

Volunteering During The Pandemic & Beyond

- A Northern Ireland Perspective



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Contents

Introduction	3
Northern Ireland Context	4
Volunteering pre COVID-19 – Data from the Continuous Household survey (CHS)	5
Volunteering at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic	6
Comparative findings from 2020 surveys in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Republic of Ireland on volunteering and the Impact of COVID-19	7
Volunteering during COVID-19 (since March 2020)	
Levels of volunteering during COVID-19	7
Types of volunteering during COVID-19	9
Levels of volunteering pre COVID-19	10
Frequency of volunteering pre COVID-19	11
Levels of volunteering post COVID-19	12
Post COVID-19 volunteering compared with pre COVID-19	13
Post COVID-19 volunteering compared with volunteering During COVID-19	14
Time commitment to volunteering post COVID-19	15
Discussion	16
References	18

Introduction

The emergence and worldwide spread of COVID-19 meant that 2020 was a very difficult and distressing year for many. However, as The Guardian highlighted, one positive element to emerge was a surge in solidarity with ‘2020 [being] the year when the volunteer society mobilised like never before’ (Henley, 2020). In Northern Ireland, as across the UK and beyond, volunteer numbers have increased as organisations, communities and individuals have responded to the shifting demands, pressures and priorities created by the pandemic at personal, community and societal levels. Of note has been the growth in informal volunteering with individuals and/or community networks providing or extending a wide range of support services, particularly within local neighbourhoods. Social media groups and communications channels, such as, WhatsApp, Facebook and Zoom have been central to the creation, extension and mobilisation of these more informal groups and activities. At the same time, restrictions on social contact, changes to working patterns and a reduction in revenue streams have accelerated an already growing trend within the formal and established voluntary sectors towards the greater use of digital platforms both in the provisions of services and organisational management processes. This can be evidenced in, for example, the extension of opportunities for virtual volunteering, greater use of webinars to disseminate best practice and encourage networks of exchange, and the creation of accessible digital resources to provide support and guidance for individuals and organisations to undertake activities, effectively and safely in compliance within broader legislative requirements, policy and the specificities of COVID-19.

If the groundswell of action, both formal and informal, prompted by COVID-19 is to be maintained and nurtured beyond the pandemic, understanding the impact of the crisis on volunteering levels, activities and commitment is important. As such, and contributing to a growing body of research on volunteering and COVID-19 within the United Kingdom and beyond, in October 2020, Volunteer Now commissioned a survey. Focusing on Northern Ireland, the objective of the survey was to assess the impact of COVID-19 on volunteer participation, pre, during and post COVID-19, in terms of the types of volunteering – formal/informal; activities undertaken; time spent volunteering; and future volunteering intentions. Similar surveys had been undertaken in June 2020, by Volunteer Scotland (Maltman, Linning, and Stevenson, 2020) and in September 2020, by Volunteer Ireland (Mulcahy, 2020). As the Northern Ireland survey used virtually the same questions and a similar methodology to that employed in the two earlier surveys data are, to a significant degree, comparable and are useful in highlighting trends within and between the three survey areas. The key focus of this report is to present the findings from the Northern Ireland COVID-19 survey and compare these with the data from the Scotland and Ireland surveys. However, in order to contextualise the 2020 survey data, it is necessary to provide a brief pre-pandemic baseline of volunteering levels and priorities within Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland Context

In both public policy and discourse, successive governments, often reflecting distinct ideological perspectives, have promoted the societal and individual benefits of volunteering. As such, while much media attention during the pandemic has focused on the value society and communities derive from volunteering, strategies and studies of volunteering have been implemented and conducted regionally across the UK over a number of years. While in terms of continuity and size England and Scotland have been to the fore in the collection of data on volunteering numbers and activities (Zimmeck, 2018), data are available for Northern Ireland which can help place volunteering responses to COVID-19 in context.

