have a designated Volunteer Coordinator, compared with 43% of large organisations. In cases where a VIO is both small *and* rural, the percentage with a Volunteer Coordinator falls to just 25%.

The interviews and open-ended questions provided further insights into some of the challenges facing organisations with regards to capacity and resources. In relation to training, for example, one interviewee, who sat on several committees, asserted that:

Table 6.3: Organisational Capacity by Location

	Rural	Small town	Large town	City
We struggle to keep up with the regulations & paperwork involved in recruiting volunteers	52%	43%	35%	30.5%
We don't have the resources to adequately support and train new volunteers	52%	42%	41%	34%
We don't have the resources to adequately support and train existing volunteers	47%	40%	35%	31.5%
Difficulties in recruiting new volunteers mean that we rely heavily on our existing volunteers	82%	79%	71%	63%
Our current volunteers are overburdened	63%	51%	40%	37.5%

> *Induction is rarely done…Part of it, to be honest with you, is who has the time? It is all very well saying this stuff and it is all very well saying all about the governance, but I know it is so hard just to keep the show on the road. You would have to have somebody and their job is that they are the officer for volunteer induction…So I think there is a whole thing about resourcing volunteer maintenance and minding volunteers and making it an important function within all organisations.*

Furthermore, several participants noted the difficulties of operating from premises that were not fit for purpose ('small and overcrowded premises') or of having no dedicated premises. For example, one interviewee from a rural VIO described situations where local groups had to hold meetings in people's kitchens, or in a room at the local pub, because they did not have a community centre.

It was also noted that many VIOs are unable to pay volunteer expenses, including travel costs, which is problematic in terms of attracting volunteers from low-income groups. Interviewees asserted that: 'There shouldn't be any costs attached to volunteering,'; 'They really should be compensated for the cost of their petrol,'; 'No volunteer should be out of pocket,'; and 'It's enough to be giving up your time without having to pay for the privilege as well.' In light of this, it was proposed that funding be made available to VIOs to cover volunteer expenses. The manager of a Family Resource Centre, for example, suggested that funding allocated to charities should have a small percentage increase to be used to support volunteers.

Implications for Policy and Practice

<u>Enabling volunteering through a more streamlined regulatory system</u>

The commitment in the National Volunteering Strategy to 'undertake an examination of the current Garda vetting

process', with a view to creating 'a more streamlined Garda vetting system' (Department of Rural and Community Development, 2019: 38) is to be welcomed. In light of the findings of the current study – and the earlier VCs and VI Call for Input consultations – it is recommended that the planned review address the issue of multiple vetting and that the timeframe for achieving this goal be revised from long term to short/medium term. Garda vetting is, of course, only one element of an expanding regulatory framework. Increased regulation is stifling existing VIOs and the emergence of new initiatives, especially given the limited capacity of smaller organisations to meet growing regulatory requirements.

There is a need for more streamlined and proportionate regulatory procedures, to help voluntary groups use their time wisely and focus their energy and resources where they are needed most. There is also a need to provide support to board/committee members, such as free training or one-to-one support for smaller organisations, to help them meet regulatory requirements, an issue we return to in the following chapter.

Developing new volunteering roles

Time continues to be one of the main barriers to organised or formal volunteering. The data suggests that VIOs will need to consider ways of creating short-term, flexible volunteering roles and one-off projects to appeal to those who are interested in volunteering, but do not want to commit on a regular basis. This is acknowledged in the Draft Volunteering Strategy under Strategic Objective 1 (Department of Rural and Community Development, 2019). The VCs have an important role to play in supporting VIOs to reimagine how they engage volunteers in shorter micro-volunteering projects, consistent with local needs.

Raising awareness of organised and informal volunteering opportunities and how to get involved.

A lack of awareness of volunteering opportunities or how to get involved was identified as a barrier by almost a third of survey respondents, therefore the proposed national volunteering campaign, under Strategic Objective 2 of the Draft Volunteering Strategy, is an important step in addressing this. A focus on informal volunteering is also required that seeks to further bolster the ability of people to engage in one-to-one and neighbour-based mutual support. The need for greater recognition of informal volunteering is raised in Volunteer Ireland's response to the draft strategy (Volunteer Ireland, 2020).

Recognising that VIOs in rural areas and small towns operate in a very different context to those in urban settings.

The findings of the current research suggest that distance and smaller population numbers impact the ability of VIOs to recruit volunteers and board/committee members. Distance also affects access to professional development, new information, ideas and innovations, which in turn can limit pathways to solutions to entrenched problems. It is, therefore, important that policymakers develop strategic policies, incentives and long-term supports that reflect the unique context of volunteering in rural regions. These should be linked to wider policies on rural regeneration.

Assisting VIO's to develop capacity

The National Volunteering Strategy recognises the need for capacity building, proposing to: 'provide a bursary fund to support volunteer involving organisations to build capacity in their organisation', and 'invest in capacity building in VIOs through the delivery of a suite of training to Volunteer Managers' (Department of Rural and Community Development, 2019: 38). Furthermore, the strategy recognises the need to strengthen the volunteering infrastructure if these objectives are to be achieved. Specifically, it commits to providing 'funding to Volunteer Centres and Volunteer Ireland in order for them to provide support and capacity building to volunteer involving organisations and volunteers (Department of Rural and Community Development, 2019: 39). The VCs already provide support to VIOs to build capacity in a number of areas, for example, through Volunteer Leadership Training (VLT) and one-to-one consultation. However, some VIOs – particularly those in rural areas – face difficulties in accessing these services due to distance, training costs and a lack of awareness of the supports available to them.

These are issues that need to be addressed in the implementation of the National Volunteering Strategy's objectives. Funding should be provided to VCs to deliver VLT training to smaller rural organisations as a means to increase their capacity around volunteer management. In addition, VIOs of sufficient scale should be encouraged to appoint volunteer coordinators to spearhead recruitment training and supports for volunteers.

