



Volunteering during COVID-19 Lessons for the Future



Rialtas na hÉireann
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Foreword

It gives us great pleasure to contribute to the foreword of the *Volunteering during COVID-19 – Lessons for the Future*.

The research team from the Institute of Education at Dublin City University are very pleased to have been involved in this innovative collaboration with Volunteer Ireland.

In managing the project and in partnership with Volunteer Ireland, we followed best practices to deliver an evidence-based report which provides rich and noteworthy information. This is not only relevant in the current post-pandemic climate but also provides a platform for ongoing and additional interrogation of the volunteering sector.

The study provides a rich insight into the experiences of volunteers throughout Ireland around their participation in volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is particularly beneficial in highlighting many benefits of volunteering for both the individual and for communities. During the pandemic volunteers were the lifeline for many in our society and never before has the work of volunteers received such attention.

This research included an online survey sent to every registered volunteer on the national volunteering database, I-VOL, followed by focus groups interviews with a range of volunteers from across the country. We are most appreciative of the contributions of the volunteers who took part in the survey and focus group interviews. This research will inform the work of Volunteer Ireland and enable them to share and exchange ideas with Volunteer Centres, volunteers and organisations on what can be done to deal with the challenges that the report raises.

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Introduction

Volunteers have played an immense role in our response to the COVID-19 pandemic. They have supported frontline services, provided a vital link to vulnerable members of our communities and helped keep cultural and social activities alive.

This publication is a snapshot of a much larger piece of academic research conducted by the DCU Research Team at Institute of Education, DCU, on behalf of Volunteer Ireland, which looks at volunteering before, during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. This report focuses in on the key findings of the report in relation to volunteering *during* the pandemic and makes recommendations for organisations on how they can use these findings to enhance their volunteer programmes.

COVID-19 brought about big changes to our personal and professional lives. It also had a major impact on volunteering throughout Ireland. The report explores how volunteers and organisations adapted to these changes and how people felt about volunteering during such a unique time.

Exploring the experience of volunteers during the pandemic will inform the work of Volunteer Ireland, Volunteer Centres and organisations that involve volunteers. Understanding volunteer motivations and frustrations will help us continue to adapt and improve our volunteer programmes as we look beyond the COVID-19 crisis.



Key Findings

1. Volunteering is good for individuals

The onset of COVID-19 brought huge changes to society in the space of just a few days. As time wore on, it had a huge impact on our mental health with many people feeling anxious, lonely and even directionless. With no access to the activities they enjoyed, the people they loved, and for many their jobs, people were left with feelings of isolation and monotony.

We know from previous research, both in Ireland and globally, that volunteering has numerous positive benefits for those that volunteer. From improved mental health to increased social opportunities, the positives of volunteering on individuals are well documented. These findings show that this has remained consistent throughout the pandemic.

A sense of purpose and motivation came through as key benefits for those who volunteered throughout the COVID-19 crisis.

72.6%

of volunteers who volunteered during COVID-19 indicated that their feeling of making a useful contribution to the community increased.

56.3%

of volunteers who volunteered during COVID-19 indicated that their sense of motivation increased.

“ It gave me a sense of purpose. I was happy to do it for a while and it got me out and about and I felt I was making a contribution to the greater good.

“ Volunteering helped me to survive lockdown, it gave me a sense of purpose.

While feelings of loneliness were widely reported throughout the pandemic, volunteering offered a lifeline and a social outlet to those who were able to contribute.

50.8% of volunteers who volunteered during COVID-19 indicated that their mental health and well-being increased.

46.5% of volunteers who volunteered during COVID-19 indicated that their feeling of being included and not alone increased.

“Volunteering helped me avoid a sense of isolation as I live alone myself and it was good to have someone to talk to and to feel that I was helping them also. Kept me feeling connected to the outside world especially during lockdown.

“Volunteering got me back into the community, it really helped me to re-engage after lockdown, I got more out of it than I gave.



“ A positive is that people came together even more and realised how important it is to be part of a community.

We know that a sense of community had a huge role to play as we navigated the pandemic, and this had a significant impact on volunteers who felt a connection and that they were part of something.

57.4% of volunteers who volunteered during COVID-19 indicated that their sense of belonging to the community increased.

“ Volunteering during the pandemic helped me to focus on what I could do to help local communities and groups instead of focusing on the headlines and case statistics.

Case Study: Cathy Medbury, Citywest Test and Vaccination Centre

Cathy Medbury began volunteering at the COVID-19 test centre in Citywest in October 2020. Due to time constraints, she had never volunteered before and had just begun looking at potential opportunities before the pandemic began. Once the pandemic hit, she knew she wanted to do something to contribute to the fight against COVID-19 and went for a trial shift at what would soon become a test *and* vaccination centre at Citywest. 17 months and over 1,000 hours later and she hasn't looked back.

