

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

Table of Contents

FOREWORD	1
CONTEXT AND RESEARCH APPROACH	3
Aims of the Research	3
Research Methodology	4
Defining Rural and Urban Areas	4
Profile of Respondents	5
Volunteering in Ireland: Key Events, Publications and Policies	7
KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS	8
The importance of volunteering in combating isolation in rural communities	8
Volunteer led initiatives empower social inclusion	9
Local volunteering is an agile and powerful resource in a time of crisis	9
Understanding, recognising, strengthening and valuing the role of volunteering in rural communities	10
Reliance on word of mouth for recruitment	10
Barriers to the recruitment & retention of volunteers	12
Barriers to volunteering	12
Organisational capacity - areas where more support is needed	16
RECOMMENDATIONS	
1. Assisting VIOs to develop capacity	18
2. Recognising that VIOs in rural areas and small towns operate in a very different context to those in urban settings	18
3. Investing in organisational, leadership and professional development	19
4. Developing new volunteering roles	19
5. Enabling volunteering through a more streamlined regulatory system	19
6. Increasing Outreach Supports	19



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland



An Roinn Forbartha
Tuaithe agus Pobail
Department of Rural and
Community Development



FOREWORD

This report contains a summary of findings from research commissioned by Volunteer Centres in Clare, Cork, Kerry, Limerick and Tipperary in late 2019 and early 2020. The research aimed to identify and compare the needs of rural and urban volunteer involving organisations (VIOs) within the geographical area serviced by the Volunteer Centres.

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. The five Volunteer Centres that commissioned this research are part of a wider volunteering infrastructure, comprising a network of 29 Volunteer Centres and Volunteer Ireland, all of which are funded by the Department of Rural and Community Development.

Each Volunteer Centre in Ireland has 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.

The intention of the research is to inform the strategies and activities of the Volunteer Centres to support, value and advance local volunteering in the counties of Clare, Cork, Kerry, Limerick, Tipperary and Waterford¹. Whilst it is recognised that each of the counties has its own unique characteristics, the commonalities and shared experiences of serving large geographical areas with dispersed rural populations brought the Volunteer Centres together to investigate and compare the distinct needs of rural and urban VIOs.

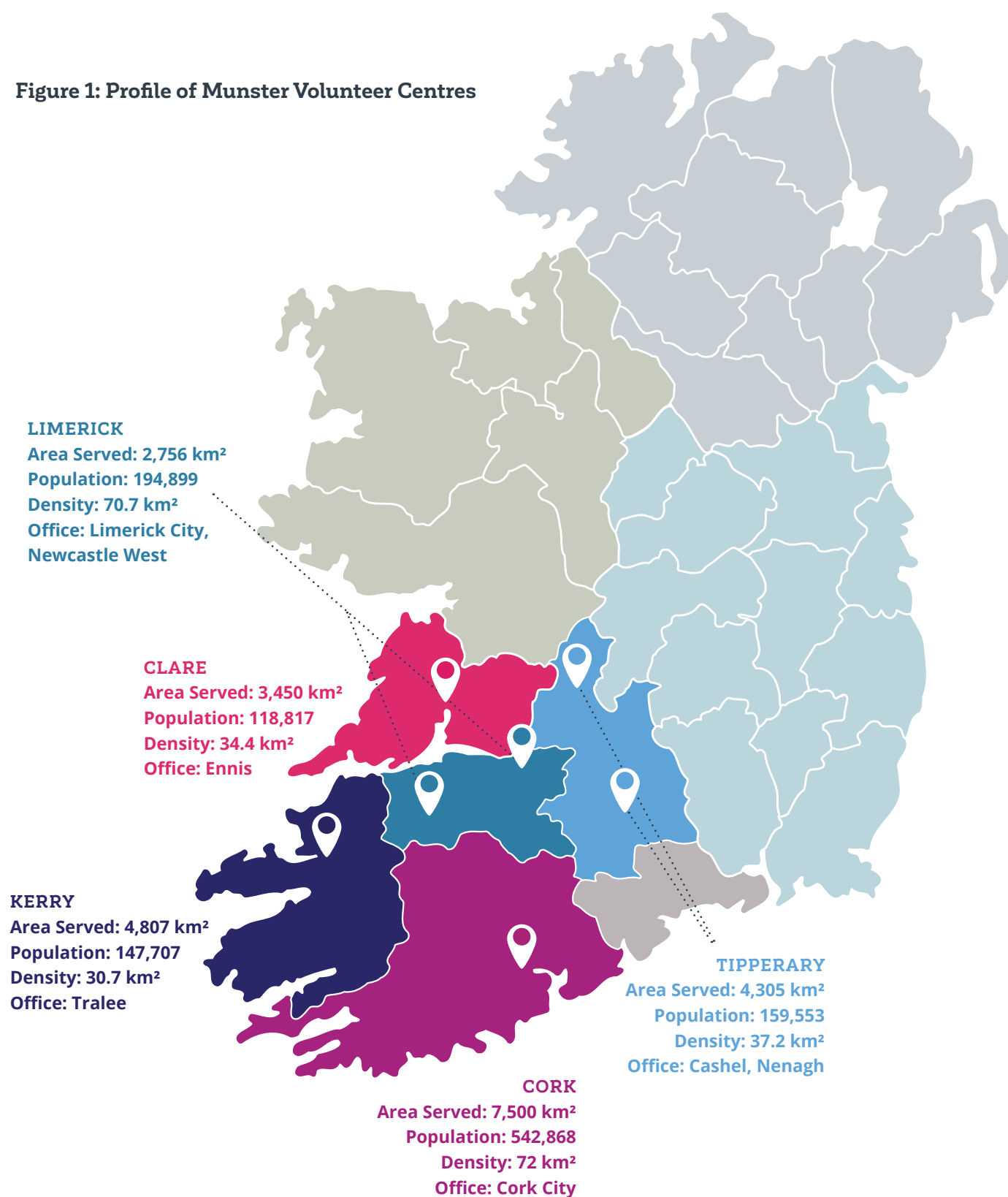
Few such studies have been carried out on volunteering in Ireland, despite the substantial contribution of volunteers to society and the economy. Fewer still have investigated volunteering from the perspective of VIOs². Significantly, most studies of volunteering do not take geographical place and setting (urban, rural) into consideration within their analysis, despite international evidence on the significance of place (Rutherford et al, 2019: 18-20).