As we have seen, some organisations have difficulties in recruiting volunteers because they have a lower profile or there are negative perceptions about the volunteering roles in some sectors. There is scope here for VCs to provide further support to VIOs on marketing, for example, workshops on social media.

Investing in organisational, leadership and professional development.

A key learning from this study is the time and resources needed by VIOs to recruit volunteers and subsequently structure and maintain volunteering programmes. Policy makers need to provide support for voluntary organisations to invest adequate time and resources in human capacity building and in organisational structural tools to strengthen volunteering operations. Consistent with this, is the need to build the capacity of VCs to support professional development for VIOs and volunteers.

Conclusion

The research found that the majority of participating VIOs experience some level of difficulty in recruiting volunteers. There were significant variations depending on location, with over three-quarters of organisations in rural areas finding it difficult to recruit new volunteers, compared with 55% of those in cities.

Time commitment and willingness to commit on a regular basis emerged as a significant barrier to volunteers, as did a perceived increase in government regulation of volunteering and regulatory requirements for VIOs.

Difficulties in recruiting volunteers in rural areas mean that some people volunteer across a number of organisations, leading to burnout. Significantly, over 80% of participants in rural areas indicated that difficulties in recruiting new volunteers means that they rely heavily on existing volunteers, while over 60% felt that their volunteers were overburdened.

In the next chapter, we will explore VIOs' access to, and use of, Volunteer Centre services and their views on how these services might be developed to further meet their needs.

Chapter 7: Volunteer Centre Services

One of the objectives of the research was to explore VIOs' access to, and use of, Volunteer Centre services, and VIOs views on how VCs services might be developed to further meet their needs. The main findings from this element of the research are presented in this chapter.

Availing of Volunteer Centre Services

Survey participants were asked if they had availed of any services provided by VCs (other than volunteer recruitment) over the preceding three years (see Table 7.1). The most frequently used services were, telephone/email enquiries (41%), followed by Garda vetting (35%), VC website resources (23%) and training courses (23%).

Further analysis found some variations in terms of location, for example, the service most frequently used by rural organisations is the Garda vetting service (45% of rural VIOs availed of this), whereas for all others it was telephone/email enquiries. However, 27% of respondents in rural areas indicated that the question was 'not applicable' as they had not availed of any services provided by a VC, higher than VIOs in any other location.

Table 7.1: Volunteer Centre Services Availed by VIOs

Services N=406	%	N
Telephone/email enquiry with Volunteer Centre staff	41	167
Garda vetting processing service	35	144
Volunteer Centre website resources (e.g. accessing information booklets)	23	95
Training course (e.g. Volunteer Leadership/Management Training)	23	92
Networking events organised by a Volunteer Centre	18	73
One-to-one support/meetings with Volunteer Centre staff (e.g. to address specific needs or objectives)	17	70
Exhibition stand at a volunteer fair run by a Volunteer Centre	10	42
Not applicable (didn't avail of any VC service/resources)	21	85

Barriers to Accessing Volunteer Centre Services

Survey participants were asked if there were any factors that made it difficult for them to avail of supports or training provided by VCs (see Figure 7.1). A lack of awareness of what support and training were available was seen as the main barrier (identified by 45% of respondents). In the comments section, some respondents went on to explain that: We were not aware that the Volunteer Centres could help us,' 'didn't know about this service until now' 'I personally wouldn't be fully aware of all training/supports being offered,' 'need more information' etc. This issue was also raised in the interviews, with several participants noting that rural VIOs in particular may not be aware of the full range of services available through the VCs.

As Figure 7.1 shows, 43% of survey respondents indicated that the amount of time it takes to attend meetings, training courses and other VC events is a barrier to accessing services. The distance to travel to the VC was identified as a barrier by over a quarter of survey respondents (28%) and was also raised in the interviews. As the following comments illustrate, the overall time commitment for rural VIOs to attend training is considerably greater due to the travel involved:

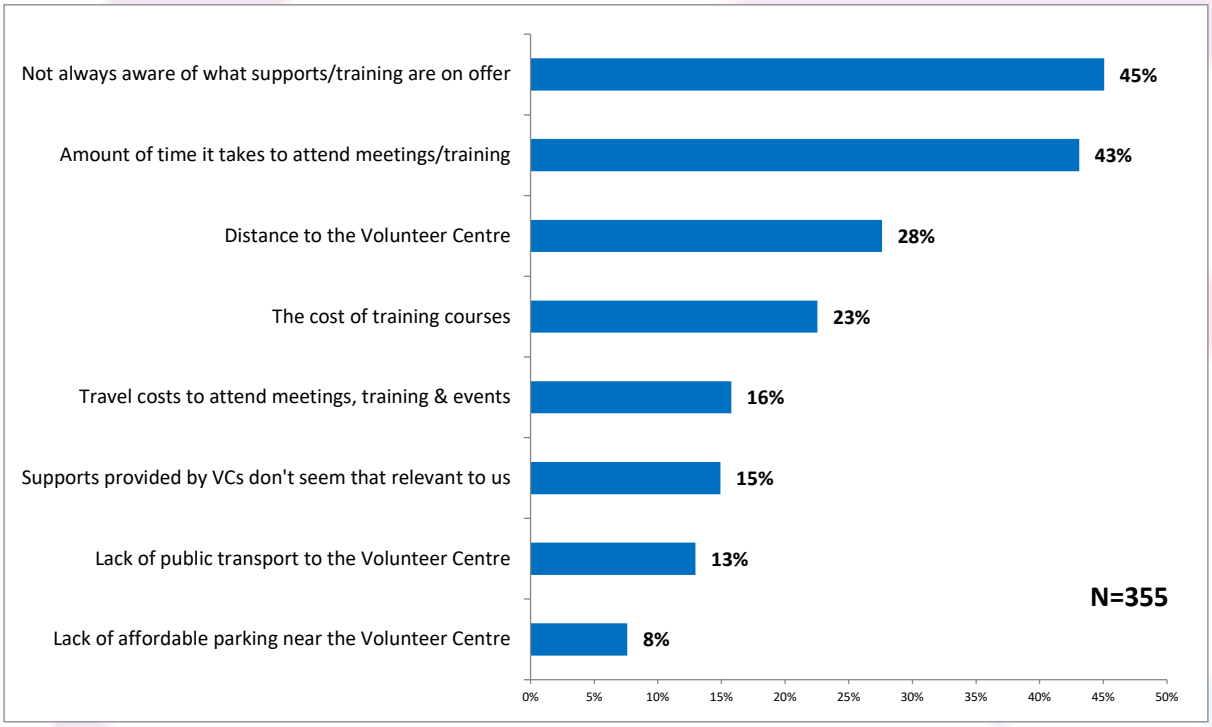
> *"Now I have seen that they [Volunteer Centre] do an awful lot by way of lunchtime talks and stuff but it is just too far for us to go…So if you have to go to Cork for an hour-and-a-half training, it is three-and-a-half hours of your day gone and for me, I am self-employed, it makes a big difference. I am already having to give a good bit of time to this [volunteering] and taking something else on is difficult".*