Not content with volunteering herself, Cathy managed to recruit many of her tennis club friends and her daughter to help out with the volunteer programme in Citywest. Cathy didn't think she'd get so much out of her volunteering experience, but she has truly enjoyed her time and feels a great sense of satisfaction having played a part in our response to COVID-19.

Although it could be difficult at times, there was a great camaraderie among the volunteers and a sense of enjoyment that Cathy struggled to put into words. She feels it gave her a real sense of purpose and played a huge part in getting her through the last few years. Especially in the tightest of restrictions, having somewhere to go and a job to do had a big impact on Cathy's wellbeing. From helping those who were elderly or unwell get through the process as quickly as possible to putting children at ease with laughs and jokes, Cathy has had a real impact on those coming through the centre just as her volunteering role has had a big impact on her.





Case Study:

Adam Masterson, Royal Canal Clean Up and Tree Nation

Just before the pandemic began, Adam had been thinking more about how he could live a more sustainable life and get involved in his community. As restrictions meant he could no longer work as a bartender, he knew this was the perfect opportunity for him to explore this idea some more.

Having looked at the roles that suited his interests, he settled on two which aligned to his passion for sustainability – the Royal Canal Clean Up and Tree Nation. With Tree Nation – a crowd planting platform, he initially began volunteering by spreading the word of their work and impact on social media. They quickly asked him to take on a bigger role and become their Volunteer Manager. Soon Adam was recruiting people all over the world to help share the message of Tree Nation’s planting projects.

With the Royal Canal Clean Up, Adam was able to get out and about two or three times a week cleaning a stretch of the canal between Ashtown and Clonsilla in Dublin. Sometimes he finished with three or four large full bin bags and came across everything from trolleys to couches in the canal! Adam really enjoyed getting out in the peace and quiet of nature and being able to take proactive steps to create positive change in his community.

What really struck Adam the most while volunteering along the canal was how many people stopped to talk to him. People were interested in what he was doing and why he was doing it and took time to thank him for his efforts. Lots of people also asked how they could get involved and he hopes that seeing him along the canal every week inspired other people to volunteer!

Key Findings

2. Volunteering is good for communities

Those who volunteered during the pandemic felt a great sense of community, of coming together and being part of something bigger. This is an important and often reported benefit of volunteering on individuals and something that has a significant impact on our communities as a whole.

Both before and during the pandemic, volunteers provided vital services in our local communities that in many cases would simply not be delivered otherwise. 95% of respondents agreed with the statement that 'volunteers provide valuable services that would not otherwise be available', while 95.6% of respondents agreed with the statement that 'without volunteers, many people would be left without help and/or services'.

Their dedication often means that services can reach those most in need and contributes to an overall sense of wellbeing in our communities. 92.2% of respondents agreed with the statement that 'because of volunteers, people's access to other services in the community increases', while 93.5% of respondents agreed with the statement that 'volunteers enhance the mental health and wellbeing of people in the community'.

As part of this research, respondents were asked to provide three words that came to mind when they thought of the impact voluntary activity has had on their local community during COVID-19. Their responses are represented in the word cloud opposite.

“ Without volunteers & volunteering communities simply could not function.

Case Study:

Mary Nee, Galway Samaritans

Mary Nee's mother had been a volunteer with Galway Samaritans, so it had always been her intention to volunteer with them someday. With five children, Mary's time was limited but when she got the chance to volunteer eleven years ago, she never looked back!

Starting as a listening volunteer, Mary soon became a day leader, getting involved in outreach in schools, and is now a trustee and the Assistant Director of the branch. The longer she spends volunteering there, the more passionate she becomes about the mission of the organisation.

Mary has made a great group of friends through volunteering, saying it's like having another family. Not only that but having always been a daughter or wife or mother, Mary felt that volunteering had finally given her an identity of her own.

This sense of purpose was never more important than during the pandemic. Galway Samaritans adapted quickly, not even closing for a week, and while some

volunteers had to step back for various reasons, the remaining volunteers did two or three shifts a week to make sure this vital service remained running for those who needed it.

With increasing isolation and loneliness reported in our communities throughout the pandemic, having the volunteers of the Galway Samaritans there to listen was a lifeline for so many. For Mary, it's a privilege to be on the other end of the phone when someone needs it and going in to do her shift provided a little slice of normality in an ever changing pandemic world. Although Mary gives so much of her time to Galway Samaritans, she feels she could never pay back the richness it has brought to her own life.