This research confirmed that volunteering is an intrinsically local experience and that volunteering in rural communities is substantially different to urban communities. This report sets out the research methodology, identifies the key research findings and outlines the strategic interventions needed to support, value and advance volunteering in rural and urban communities.

¹ At the time the research was conducted, Waterford was the only county in Munster that did not have a Volunteer Centre. A VIS operated on a part-time basis hosted by Waterford Area Partnership. Volunteer Information Services provided a volunteer referral service similar to that provided by VCs, but there is no walk-in location with full-time staff. (Volunteer Ireland, 2020). Waterford VC was formally established in 2021.

² Note: volunteer involving organisations can be entirely volunteer led or involve paid staff alongside volunteers to deliver services.

Figure 1: Profile of Munster Volunteer Centres



CONTEXT AND RESEARCH APPROACH

The commissioning of independent research led by Scanlon, Powell and Martin of University College Cork (2020) to investigate the potential challenges faced by rural and urban VIOs occurred in the aftermath of 31 focus groups with volunteers and VIOs throughout the region in early 2019.

The focus groups were designed and delivered by Volunteer Centres in Clare, Cork, Kerry, Limerick and Tipperary to inform their individual and collective submissions into the Department of Rural and Community Development's Call for Input (CFI) to develop a National Volunteering Strategy for Ireland³.

The evolution of policy on volunteering can be found in the longer report (Scanlon, Powell and Martin 2020). Table 3 on page 7, is a summary of the relevant developments in volunteering policy which have occurred in the 21st Century.



Aims of the Research

The principal aim of the project was to provide evidence-based insights and recommendations. As such, the research set out to identify and comparatively analyse the volunteering needs of rural and urban volunteer involving organisations within the geographical area serviced by the Volunteer Centres in Clare, Cork, Kerry, Limerick and Tipperary.

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.

³ The network of Volunteer Centres along with Volunteer Ireland, had advocated for a National Volunteering Strategy for many years. The announcement in December 2018 by the Department of Rural and Community Development to develop a National Volunteering Strategy was warmly received.

Research Methodology

The research findings are based on quantitative and qualitative fieldwork which included an online survey of 511 representatives from VIOs in the Munster region – (administered in December 2019). In addition to the online survey, 15 semi-structured interviews were carried out with representatives from the voluntary and community sector. Purposive sampling was used to ensure a range of experiences and representation from different sectors. The interviews were held from February to April 2020.

Defining Rural & Urban Areas

One of the key objectives of the 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. Having considered the merits of various definitions the researchers chose to proceed with the CSO definition as it conveys the heterogeneous nature of rural areas and communities in Ireland.⁴ The following are the categories that were set out in the questionnaire:

- ⊕ A city (Cork, Limerick, Waterford)
- ⊕ A large town (over 10,000 inhabitants, e.g. Killarney, Mallow, Ennis, Clonmel, Tramore)
- ⊕ A medium/small town (between 1,500–10,000 inhabitants, e.g. Listowel, Abbeyfeale, Dungarvan, Cashel, Kilrush)
- ⊕ Rural area (village or other settlement of under 1,500 inhabitants)

All five⁵ Munster based Volunteer Centres cater for a mix of rural and urban areas. Local factors such as geographical 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).