Financial costs can also be a significant barrier to accessing VC services, including the cost of training courses (identified by 23% of survey respondents) and travel costs to attend meetings, training and other events (identified by 16% of respondents). Other barriers to accessing services included the timing of training, with several survey respondents reporting that courses were held during weekdays, making it difficult for people in full-time employment to attend. As one participant pointed out, 'We find they often run training mid-week during the day, which does not suit our Leaders who work or are in college.' Only 15% of respondents indicated that VC services were not relevant to them.

There were some variations depending on whether the VIO had used VC services in recent years. Those who had not used VC services were more likely to indicate that they were not always aware of what supports or training were on offer (54%, compared with a figure of 45% for the group overall), and that the supports provided by the VCs were not that

relevant to them (21% to 15% for the group overall).

Figure 7.1: Barriers to Taking Up Supports or Training Provided by Volunteer Centres



Developing Volunteer Centre Services

Survey participants were asked a series of questions about their training and support needs and whether outreach and localised service provision would make access and use of VC services more accessible, particularly in rural areas. The main findings are presented below.

Outreach and Local Provision of Volunteer Centre Services

As we saw in Chapter 1, VCs provide some outreach services (e.g. pop-up centres) though availability of these services is limited by staffing levels and resources. In light of the fact that VCs are centrally located (in larger towns and cities), participants were asked if they would be more likely to avail of services if they were provided locally. There appears to be considerable support for additional outreach services: 83% of VIOs in rural areas and small towns indicated that they would definitely or probably avail of services if they were available locally.

Survey participants from organisations based in rural towns and villages were also asked to indicate whether they thought a set of specific measures (listed in Table 7.2) 'would be useful in improving Volunteer Centre services in rural areas'. The responses indicate a high level of support for a range of outreach initiatives, including the setting up of local offices, training and networking in local settings, more consultation on the needs of rural VIOs and more awareness raising on volunteering opportunities in these areas.

There were some variations depending on whether the VIO had previously availed of VCs training/supports. For example, 80% of those who had previously used VC services agreed/strongly agreed with the statement on the value of setting up a permanent local office/pop-up centre, compared with 68% of those who had not used VC services.

This could be interpreted as an endorsement of the VCs services, as those that have used these services want to see them being made available on a more widespread basis. Levels of support for more consultation and more awareness raising were also higher (by an average of 8%) amongst those who had previously used VC services.

The importance of outreach, particularly visits to individual VIOs, was also articulated in an open-ended survey question on what more the centres could do to support VIOs. Participants noted that one-to-one meetings and visits would help VCs get a better understanding of their work and individual needs, as the following comments illustrate: 'visit the volunteers that run clubs to see the work done on the ground' 'arrange for VC manager to visit

us and meet our trustees' 'visit to assess requirements' '[carry out] one-to-one volunteer assessment needs with the organisation'. Similarly, one of the interviewees noted the potential benefits of site visits, whilst also acknowledging the challenges in terms of staff workload:

> *"I think sometimes, it might be good for them [VC staff] if they came and had a look at some of the services that they help to recruit for, but that might be totally impractical because I don't know what their workload is and what their staffing levels are".*

Outreach was seen as particularly important in the more remote rural areas, where VIOs may not even be aware of the Volunteer Centres. As one community worker pointed out:

> *"Some people wouldn't know that they [Volunteer Centres] are there. I think a bit of door knocking would be helpful, ringing around some of the groups and meeting them. And just introducing themselves…Not only would they [the organisations] find out that the centres are there, but they'd feel supported as well, to know there's an organisation that's set up to support them".*

Overall, the research points to the need for greater outreach services including, where practicable, individual visits to VIOs, particularly those based in more remote areas.