Case Study: Ability West

Ability West provides services and supports to people with intellectual disabilities and autism across Galway City and County. It is dedicated to empowering the people with disabilities to live self directed lives in an equal and inclusive society. Volunteers support this mission by assisting in the delivery of different programmes in day centres and engaging in friendship programmes such as the Best Buddies Programme.

When the pandemic began and people were unable to attend their day services in person, Ability West had to adapt quickly. Volunteers were engaged to deliver virtual day services twice a day on Zoom covering everything from music sessions to exercise classes and sessions on healthy living. Although nothing could replace face to face contact, many parents told Ability West that these sessions were a real lifeline for their family member during lockdown.

The befriending programme, Best Buddies, which was usually done in person also had to shut down due to restrictions at the time. However, that didn't stop a number of volunteers who kept in touch with their buddies making regular phone calls, Zoom link ups and sometimes even window visits when possible.

Ability West also saw their volunteer programme come full circle during lockdown with the development of a Monday morning "radio show" on Zoom called "Live at 11". With the support of Ability West staff, the show is delivered by and for services users with music, chats and special guests. It still continues to this day and has been a real hit across its centres.

Key Findings

3. Volunteering is a lifeline for many

The positive impact of volunteering has been researched and analysed in a number of publications. The statistics in this research clearly demonstrate how volunteering impacts positively on mental health, on feelings of isolation and on volunteers' sense of belonging to their communities.

What came through clearly in the qualitative element of this research, was that volunteering is a lifeline for so many people. It's their sense of purpose, it's their social outlet, it's their way of making a difference in the world, it's how they become part of their community.

For those that volunteered during the pandemic, volunteering proved to be a big support and anchor in their lives.

On the other hand, there were many people who had volunteered for years and found themselves suddenly unable to do so, whether that was for personal reasons or that their volunteer programme had temporarily shut down. For these people, being unable to volunteer had a significant negative impact on their health and wellbeing.

““ Being part of the effort to get through this pandemic has had a huge impact on me personally.

““ People in my community became more reliant upon and appreciative of volunteers and the work they do during lockdown. For many, interactions with volunteers in local community groups became something to look forward to, as other social interactions became limited. ”

““ I felt more isolated without my volunteering role during COVID. Volunteering is often an excuse for the volunteers themselves to be included and feel useful. I've lost most of my volunteering roles, but I've taken up some solo tasks like beach cleans... but it's missing that social aspect for me and isn't filling that need.

““ Even the sense of volunteering, that you're giving something back in terms of mental health, it's probably going to impact people hugely because they haven't been able to do that.

““ You didn't realize until it was all pulled from under us, how much we needed it. I know I can speak for myself, and I know I can speak for my husband... that was a huge impact for the volunteers themselves.



Case Study: Eddie Smyth, Greystones Cancer Support

Eddie Smyth has been volunteering for about five years driving cancer patients to their appointments with both Greystones Cancer Support and Wicklow Cancer Support. He is also a board member of Wicklow Volunteer Centre. After Eddie's wife sadly passed away in 2015, he decided to try volunteering as a way to get back and do something. Together, he and his wife had previously considered volunteering with their local cancer support group but had just never gotten around to applying and he decided to take on the role in her memory.

He really enjoys volunteering because it gets him out and about and in his driving role, he gets the opportunity to meet lots of different people, learning about their lives and stories. It's also great to know that he can be of assistance and help people who really rely on this service.

When the pandemic hit in early 2020, Eddie had to stop his driving role as advised by the HSE as he is over 70 and needed to take extra precautions. He felt lucky that

he could continue volunteering in his board role as meetings were held online and that he has a great family support system around him with three children and five grandchildren.

Although Eddie had great support during this time, he really felt for those patients who relied on the service to get to their appointments. Not having the service available in their community would mean great difficulty and incredible expense for people who were going through such a difficult time.

Thankfully, Eddie was able to resume his driving role with Greystones Cancer Support in December 2021 and is delighted to be back. He feels he gets so much more out of it than he gives and it's a great feeling to be able to provide such a needed service and spend time chatting with the people he drives.

Key Findings

4. Technology was a double edged sword

As with many tasks throughout the pandemic, a lot of volunteering that was traditionally done in person moved to online platforms. Befriending services moved to phone calls rather than in person coffee and chats, support groups for those experiencing mental health difficulties became online chat rooms and music and arts classes were now taught through Zoom instead of in the local community centre.