Figure 1 illustrates, there are notable variations in terms of population density in the five areas serviced by the Volunteer Centres. For example, 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 km², followed by Clare (34.4) and 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 km² respectively, just above the national average of 70 per km² (CSO, 2016b). However, here too, there are substantial rural communities. Cork is the largest county in Ireland by geographical area at approximately 7,500 km², with numerous towns and villages dispersed throughout this area, some of which are in remote locations in the west of the county. The rurality of the region has 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 (I-Vol) 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. These challenges were recognised 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.

⁴ The CSO, 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).

⁵ see footnote 1.

Profile of VIOs respondents

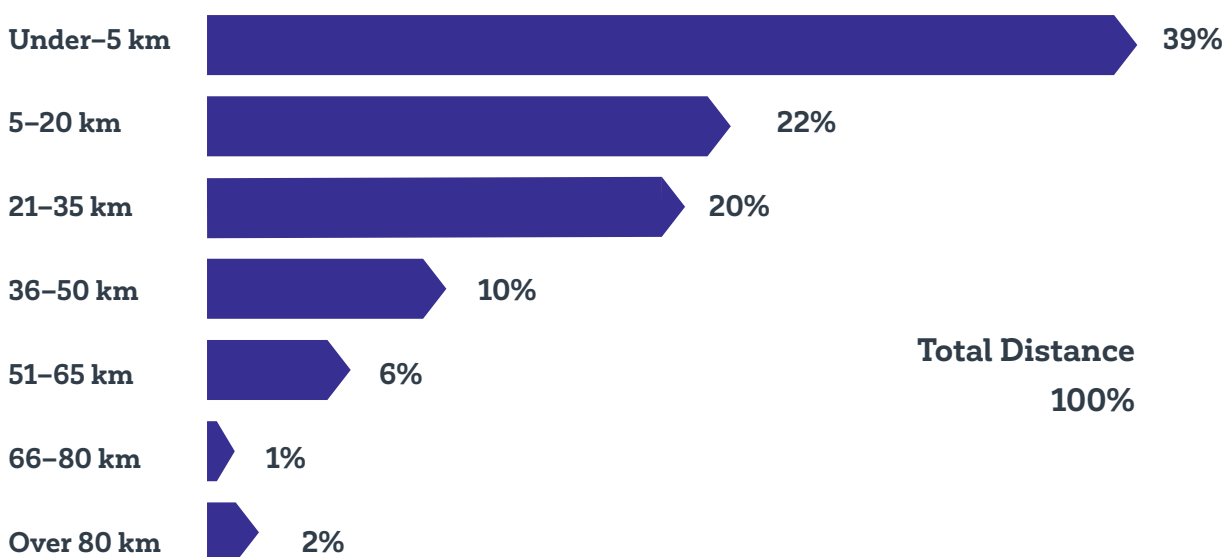
Overall, there was a reasonably even spread, ranging from 21–27%, with an almost identical number of responses from cities and rural areas.

Background details on responding VIOs are set out above, including: location in which the VIO is based, distance from their county's Volunteer Centre, 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.