Table 7.2: Support for Outreach Measures in Rural Areas

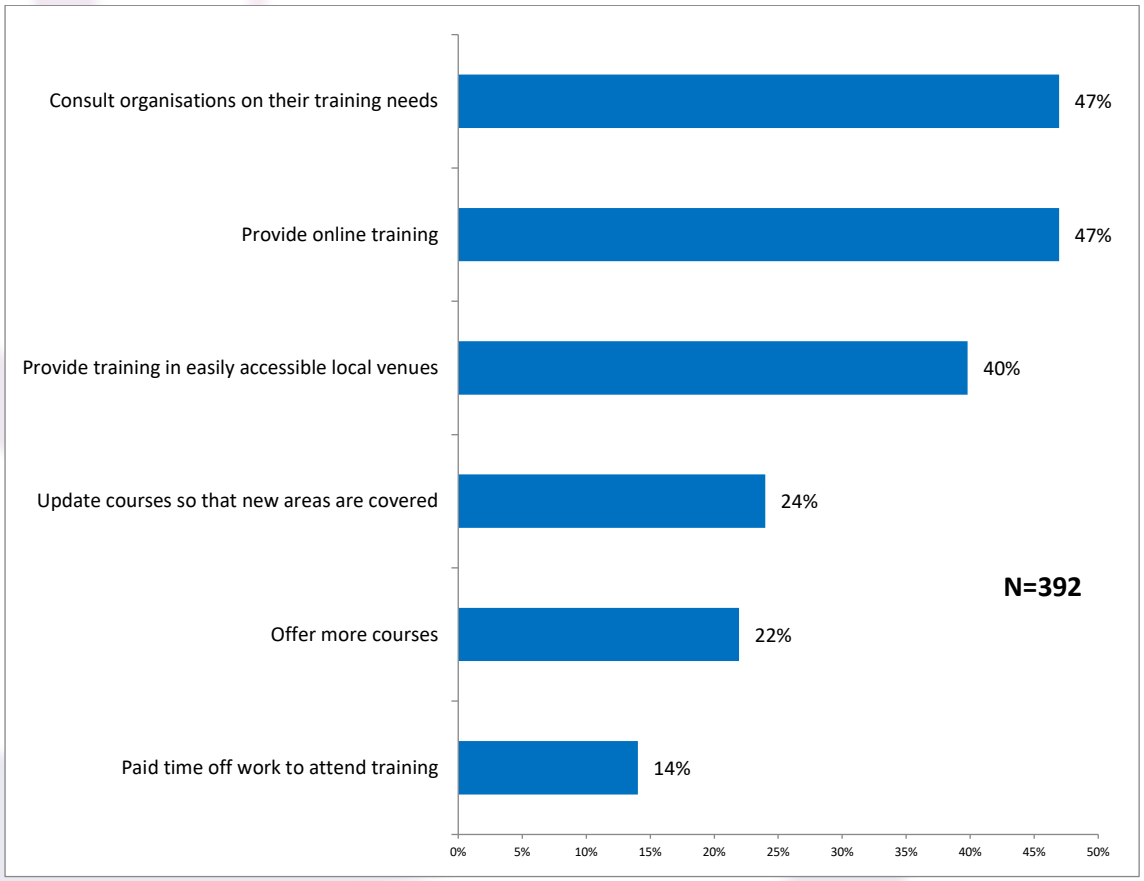
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
A permanent local office or regular pop-up Volunteer Centre	33%	45%	20%	1%	1%
Training provided by Volunteer Centres in a local setting	36%	51%	12%	1%	0%
Networking opportunities provided locally	34%	51%	15%	1%	0%
More consultation with rural organisations on their needs	36%	49%	15%	0%	0%
More awareness raising of volunteering opportunities in rural communities	38%	50%	12%	0%	0%

Developing Volunteer Centre Training

Survey participants were asked how the training provided by Volunteer Centres to volunteer coordinators/managers might be improved or made more accessible. The data points to the need for online training and more consultation with VIOs on their training requirements, each of which was identified by nearly half of survey respondents (Figure 7.2). In addition, 40% of respondents (particularly those in rural areas) wanted to see training being made available in easily accessible local venues.

Nearly a quarter of survey respondents wanted courses to be updated so that new areas are covered, while 22% indicated that more courses should be offered. The timing of training was also raised (under 'other suggestions'), with calls for more flexible training times and training in the evenings. As one respondent pointed out: 'They could make it feasible for self-employed individuals to attend courses without having to take time off their working/earning day, e.g., hold courses in the evening.'

Figure 7.2: Ways in which Training Could be Improved & Developed



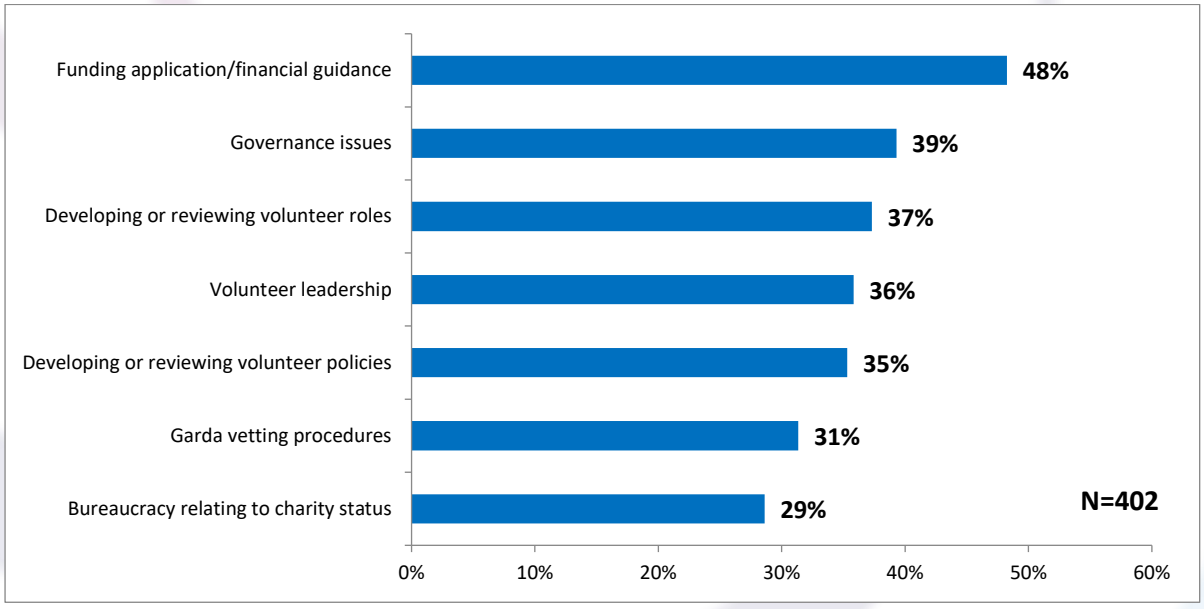
Area Where More Support and Training are Needed