The ability to adapt and move quickly to online platforms meant that many organisations, and their volunteers, could continue to deliver vital services. Volunteers who were cocooning could still engage in their role from the comfort of their own home without fear of putting their health at risk. Service users whose only contact may be a call from a volunteer were able to sustain that vital link. This research shows mixed feelings on the importance of technology to volunteering during the pandemic.

Many respondents appreciated how technology enabled them to continue volunteering during COVID-19 while other respondents noted how they developed new technology skills. Others found that COVID-19 helped to advance the use of technology in volunteering and that more of the potential of technology in volunteering was now being harnessed.

However, many felt that while technology enabled them to keep volunteering, for example online with Zoom, that it was not as effective as face-to-face contact and interaction. Other respondents cited problems with technology. For example, they lacked online skills or did not have the necessary equipment to volunteer online. Other respondents found that their volunteering roles were not adapted for the online medium.

“ Access to more things online and ways to help people virtually, some of these things could have been implemented before COVID I think but it took the pandemic to make it happen.

“ Zoom facilitated attendance at meetings of many who would have not been able to participate.

“ Social distance and human volunteering are not compatible. Technology can help but social contact is key. I'm not comfortable on the phone or on computer video call.

“ Volunteering in an online capacity is very difficult. For many roles face to face is very important especially as many people in rural communities do not have access to online resources.

Case Study:

Aware

Aware is a national charity that supports people experiencing low mood, anxiety, depression or bipolar disorder. They have four services supported by volunteers: a support line, local support groups, a support email, and the Life Skills Online programme.

With most of these services delivered in person – volunteers with the support line usually do their shifts from the Aware office in Dublin – they had to quickly adapt with the onset of the pandemic. Within days training had moved online, and the helpline was changed to work through an app on volunteers' mobile phones – all secure and encrypted – so they could take calls during their shift while at home.

Aware made looking after their volunteers' mental health a priority. They have made the importance of shifts very clear – if a volunteer is on for a three hour shift, then they finish when the three hours is up. When fulfilling a volunteer role at home, the lines between 'on' and 'off' can become blurred so they have been very clear about maintaining boundaries.

They also created a 'buddy system' whereby a more experienced volunteer will check in with a volunteer at the end of their shift to see how they are, how they got on and if there were any challenges. This is really important as one of the most enjoyable aspects of volunteering for many is the social side where they make connections with other people – this doesn't replace that but ensures the volunteer feels supported and connected.

However, virtual volunteering isn't for everyone. For some volunteers, particularly those who don't typically deliver Aware's online services, technology has been a challenge. In these cases, they offered extra support to help the transition but in some instances the volunteers felt it was best to wait until things went back to normal to continue their role. Aware have been sure to engage these volunteers in other ways by asking them to spread the word about their services online and by word of mouth.



Recommendations for Organisations



1. Communication

It is clear from the qualitative element of this research that communication between volunteers and organisations that involve volunteers is key. There were mixed experiences among respondents with some organisations in regular contact with their volunteers even if their volunteer programme had been suspended. Even if the communication was simply to say there was no change in the status of the programme, volunteers appreciated being kept up to date and feeling that they were being considered by the organisation.

“Communication is key to supporting volunteers to continue in their roles.

“It was lovely to receive messages from the organisation I volunteered with checking in to see how I was.

On the other hand, some organisations simply cut contact with their volunteers until their programme was ready to restart. Although this wasn't done with any bad intent and was often the result of capacity issues, this lack of communication left a negative impact on those volunteers.

“You have my wife getting regular phone calls and she got a few little gifts in. They were amazing and they were really genuine about it. And she got regular emails as well just saying, 'Look, we're not opening yet, but maybe it'll happen and we're keeping you updated.' Amazing.

A key lesson for organisations that involve volunteers is that keeping in contact with volunteers whether they are currently volunteering or not is vital to ensure volunteers feel appreciated and connected with the organisation. Even a simple email can go a long way.

“Be aware of keeping in contact with volunteers. Sometimes volunteers feel like they are on their own.

“Occasional phone calls from a supervisor were really encouraging and kept up motivation.

2. Adaptability and Flexibility

Organisations that engage volunteers showed a great amount of adaptability and flexibility during the early stages of the pandemic. Many had to completely rethink how they delivered their services and how they could continue to involve volunteers in their programmes.

Volunteer motivations had already been changing slowly over the last decade with many looking for more short term opportunities and others looking to volunteer from the comfort of their own home. The onset of COVID-19 accelerated the development of these opportunities within organisations, and it is critical that this flexibility is not lost as volunteer programmes begin to reopen.