Table 1: Location of VIO

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

Figure 2: Distance from Volunteer Centre



**Figure 3: Size of organisation
(based on annual income)**

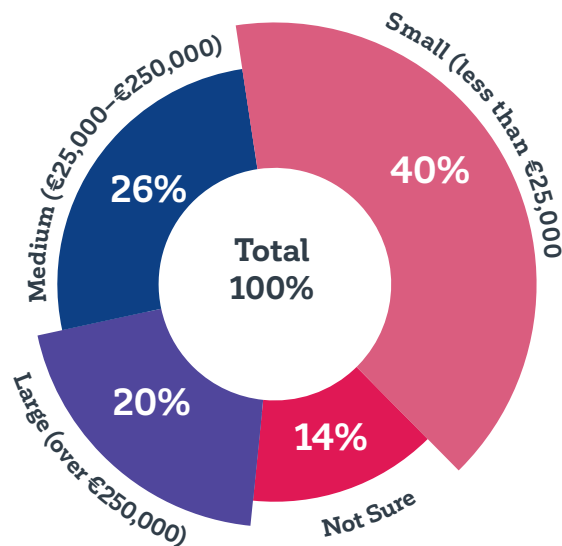


Figure 4: Number of years the organisation has been in operation

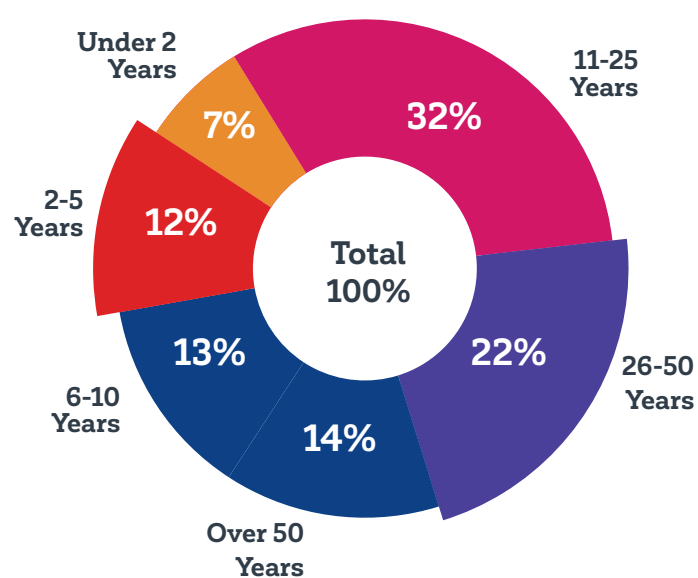


Table 2: Type of organisation

Organisation Type	%
National voluntary organisation	8
Local branch of a national voluntary organisation	15
Local voluntary organisation	23
Social enterprise	6
Community centre	9
Community or neighbourhood group	14
Sport, leisure or social club	5
Festival, annual event, one-off event	3
Other	15

Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding

Volunteering in Ireland: Key Events, Publications & Policies

The table below is a summary of the relevant developments in volunteering policy which have occurred in the 21st Century. Commentary on the evolution of policy on volunteering can be found in the longer report (Scanlon, Powell and Martin 2020).

Table 3: Volunteering in Ireland: Key Events, Publications & 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	<i>Tipping the Balance: Report of the National Committee on Volunteering</i> 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, <i>Volunteers and Volunteering in Ireland</i> .
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	<i>Working Draft of Volunteering Strategy 2020–2025</i> 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 . Launch of Ireland's first National Volunteering Strategy 2021-2025. The purpose of the strategy is to recognise, support and promote the unique value and contribution volunteers make to Irish society.

KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

The importance of volunteering in combating isolation in rural communities

It is clear that volunteering plays an important role in identifying and addressing local needs, often providing services that would otherwise not be available. In rural areas volunteer-led services are *“most commonly substitutional rather than additional to statutory provision”* (Timbrell, 2007 cited in Woolvin, 2012: 25).

The research shows that volunteers are particularly active in the areas of health and caring, community development and rural regeneration. Volunteering initiatives help to address the problems of social isolation and loneliness, particularly amongst older people and those living in rural communities.

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:

“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”.

“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 empower social inclusion

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 year, was it 2015 or 2016, we had a group of Afghan people, some of whom were underage 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 group of] young Muslim 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".

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.

Local Volunteering is an agile and powerful resource in a time of crisis

Although not part of the original remit of the research, the interviews conducted during the Covid-19 emergency and the lockdown from March 2020 onwards provided an unexpected insight into the dynamics of rural and urban volunteering in times of crisis. The upsurge of formal and informal volunteering to provide support to older people and other vulnerable groups has been well documented elsewhere. However, the case study below, illustrates how volunteering empowers and safeguards communities and how quickly volunteers can come together to respond in a time of crisis.

Case Study: Burren Community Meitheal

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".

Understanding, recognising, strengthening and valuing the role of volunteering in rural communities

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.

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

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

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.