When asked to identify the areas where further training and support were needed, nearly half of all survey respondents (48%) identified the preparation of funding applications and financial guidance (see Figure 7.3). Comments made in the interviews suggest that the administration of funding applications is regarded as one of the most challenging aspects of volunteering with a board or committee. The application procedures for LEADER and other funding streams were variously described as, 'a nightmare', 'frightening', 'off-putting', and 'so complicated that sometimes you just think it is easier to stand there with a bucket on the street'.

It was felt that smaller organisations and those without administrative staff were at a particular disadvantage when it came to navigating complex funding applications. In light of these comments, it is not surprising that support/training in the preparation of funding applications and financial guidance received the highest ranking amongst survey participants. Interestingly, those VIOs that had not used VC services in the preceding three years were particularly interested in receiving support in this area: 59% of this group said that training/support was needed.

As Figure 7.3 shows, survey participants also identified the need for training and support in a number of other areas, particularly governance, developing/reviewing volunteer roles and policies, and volunteer leadership (each of which was selected by more than one third of respondents). Other suggestions included training and support in the use of social media and information technology.

Figure 7.3: Areas Where More Support and Training are Needed



Interview participants also identified a number of areas where further training and support would be beneficial, including governance issues, GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation), committee skills and the development of volunteer policies and supports.

One board member, for example, noted that training on governance would be particularly valuable 'for groups that would not have been signed up for the governance code before and that are endeavouring to do so now'. He went on to say that the need for guidance in this area was so great that, if courses were provided, 'you would have no problem filling a room night after night from all the different groups'.

Similarly, another interviewee noted that it is important for VCs to keep organisations up to date with 'emerging trends', particularly those pertaining to governance:

> *You have to try and look at what is coming down the tracks a little bit, and what are the emerging trends. The Charities Regulator has introduced a new governance code – I think it is being rolled out this year – for implementation and compliance next year. I think there are five or six principles and a number of standards associated with that, but organisations that are benefiting from funding – and particularly those that had a charitable tax status – they will have to be fully compliant with that Charities Regulator governance code, in order to be able to draw down funding, because it is only a matter of time before it is going to be a requirement that you are Charities Regulator governance compliant. That is something that organisations need to keep an eye on. Now that would take an effort for a Volunteer Centre working perhaps with other entities to really get that message out there to organisations.*

While some interviewees were concerned with the need for information and training on issues such as governance and GDPR, others focused on the need to support VIOs in developing their capacity to recruit, retain and support volunteers, and to 'get the best out of people'. One participant noted, for example, that some VIOs needed to provide a more 'nurturing' environment for volunteers and that 'this is one area where the Volunteer Centres could have a role'.

Perceived Benefits of Working with a Volunteer Centre

In the course of the questionnaire, some participants commented on the benefits that they derived from working with VCs.[5] The qualitative interviews provided an opportunity to explore the issue of added value in further detail. Several interviewees noted the

[5] Survey participants were not asked to specify the benefits of working with a Volunteer Centre, but provided comments when answering open-ended questions on other topics.

importance of the training and consultancy in volunteer management provided by the Volunteer Centres and their support in developing volunteer policies.

Respondents also described the added value of working with a VC in terms of 'feeling supported', particularly in relation to meeting regulatory requirements, which, as we saw in Chapter 6, many VIOs find onerous. The Chairperson of one VIO described the key role that the Volunteer Centre had played in helping the organisation apply for charitable status:

> *"We had meetings with them [the VC]. We explained to them what we needed to do and they kind of explained it back to us in the format that would be appropriate for the charitable status application, right. So, they guided us through how to organise our information…I had one go at it first myself and I got back a thousand questions! I had actually gone to my accountant and I had gone to a solicitor and they both told me they didn't deal with charitable status applications. If we didn't have the Volunteer Centre now, where would we have gone for guidance?"*

It was clear from this, and other interviews, that as bureaucratic requirements have proliferated, without corresponding supports to VIOs to meet these requirements, VCs are increasingly being called upon to provide guidance.

In the final interviews, which corresponded with the introduction of lockdown measures in response to the Covid-19 emergency, participants commented on the timely information and guidance that the Volunteer Centres had provided to VIOs involved in responding to the crisis, particularly in relation to safety measures and preventing the spread of the coronavirus.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of the current research indicate that some VIOs, particularly those in rural areas, face significant challenges in accessing training and needs to be urgently addressed. Outreach services, including online and blended delivery, have the potential to increase access to training and supports and should be increased. Nearly half of survey participants pointed to the need for more online training. During the ongoing Covid-19 emergency more services and training – across a range of sectors – have been delivered online and this is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. At the same time, there are a number of drawbacks to online training, including limited broadband in some rural areas and preference for in-person training and supports.