The pandemic forced organisations to assess how they delivered their services and what adjustments could be made to adapt them to the changing situation. This same critical thinking must now be applied to volunteer programmes so organisations can continue to attract and retain volunteers to support their mission. There is a real opportunity to modernise the way we think about volunteer engagement to ensure that both the organisation and the volunteer are getting the most out of their partnership.

“ I think there’s definitely huge potential there. There’s more than one way to skin a cat... And just being kind of innovative and thinking outside the box and helping people. And it’s not necessarily always going to be the kind of the traditional volunteering roles. It might be something very alternative and very adapted for the current climate.

“ I think there’s a kind of an inertia at the moment. I suppose people are kind of firefighting and another way then. Their focus is kind of all over the place. But I think someone needs to look in at the bigger picture and see how can we get back what we had, even though it’s in a different way?

3. Support and Training

Overwhelmingly, volunteers spoke about the importance of ongoing support and training in their role. Throughout the open-ended questions and focus groups, many volunteers explained how training and support was important for volunteers, particularly at the initial stages of finding a suitable role. In particular, Volunteer Centres were singled out as being an invaluable support to volunteers.

Ongoing support and training, along with regular contact, from organisations also emerged as being important for volunteers. Many volunteers expressed a preference for formal volunteering as it provided support, training, structure and guidelines.

The pandemic highlighted that in a crisis, best practice in volunteer management was more critical than ever before. It is clear from these findings that volunteers feel valued, appreciated and safe when they receive the appropriate support and training from organisations. It is the cornerstone of a quality volunteer programme which makes it easier to both recruit and retain volunteers.

“ The support was very crucial in undertaking the volunteer work.

“ I'll definitely be in touch with them again because they said that they're willing to help. They'll let you know who is available to take you on or to give you an interview and things like that. They've definitely been a big help to me.

“ They'd ask you what areas you're interested in, first of all. You may list two or three different areas, and they would come up then with proposition, and it's like that.

““ Once you could give the commitment and don't commit to something you can't, and it's okay to say "no" as well. Do you know, I've turned down a lot of roles there lately because of college and stuff like that, I just can't. But that's fine too. And I have never felt pressured or anything like that into taking a role on or that I was treated differently because I didn't.

““ Predominantly I have to say my experience is very positive like that because most organizations are very well set up for volunteers and they understand what you're giving to them and what the benefit there are. So I'd say 99% of the time was very positive and well set up and well structured, like good training. They induct you into the area and expectations and the rules and the regulations and the protocols and whatever issues might you encounter or not. And you know you'd be well prepared for it.

““ They do go above and beyond. I'm not just talking about Alone now, but volunteer organizations and volunteer support groups, I find they're not just interested in how you handle your volunteer role or what difficulties you have or the questions that you have. They also try to help you.

““ Training is key for all volunteers!

4. Advertising and Promotion

Throughout the open-ended questions and focus groups, volunteers raised concerns around not knowing how and where to find suitable volunteer roles. A number of respondents suggested that Volunteer Ireland, Volunteer Centres and organisations that engage volunteers need to undertake more widespread promotion and advertising of their services to reach people who want to volunteer.

While some respondents recognised that this can be difficult for organisations due to lack of capacity and resources, they felt more could be done using innovative ideas like developing a podcast.

“ I think that’s really important, that people know that Volunteer Ireland exists because I bet many, many, many people don’t know they exist. They know that Tidy Towns group down the road, and they know that the mother and toddlers group in this community centre, but they don’t know that there’s a central place you can go. So yeah, I wish, it would be nice.

“ A little more advertising for people who, like me, did not realise Volunteer Ireland even existed.

“ I’d like to encourage people to be registered, so that if something did turn up, that they were actually approached. Because if you’re approached and ask to do something, you’re much quicker to say, ‘Yes, I’ll do it, I’m only available on Monday, I’ll do this.’ But we’re not inclined to push ourselves forward, I know I’ve said that before... There are always people there with good intentions I’ll say, but it’s asking them to do a specific thing. So I think maybe some sort of campaign, to encourage people to be registered as volunteers.



Conclusion

The combination of quantitative and qualitative data within this research allows us to create a unique picture of volunteering during a pandemic. It is clear that while volunteers had varied experiences, there are a number of findings consistent with research conducted in the years prior to the pandemic. If anything, the crisis amplified some findings such as volunteering playing a part in reducing isolation and highlighting its benefit to our communities.

For organisations, it is apparent that best practice in engaging volunteers is just as important, if not more so, during a crisis. Communication, support, training and flexibility all came through as key considerations for organisations as they look to recruit and retain volunteers.

Certainly, these findings show how critical volunteering has been to both individuals and our communities throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.



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