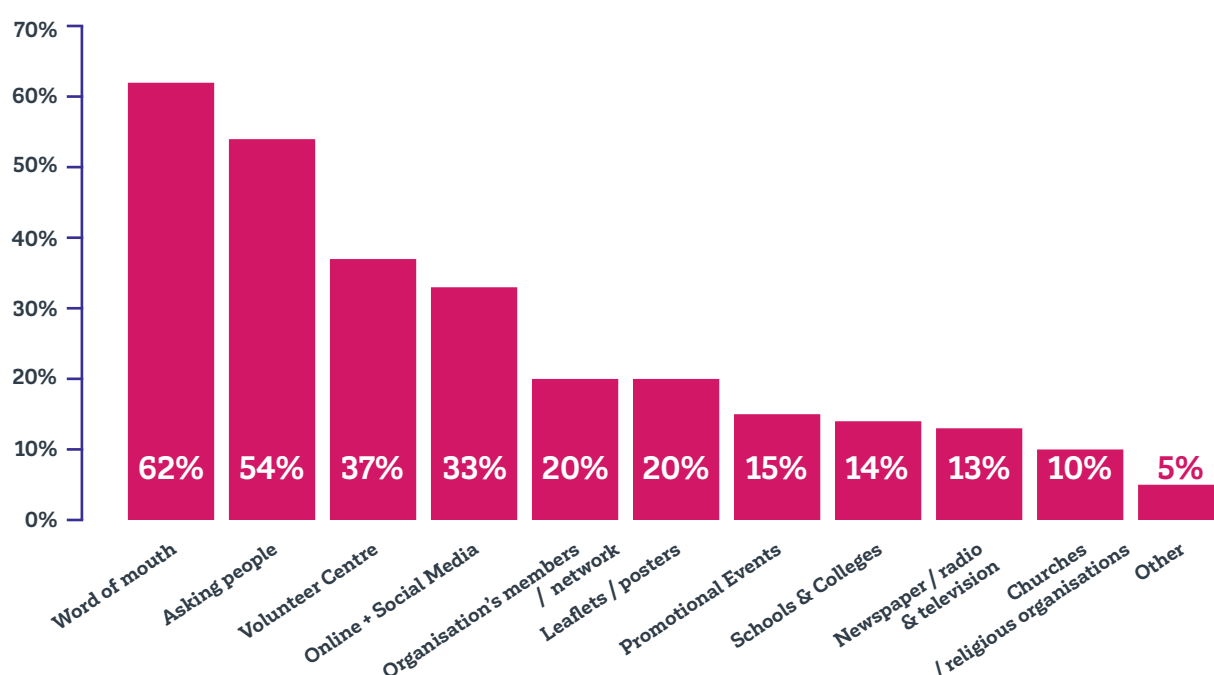
Some participants felt volunteers were currently not receiving the credit that they deserved, and that this needs to be rectified. The following were typical comments.

“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”

Reliance on word of mouth for recruitment

Survey participants were asked to indicate how their organisation usually recruits volunteers (participants could tick all methods that applied). Figure 5 below illustrates the responses for both urban and rural VIOs. The responses confirm that word of mouth is still valued as the most important means of recruitment of volunteers across both urban and rural VIOs in the Munster region. The researcher further analysed this data by location and noted the following similarities and differences.

Figure 5: Volunteer Recruitment Methods Used



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.

“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”

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

Consistent with the international research literature, the 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. Therefore, Volunteer Centres have a role to play in encouraging and enhancing volunteer recruitment by offering opportunities to broker relationships between volunteers and VIOs.

+ Raising public awareness of Volunteer Centres recruitment service and the national volunteering database, especially in rural areas

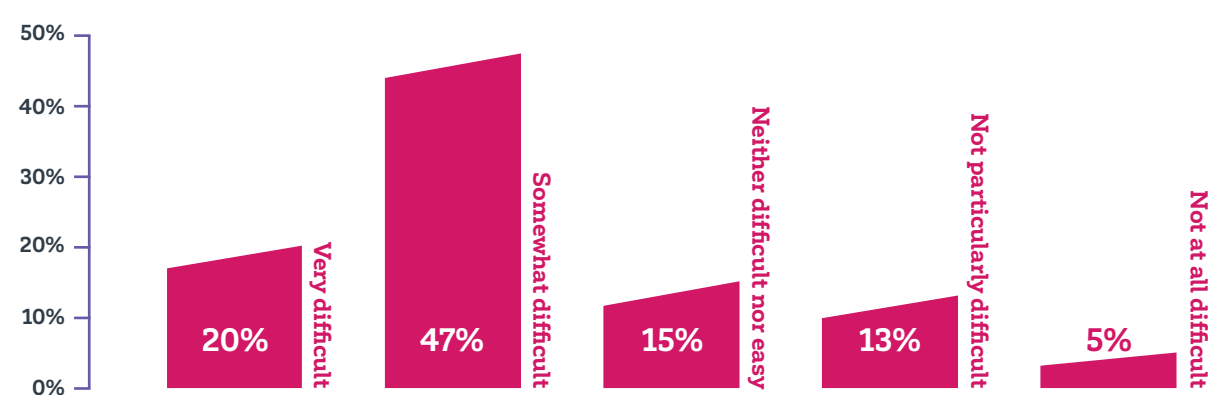
The research findings suggest that some VIOs, particularly those in rural areas, do not use services such as the VC recruitment service due to a lack of awareness or preconceptions about the nature of the service (e.g., that it is focused on urban areas). This points to the need for national and local awareness-raising campaigns on the recruitment role of VCs and the national volunteering database as well as promoting diversity in volunteer recruitment. It is important that campaigns relating to the national volunteering database target both VIOs and the general public.