While the provision for further training set out in the National Volunteering Strategy is clearly

very welcome, the importance of providing one-to-one support to VIOs also needs to be acknowledged. The findings from the current research indicated that VIOs want more direct contact, including site visits and this was also raised in the Call for Input (Kerry VC, 2019) and response to the Draft Strategy (Clare VC, 2020; Volunteer Ireland, 2020). For example, Volunteer Ireland notes that 'although training is important, most trustees will require a significant amount of hand-holding and support after a one-off training session, in order to become compliant with the CRA governance code' (Volunteer Ireland, 2020: 6). Kerry VC made a similar point in their earlier CFI: 'Small to medium rural based volunteers and trustees want and need hand-holding,' (Kerry Volunteer Centre, 2019: 8).

They are asking for locally accessible face-to-face supports. A three-pronged approach, of information seminars, followed by training workshops and one-to-one mentoring would appear to work well, but is clearly labour intensive. Furthermore, the restrictions relating to Covid-19 – introduced near the end of the research fieldwork – clearly have implications for face-to-face meetings.

Along with training in good governance, the findings indicate that there is an urgent need for more training and support in the preparation of funding applications and financial guidance. This is particularly important for smaller VIOs, who do not have the administrative staff or capacity to process complex funding applications. The funding application procedures should also be reviewed in light of comments that these are overly complex and may deter potential applicants.

There are clearly opportunities for VCs to develop their training services and one-to-one supports in the areas identified in this research. VCs need to be supported to focus on delivering more training and support to VIOs locally, regionally and nationally. This could involve a number of VCs pooling their expertise and resources to deliver training, for example, particular VCs specialising on specific topics. Geography and existing limited resources may be an issue. It may be worth VCs considering blended or online delivery, or through collective outreach training events.

The findings also suggest that VCs should look at ways of raising the profile of the services they provide, as one of the main barriers to accessing services is lack of awareness.

Conclusion

The research indicates that VIOs avail of a range of services provided by VCs, including telephone/email enquiry service, Garda vetting, VC website resources and training courses. However, there were

significant variations in the uptake of VC services, 27% of respondents in rural areas indicated that they had not availed of any services provided by a VC in the previous three years, a higher proportion than in any other location. The findings suggest a number of reasons for the lower uptake of services in rural areas, including the distance to travel to the VC and a lack of awareness of the range of services on offer.

There appears to be considerable support for additional outreach services, 83% of VIOs in rural areas and small towns indicated that they would definitely or probably avail of services if they were available locally.

In open-ended survey questions and the interviews, participants noted that visits to individual VIOs would also be beneficial – although a few participants also acknowledged the difficulties this is likely to pose, given current VC staffing levels, resources and distances to travel.

The findings also point to the need for online training and more consultation with VIOs on their training requirements. In the final chapter we will summarize the report and offer some detailed recommendations.

Chapter 8: Conclusions and Recommendations

In this report, we have outlined the important contribution and impact of volunteerism in both urban and rural settings. Volunteers play an active role in the provision of health and caring services, in rural regeneration projects and in combating rural isolation and social exclusion.

VIOs respond to local needs and often provide services that would otherwise not be available, particularly in rural areas. During 2020, volunteering attracted increased public attention, as volunteers and VIOs responded to the needs of vulnerable groups during the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent restrictions on movement. While volunteering clearly has an important place in both rural and urban communities, our research also identified a number of challenges facing volunteerism and VIOs:

Many organisations experience difficulties in recruiting sufficient volunteers, particularly those based in rural areas. Some of the main barriers to recruitment identified in the research were:

- a lack of time and unwillingness to commit to volunteering on a regular basis.
- Garda vetting and other regulatory requirements.
- a lack of awareness of volunteering opportunities or how to get involved.
- rural locations faced additional challenges in the form of small local populations that limit the pool of potential volunteers.
- the distance to travel to VIOs; and the lack of public transport outside the main urban areas.
- the cost of travel and lack of public transport mean that it is particularly difficult for certain groups (those on low incomes, students, young people) to participate in volunteering in rural villages and towns.
- difficulties in recruiting volunteers in rural areas mean that some people volunteer across a number of organisations, leading to burnout.

Increased regulation and bureaucracy is having a detrimental impact on volunteering and those involved in the voluntary sector. A recurring theme in the interviews and focus groups was that the government had introduced a raft of new administrative and legal requirements, without corresponding supports to help VIOs meet these requirements. While acknowledging the need for regulation, respondents noted that the measures introduced in recent years have significantly increased the volume and complexity of the work undertaken by boards and committees,

made it more difficult to recruit board/committee members and stifled new initiatives from emerging. Smaller organisations that cannot afford administrative staff were seen to be at a particular disadvantage in keeping up with the regulatory requirements.

Low levels of resourcing to support volunteers was also raised in the research. Findings from the survey indicate that many organisations do not have the resources to provide training to new and existing volunteers. Furthermore only 36% of participating organisations had a Volunteer Coordinator. Interview participants highlighted the fact that VIOs were unable to pay volunteer expenses, including travel expenses, making it more difficult for those on low incomes to participate. The lack of resources for volunteer expenses and training was located within the wider context of recognition for volunteers. Several interviewees reported that volunteers were 'taken for granted'. Frustration was also expressed at the process of applying for funding, with programmes such as LEADER seen as unduly complex. Again, the smallest organisations were seen to be at a disadvantage in applying for funding.

In light of the challenges outlined above, it was not surprising that, when asked what more the government could do to support volunteerism, most comments focused on the need for more streamlined procedures and more support in the preparation of funding applications and meeting regulatory requirements. Participants also highlighted the need for financial support to cover volunteer expenses and greater recognition of the contribution that volunteers make to Irish society.

As well as identifying the potential challenges faced by VIOs, the research set out to explore their access to and use of VC services and what more could be done to support VIOs.

