



## Volunteer Now's response to the Consultation on the Programme for Government

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Volunteer Now welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Programme for Government (PFG) consultation and have spoken to a range of stakeholders, including local community groups, mental health charities, large volunteer-involving organisations and council staff members to support us in compiling this response.

Volunteer Now works to promote, enhance and support volunteering across Northern Ireland. Volunteer Now is about **connecting** with individuals and organisations to **build** healthy communities and create positive **change**. **Volunteer Now** enhances recognition for the contribution volunteers make, provides access to opportunities and encourages people to volunteer. We provide training, information, guidance and support to volunteer-involving organisations on issues of good practice and policy regarding volunteering, volunteer management, safeguarding and governance.

During the unprecedented last 12 months volunteers have demonstrated their real and meaningful impact to everyone. It is crucial that the gain in the level of volunteering seen from the past 12 months are built upon as we move forward. This is why we were disappointed not to see volunteering mentioned in the current Programme for Government (PfG) draft. From an overarching perspective, it is important that we are a society seen to be promoting and recognising volunteering. There should be a focus on what we can all 'give back' to our society as opposed to solely thinking about what society can give to us.

There is a clear need for better public policy on volunteering and for this to be reflected in the PFG. The current volunteering strategy dating from 2012 should be referenced within the PfG and an urgent review of this strategy is required post pandemic to build in our learning from the past year. The fact this strategy needs to be reviewed suggests that a greater focus must be placed on volunteering as a whole, with a big step being the inclusion and embedding of it in the final PfG.

Volunteer Now would like to make the following key points in relation to the draft report:

- **OUTCOME- Everyone can reach their potential**

In the Key Priority Areas (Capability & Resilience; Better Jobs; Skills & Attainment; Sports, Arts & Culture), volunteering plays a part in all of these and yet is not mentioned. For example, most sports organisations could not function at all without volunteers<sup>1</sup>. Some of the most commonly cited benefits in the latest Continuous Household Survey (2019-2020) are in relation to skills and personal development, e.g. learned new skills or improved knowledge (49% and 40% respectively). In our view, this strongly highlights that volunteering is a keyway to encourage individuals to 'reach their potential.' For volunteers, a popular motivation is to learn something new! Volunteering also contributes to community resilience and is an important way of building social capital.

- **OUTCOME- We all enjoy long, healthy, active lives**

Volunteering has several health benefits, both physical and mental. This is documented through extensive research<sup>2</sup>.

Volunteer Now carried out some research with people in NI aged 50+ finding that:

- ✚ 75% of respondents described their life as either very active or quite active. Volunteers were more likely to say that they were active than non-volunteers. This suggests that volunteering can help people lead more active lives.

In addition to this, volunteering is crucial to the survival and growth of sport in Northern Ireland. Without sufficient sporting infrastructure in place, it will be more challenging for people to be active, again highlighting the benefits of volunteering. Using major sporting events as an example, volunteers have played a huge role in the success of events in Northern Ireland, promoting what we have to offer as a nation. Therefore, argument could be made that volunteers are also contributing to 'People want to work, live and visit here'.

**The 5 ways to wellbeing:** New Economics Foundation states that if practised regularly the Five Ways to Wellbeing will contribute to improving personal wellbeing<sup>3</sup>. Subsequently, under GIVE, volunteering is mentioned as a method. Volunteering should be included as a key priority area in relation to this outcome, as the mental and physical health benefits are huge. The most frequently cited benefit in the CHS findings for Northern Ireland was that it 'makes me feel better about myself' (69%).

- **OUTCOME- Our children and young people have the best start in life**

As mentioned, volunteering is important for skills, personal development and building better community relations. As young people grow, volunteering should be encouraged to enable them to play a full part as citizens and to support them in forming the community bonds and building the resilience they need to cope with life.<sup>4</sup>

Aside from the volunteering benefit to the young person, it is also relevant to mention that over 90% of youth work is done by volunteers<sup>5</sup>. Volunteers are the backbone of youth work in Northern Ireland and youth services could not be delivered without volunteers and yet there is no mention of volunteering in relation to children and young people's services.

The options for young people to be involved in a wide range of volunteering opportunities, including overseas opportunities needs to be encouraged.

**Measurement** - Data is already being collected annually on volunteering through the Continuous Household Survey by NISRA.

In summary, we feel that volunteering should not be omitted from any future Programme for Government and that it should be reflected throughout the document. Volunteering is often taken for granted but government has a responsibility to create the conditions to allow it to flourish. If it is mentioned in the PFG then that should feed through to more effective public policy on the issue across the board. This will give us as a community the opportunity to build on the fantastic volunteering response during the pandemic and to create the kind of society we all want to live in.

Volunteer Now would be pleased to discuss any of the points raised above.

## **References**

<sup>1</sup> Its All About Time 2007 – 77% of sports organisations could not operate without volunteers.

<sup>2</sup> <https://whatworkswellbeing.org/resources/volunteer-wellbeing-what-works-and-who-benefits/>

<sup>3</sup> New Economics Foundation (NEF). (2008). Five ways to wellbeing: The evidence. London. nef.

<sup>4</sup> YLTS Research (2018)- Respondents who volunteered (38%), particularly those involved in formal volunteering, were also more likely than those who had not volunteered (21%) to have taken part in cross community project.

<sup>5</sup> There are approximately 140,000 young people who are registered participants in the Youth Service. There are almost 1,600 registered youth service providers, the regular running of which is reliant on a workforce of 20,881, of whom over 90% are volunteers. Dept of Education