Barriers to the recruitment & retention of volunteers

Overall, 67% of survey respondents found it very or somewhat difficult to recruit volunteers.

Figure 6: Level of Difficulty in Recruiting Volunteers



Significant differences between urban and rural

The data suggests that VIOs in rural areas and towns find it far more difficult to recruit new volunteers than those in cities.

Table 4: 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%

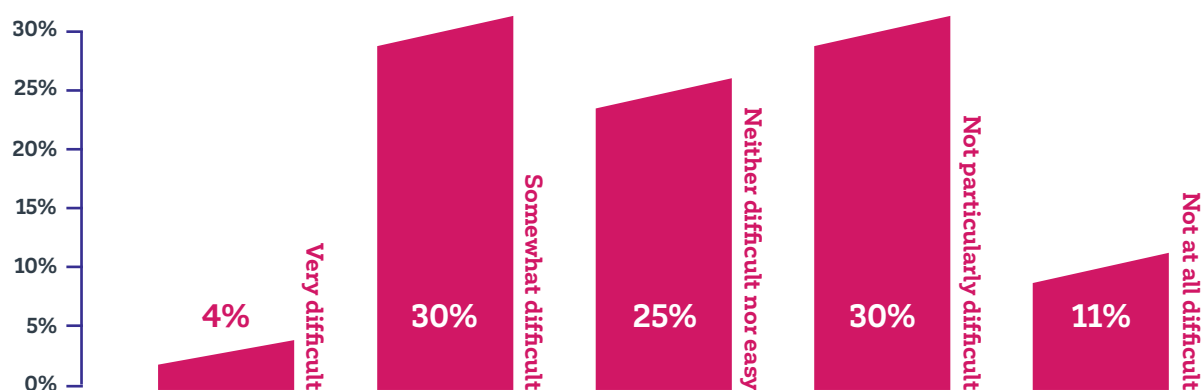
Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding

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 7). 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.

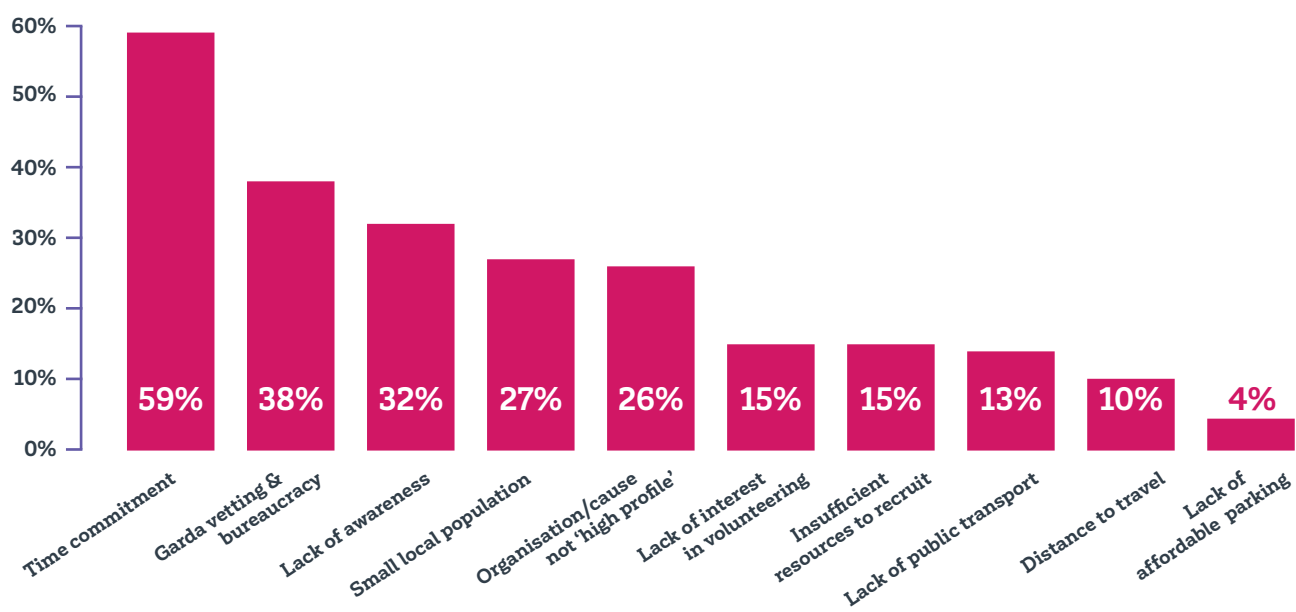
Figure 7: Level of Difficulty in Retaining Volunteers



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 (represented in Figure 8 below).

Figure 8: Barriers to Volunteering



Further analysis by location revealed a number of similarities and differences.