As we saw in Chapter 5, 40% of participating VIOs had advertised vacancies through a Volunteer Centre in the previous 18 months. Aside from volunteer recruitment, VIOs availed of a range of other services provided by VCs, including telephone/email enquiries, Garda vetting, VC website resources and training courses. There were significant variations in the uptake of VC services, only one fifth of rural VIOs advertised vacancies with a VC, compared with almost half of city-based organisations. The service most frequently used by rural organisations is Garda vetting, with 45% of rural VIOs availing of this service. However, just over a quarter of respondents in rural areas said that they had not availed of any services provided by a VC in the previous three years, higher than VIOs in any other location.

The research points to a number of reasons why the uptake of services may be lower in rural areas. In the case of advertising vacancies, there was a perception that VCs based in large towns and cities would not be effective in reaching potential volunteers in rural areas.

The distance to travel to the VC, and the time commitment involved, can also be a deterrent to attending training, meetings and other events. Furthermore, it was clear from the research that some VIOs are not aware of the range of services offered by the VCs, this was raised in response to questions on why VIOs do not avail of the local volunteer centre recruitment service and on the barriers to taking up supports or training.

Moreover, when asked to identify the ways in which different services might be developed to meet the needs of VIOs, survey respondents highlighted the need for greater communication, awareness raising of the services on offer and more outreach work – including visits to the VIOs.

While a lack of awareness of the services provided by VCs was certainly not confined to any one location, the evidence suggests that this is particularly evident amongst VIOs in rural areas. Overall, the research points to the need for further awareness raising and outreach work to ensure that rural VIOs, many of which are small organisations with limited resources, are better placed to avail of the support services provided through Volunteer Centres.

Key Issues & Recommendations

1. Address the principal deterrents to volunteering including time commitment, growing regulation and bureaucracy, and lack of awareness of volunteering opportunities.

Time is one of the main barriers to volunteering. It is important that VIOs consider ways of addressing this, for example, by developing short-term, flexible volunteering roles and one-off projects to appeal to those who are interested in volunteering but do not want to commit on a regular basis. VCs should continue to work with VIOs to reimagine how they engage volunteers in shorter micro-volunteering projects consistent with local needs.

Increased regulation is a barrier to volunteering and is stifling smaller VIOs who have limited capacity to meet growing regulatory requirements. In order to help all voluntary groups use their time effectively and focus their energy and resources where needed most, a more proportionate and enabling regulatory environment needs to be developed. In light of the findings of the current study and the earlier VC and Volunteer Ireland Call for Input consultations, it is recommended that the planned review of Garda Vetting as identified in the National Volunteering Strategy addresses the issue of multiple Garda vetting and that the timeframe for achieving this goal be revised from long term to short/medium term. Garda vetting is of course only one element of an expanding regulatory framework

Further support needs to be provided to board/committee members, such as free training or one-to-one support for smaller organisations, to help them meet regulatory requirements. A key point made in the research was that the government had 'put this big bureaucratic process in place' but did little in terms of supporting and upskilling volunteers to manoeuvre their way through it.

There is a clear need to **raise awareness** of volunteering opportunities and how to get involved. A lack of awareness of volunteering options was identified as a barrier to volunteering by almost a third of survey respondents. This highlights the importance of running a national volunteering campaign, as proposed under the National Volunteering Strategy.

There is also a clear need to **raise public awareness of Volunteer Centres'** recruitment service, especially in geographically distant communities. We suggest that the communications campaign planned under the National Volunteering Strategy include components that:

- Increase awareness of the I-VOL system amongst the general public and in the voluntary and community sector;

- Highlight the advantages or added value of advertising through I-VOL, e.g. potential for VIOs to reach a wider range of people, increase diversity in their organisations and further social inclusion in their communities; and

- Address possible misconceptions, e.g. that VC recruitment services are for urban rather than rural areas.

2. Recognise that organisations in rural areas and small towns operate in a very different context to those in urban settings.

There is a need to develop strategic interventions, policies, incentives and long-term supports that reflect the unique context and needs of volunteering in rural regions.

Whilst these can be actioned in the implementation phase of the National Volunteering Strategy, they should be linked to wider policies on rural regeneration. The findings of the current research indicate that distance and smaller population numbers impact the ability of VIOs to recruit sufficient volunteers and board/committee members. Distance also affects access to professional development and wider networks, which in turn can limit pathways to solutions to entrenched problems.

The role volunteering plays in supporting economic and social development in peripheral and rural areas, is an under-researched area that warrants further attention.

3. Invest in building capacity within VIOs for volunteering and enable VCs to provide enhanced professional development support on a regional basis.

Policy makers need to adequately recognise the time and resources needed by VIOs to recruit volunteers and subsequently structure and maintain volunteering programmes. They can support voluntary organisations to invest adequate time and resources in human capacity building and in organisational structural tools to strengthen volunteering operations. VIOs of sufficient scale will benefit from being encouraged to appoint dedicated volunteer coordinators to lead volunteer recruitment and volunteer training and support.

Support VCs to provide organisational, leadership and professional development on an accessible local basis to VIOs, alongside enhanced in-person outreach and online services. The findings indicate that VIOs want enhanced Volunteer Leadership and Governance support and more direct one-to-one contact. While the provision for further training set out in the government's National Volunteering Strategy is clearly very welcome, the importance of providing one-to-one support to VIOs also needs to be acknowledged. The findings from the current research indicates that VIOs want more direct contact, including site visits, and this is also raised in the Call for Input and response to the Draft Strategy by Clare, Cork, Kerry, Limerick, Tipperary Volunteer Centres and Volunteer Ireland.

The National Volunteering Strategy recognises the **need for capacity building** within small VIOs. Furthermore, the strategy recognises the need to strengthen the volunteering infrastructure if these objectives are to be achieved. However, VIOs in rural areas face difficulties in accessing VC services due to distance, training costs and a lack of awareness of the supports available to them. These are issues that need to be addressed in the implementation of the National Volunteering Strategy. Outreach services, awareness raising campaigns, including fully online training and blended learning delivery, have the potential to increase access to training and supports and should be increased. Nearly half of survey participants pointed to the need for more online training. During the ongoing Covid-19 emergency more services and training – across a range of sectors – have been delivered online and this is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. At the same time, it needs to be acknowledged that there are a number of drawbacks to online training, including limited broadband in some rural areas and preference for in-person training and supports.

There are **clearly opportunities** for VCs to develop their training services and one-to-one supports in the areas identified in this research

and in the National Volunteering Strategy. VCs need to be supported to focus on delivering more training and support to VIOs on a collective basis. This could involve a number of VCs sharing and pooling their expertise and resources to develop and deliver training, for example, particular VCs specialising on specific topics. Geography is an issue, as rural VIOs have already cited distance from VCs as a barrier to accessing services and supports. It may be addressed to some extent through blended or fully online delivery, one to one mentoring and outreach training events as noted above.

Along with training in good governance, the findings indicate that there is an **urgent need for more training and support** in the preparation of funding applications and financial guidance. This is particularly important for smaller VIOs, which may not have the administrative staff or capacity to process complex funding applications.

It important for policymakers and volunteer involving organisations to **understand, strengthen and promote volunteer recruitment** via word of mouth, local networks and relationships. Consistent with the international research literature, our research identified that for the majority of people, their pathway to volunteering is through word of mouth, that is person-to-person contacts. VIOs should further activate the potential of word of mouth through inviting potential volunteers to be part of a co-production framework, or to be partners in identifying needs and defining opportunities for volunteering. Co-production, as applied to volunteering, is a practice in which citizens are involved in the conception, co-creation and delivery of volunteer activities. Enlisting expert support to develop such a framework may be necessary, as will VCs providing professional development and good practice examples to support VIOs, over time developing an evidence base in this area.

4. Continue to develop the national evidence base in support of volunteering.

Ongoing research into volunteering is key to developing an evidence informed policy and practice environment. For example, there is a pressing need for research into the role of volunteering and related methods in responding to national emergencies. Research has yet to develop a framework that considers the ways informal and formal volunteering may serve as a mechanism for low-income individuals to improve their own lives and support their communities. As noted above, the role volunteering can play in supporting economic and social development in peripheral and rural contexts is an under-researched area in Ireland.

5. Encourage both formal and informal volunteering as a means of building social capital.

Volunteering builds social capital through citizens, communities and organisations. Encouraging forms of volunteering that promote social change and cohesion is the breeding ground for democratic skills and attributes. The focus in Irish policymaking up to now has been upon fostering volunteering within the third sector as part of a voluntary group. Rather than focusing on organised volunteering alone, a focus on informal volunteering is also required that seeks to further bolster the ability of people to engage in one-to-one and neighbour-based mutual support. If volunteering is to be cultivated in a manner that helps lower-income populations to build social capital, then the argument is that a reorientation of policy towards informal volunteering is required.

The importance of **recognising and supporting informal volunteering** is highlighted in Volunteer Ireland's (2020) response to the Draft Strategy. Actioning this could involve developing a co-productive framework for VIOs that casts citizens as partners in identifying grassroots needs and strengths, and defining informal opportunities for volunteering that are culturally and contextually relevant.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Profile of Survey Respondents

Background details on responding VIOs are set out below, including: county in which the VIO is based, distance from their county's Volunteer Centre, location of VIO, number of years that the VIO has been in operation and size of VIO based on annual income for the most recently completed financial year. There are variations in the response rate for each question (denoted by the 'N' number at the end of each table below); key questions relating to location of VIOs were asked at the beginning of the questionnaire and had notably higher response rates.

Table A.1 County in which the VIO is based

County	%	N
Clare	8	43
Cork	29	147
Kerry	16	83
Limerick	20	102
Tipperary	23	115
Waterford	3	14
Other	1	6
Total	**100**	**510**

Table A.2 Distance from Volunteer Centre

Distance	%	N
Under–5 km	39	199
5–20 km	22	113
21–35 km	20	102
36–50 km	10	52
51–65 km	6	28
66–80 km	1	6
Over 80 km	2	9
Total	**100**	**509**

Table A.3 Location of VIO

Location	%	N
A city (Cork, Limerick)	27	135
A large town (over 10,000 inhabitants)	21	101
A medium/small town (between 1,500–10,000 inhabitants)	25	123
Rural area (village or other settlement of under 1,500 inhabitants)	27	131
Total	**100**	**490**

Table A.4 Size of organisation (based on annual income)

Size	%	N
Small (less than €25,000)	40	163
Medium (€25,000–€250,000)	26	105
Large (over €250,000)	20	83
Not sure	14	57
Total	**100**	**408**

Table A.5: Number of years the organisation has been in operation

Years in operation	%	N
Under 2 years	7	27
2–5	12	51
6–10	13	52
11–25	32	133
26–50	22	90
Over 50 years	14	57
Total	**100**	**410**

Table A.6 Type of organisation

Organisation	%	N
National voluntary organisation	8	34
Local branch of a national voluntary organisation	15	61
Local voluntary organisation	23	96
Social enterprise	6	23
Community centre	9	38
Community or neighbourhood group	14	59
Sport, leisure or social club	5	22
Festival, annual event, one-off event	3	14
Other	15	62
Total	**100**	**409**

Appendix 2: Call for Input

volunteer centre
Ionad d'Obair Deonach an Chláir
CLARE

volunteer centre
Ionad d'Obair Deonach Corcaigh
CORK

volunteer centre
Ionad d'Obair Dheonach Ciarraí
KERRY

volunteer centre
Ionad d'Obair Deonach Luimneach
LIMERICK

volunteer centre
Ionad d'Obair Deonach Thiobraid Árann
TIPPERARY

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