- + Time commitment is seen as the main barrier regardless of location and Garda vetting/ bureaucracy featured in the top three barriers across all locations.

“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”.

“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”.

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.

+ 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.

+ 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. 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 because of negative publicity of the charity sector generally.

+ 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”.



+ Additional Barriers to Recruitment in Rural Areas

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".

Other interview 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.

It was also noted that some rural inhabitants travel long distances to and from work, which significantly limits the amount of time available for volunteering. 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”*.

Important to Note:

Research data suggests that while 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.

Organisational Capacity - Areas where more support is needed

Table 5 provides an indication of the challenges that organisations face in specific areas. There were significant differences depending on location.

Table 5: Organisational Capacity

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

Table 6 shows the percentage of VIOs within each location that agreed/strongly agreed with the five statements.

1. In each case, the highest level of agreement came from rural VIOs, followed by those in small towns, large towns and cities. ➔

2. 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.

Table 6: 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%

When asked if their organisation had a designated Volunteer Coordinator, again differences were apparent depending on location.

1. Only 28% of organisations in rural areas had volunteer coordinators compared with 40% of those in cities and large towns. ➔

2. 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.

3. In cases where a VIO is both small *and* rural, the percentage with a Volunteer Coordinator falls to just 25%.



RECOMMENDATIONS

1 Assisting VIOs to develop capacity

The National Volunteering Strategy recognises the need for capacity building. 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.

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.

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

The findings of the 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.

The recent launch of 'Rural Development Policy 2021-2025 - Our Rural Future (2021: 55)' recognises the unique burden on rural volunteers and the operational challenges faced by rural community groups and commits to supporting the National Strategy on Volunteering 2021-2025 as a means to addressing these challenges.



3 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.

Support is required to assist community and voluntary organisations to invest adequate time and resources in human capacity building and in organisational structural tools to strengthen volunteering operations. The current research indicates that some VIOs, particularly those in rural areas, face significant challenges in accessing training.

VCs should be supported and resourced to build their capacity to provide organisational, leadership and professional development on an accessible 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 from VCs.

4 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.

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.

5 Enabling volunteering through a more streamlined regulatory system

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.

Garda vetting is, of course, only one element of an expanding regulatory framework. Increased regulation is posing a challenge to 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.

6 Increasing Outreach Supports

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. Outreach was seen as particularly important in the more remote rural areas, where VIOs may not even be aware of the Volunteer Centres.

83% of VIOs in rural areas and small towns indicated that they would definitely or probably avail of services if they were available locally. Only two of the five Munster VCs, have a permanent outreach office.

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



Central Statistics Office (CSO)(2016a) *Census of Population 2016 – Profile 3 An Age Profile of Ireland*. Dublin: CSO.

Central Statistics Office (2016b) *Census of Population 2016 - Profile 2 Population Distribution and Movements*. Dublin: CSO.

Central Statistics Office (2015) *Quarterly National Household Survey (QNHS) Volunteering and Wellbeing*. CSO Statistical Release, 16 July 2015. Dublin: CSO.

Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas (2014) *Energising Ireland's Rural Economy*. Carlow: CEDRA.

Cork Volunteer Centre (2019a) *Annual Report, 2019*. Cork: CVC.

Cork Volunteer Centre (2019b) *Call for Input (CFI) on Key Aspects to be Included in a National Volunteering Strategy*. Cork: CVC.

Davies, A., Lockstone-Binney, L. and Holmes, K. (2018) 'Who are the future volunteers in rural places? Understanding the demographic and background characteristics of non-retired rural volunteers, why they volunteer and their future migration intentions', *Journal of Rural Studies*, 60: 167–75.

De Lima, P. (2009) 'The impact of the economic downturn on the rural voluntary sector in Scotland', in ESRC/SCVO Public Policy Seminar Series *Recession and the Third Sector*.

Department of Justice and Equality (2017) *The Migrant Integration Strategy–A Blueprint for the Future*. Dublin: Department of Justice and Equality.

Department of Rural and Community Development (2021) *Rural Development Policy 2021-2025 - Our Rural Future*, Dublin: Department of Rural and Community Development.

Department of Rural and Community Development (2019) *Working Draft of Volunteering Strategy 2020–2025*. Dublin: Department of Rural and Community Development.

Department of Rural and Community Development (2018a) *Realising Our Rural Potential – Action Plan for Rural Development*. Dublin: Department of Rural and Community Development.

Department of Rural and Community Development (2018b) *National Volunteering Strategy: Call for Input on Key Aspects to be included in a National Volunteering Strategy*. Dublin: Department of Rural and Community Development.

Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (2018) *National Sports Policy 2018–2027*. Dublin: Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport

Farrell, M. (2020) 'How volunteers became the lifeblood of rural Ireland', *RTE Brainstorm*, 10 January 2020.

Farrell, M. (2018) *Rural Volunteerism: Impacting Development and Sustainability*. Dublin: Volunteer Ireland.

Government of Ireland (2000) *White Paper on a Framework for Supporting Voluntary Activity and for Developing the Relationship between the State and the Community and Voluntary Sector*. Dublin: Stationery Office.

Joint Oireachtas Committee on Arts, Sports, Tourism, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (2005) *Volunteers and Volunteering in Ireland*. Report no. 6. Dublin : Stationery Office, 2005.

Kerry County Council (2015) *County Kerry: A Socio-Economic Profile*. Tralee: Kerry County Council.

Kerry Volunteer Centre (2020) *Mobilising Volunteers in Response to Covid-19*. Tralee: Kerry Volunteer Centre.

McLaughlin, D. (2017) *Developing Funding Criteria for Volunteer Centres in Ireland: Towards a Funding Framework*. Dublin: Creative Strategic Solutions.

National Committee on Volunteering (2002). *Tipping the Balance: Report of the National Committee on Volunteering*. Dublin: NCV.

National Youth Council of Ireland (2011) *Lending a Hand: A Report on Young People and Volunteering in Ireland*. Dublin: NYCI.

North, East & West Kerry Development (NEWKD)(2017) *North, East and West Kerry Demographic and Socio-Economic Profile*. Tralee: NEWKD.

Powell, F., Scanlon, M. and Galvin, M. (2018) *Making a Difference: A Research Report on Student Volunteering in University College Cork*. Cork: UCC.

Prizeman, G., O'Regan, A., Donoghue, F. and McGee, S. (2010) *Volunteering in Citizens Information Services: The Role and Contribution of Volunteers*. Dublin: Citizens' Information Board.

Royal Irish Academy (2019) *Rural Conversations*. Dublin: RIA.

Ruddle, H and Mulvihill, R (1999) *Reaching Out: Charitable Giving and Volunteering in the Republic of Ireland, The 1997/98 Survey*. Dublin: Policy Research Centre, National College of Ireland.

Rutherford, A.C., Bu, F., Dawson, A. and McCall, V. (2019) *Literature Review to Inform the Development of Scotland's Volunteering Outcomes Framework*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

Skerratt, S., MacLeod, M., Hall, C., Duncan, R., Strachan, M. and Harris, J. with Moseley, M. and Farmer, J. (2008) *Community Facilities in Rural Scotland: A Study of Their Use, Provision and Condition*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

Smith, F., Timbrell, H., Woolvin, M., Muirhead, S. and Fyfe, N. (2010) 'Enlivened geographies of volunteering: situated, embodied and emotional practices of voluntary action', *Scottish Geographical Journal*, 126: 4, 258-74.

Taskforce on Active Citizenship (2007) *Report of the Taskforce on Active Citizenship*. Dublin: Taskforce on Active Citizenship.

The Wheel (2018) *Regulation*. Available at: <https://www.wheel.ie/policy-and-research/issues/regulation>

Volunteer Ireland (2020) *Submission on the Draft National Volunteering Strategy*. Dublin: Volunteer Ireland.

Warburton, J. and Winterton, R. (2017) 'A far greater sense of community: the impact of volunteer behaviour on the wellness of rural older Australians', *Health and Place*, (48): 132-8.

Whittaker, J., McLennan, B. and Handmer, J. (2015) 'A review of informal volunteerism in emergencies and disasters: definition, opportunities and challenges', *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 13: 358-68.

Woods, A. (2017) *The Impact of Volunteering on the Health and Well-being of the Volunteer*. Dublin: Volunteer Ireland.





Clare Volunteer Centre
Government Buildings
Kilrush Road
Ennis, Co. Clare
V95 F782

☎ 065 68 455 17
✉ info@volunteerclare.ie
www.volunteerclare.ie

Cork Volunteer Centre
13 North Main St.
Cork,
T12 Y6W0

☎ 021-4251572
✉ info@volunteercork.ie
www.volunteercork.ie

Kerry Volunteer Centre
7 Maine Street,
Tralee,
Co. Kerry
V92 HC0H

☎ 066 7117966
✉ info@volunteerkerry.ie
www.volunteerkerry.ie

Limerick Volunteer Centre
Unit 40 Tait Business Centre
Dominic Street
Limerick
V94 E5R7

☎ 087 738 7481
✉ info@volunteerlimerick.ie
www.volunteerlimerick.ie

Tipperary Volunteer Centre
Chapel Lane,
Cashel,
Co. Tipperary
E25X239

☎ 062-64775
✉ info@volunteertipperary.ie
www.tipperaryvolunteercentre.ie