The publication in September 2007 of *'It's All About Time'*, a detailed report of volunteering in Northern Ireland, and the subsequent consultation process that followed led to the introduction in March 2012 of Northern Ireland's first Volunteering Strategy. Providing a framework for the following five years, the key objectives of the Strategy were increased participation through the promotion and development of volunteering opportunities within a supportive, arguably more professional, infrastructure. While the Strategy was revisited in 2017/18 and an action plan formatted, this was not formalised as, at that time, there was no Department for Communities Minister in place. While the pandemic has placed volunteering clearly in the spotlight and highlighted new imperatives, the work undertaken in 2017/18 remains useful in shaping policy.

Survey data on the experiences of adult volunteers in Northern Ireland have been collected annually through the Continuous Household Survey (CHS) since 2017. Prior to this, questions were included in the Northern Ireland Omnibus Survey. Whilst both surveys are undertaken by NISRA's Central Survey Unit (CSU), this change in methodology means that the results are not directly comparable. In CHS volunteering is defined as *'the commitment of time and energy, for the benefit of society and the community, the environment, or individuals outside (or in addition to) one's immediate family. It is unpaid and undertaken freely and by choice.'* As currently defined, therefore, it is not possible to effectively disaggregate data into formal and informal volunteering; albeit that data on volunteering activities are collected. Given the acknowledged rise in informal volunteering during COVID-19, it could be important to consider if/how it might be possible to capture in what ways and to what extent this is occurring. Nonetheless, data from the CHS are useful in providing a baseline and contextualising the findings from the October 2020 Volunteer Now survey on the impact of COVID-19 on volunteering.

Volunteering pre COVID-19 – Data from the Continuous Household Survey (CHS)

In October 2020, the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) published an overview of the findings on volunteering from the most recent CHS, which was carried out between April 2019 and March 2020. It showed that 28% of participants had been involved in volunteering in the preceding twelve months, a figure similar to that reported in 2018/19 and 2017/18 (27%). The age distribution of those volunteering was relatively similar - a lower proportion of 25-34 years (24%) volunteered compared with those aged 16-24 (29%), 35-44 (28%), 45-54 (30%) 55-64 (29%) and 65 years plus (26%). A higher proportion of those who were economically active volunteered (30%) in comparison to those not economically active (25%). Participants living in the least deprived areas (35%) or rural areas (32%) were more likely to volunteer than those in the most deprived areas or urban areas (21% and 25% respectively).

Again, as in previous years, the three most popular types of organisations for volunteering were church/faith based organisations and groups (39%), sports organisations (29%), and community and neighbourhood groups (17%); these were closely followed by organisations linked to youth/children outside school (15%) and children's education/school (15%). Only 2% of respondents said that while they volunteered it was not with an organisation. Again, this low proportion might be a result of CHS not actively capturing data on informal volunteering. Analysis by gender showed that a higher proportion of males than females were involved with organisations connected to sports (39% and 20% respectively); whereas female involvement was higher in 'church/faith based' organisations (43%), 'children's education/school' (20%), 'youth/children activities outside school' (19%) than males (35%, 9% and 11% respectively). Gender differences were not as evident in relation to volunteering with community, neighbourhood and citizen groups (females 19%, males 14%).

A higher proportion of participants who were not economically active volunteered with a 'church/faith based' organisation compared to those who were economically active (48% and 33% respectively). In comparison, a higher proportion of those who were economically active volunteered with a sports organisation (34%) and organisations involving children's education/schools (17%) than those not economically active (21% and 10% respectively).

Participants living in the least deprived areas were more likely to volunteer with a 'church/faith based' organisation (45%) than those living in the most deprived areas (19%). Conversely, a higher proportion of those living in the most deprived areas volunteered with an organisation involving 'local community, neighbourhood or citizens groups' (20%), than those in the least deprived (11%).

Participants aged 65 years plus were more likely to be involved with church/faith based groups (58%) than those aged 16-44 (30%) and 45-64 (36%) years; while the proportions of those aged 16-54 years who were involved in sports organisations were similar as those in the 55-64 and 65 plus aged bands, the proportions were 26% and 12% respectively.

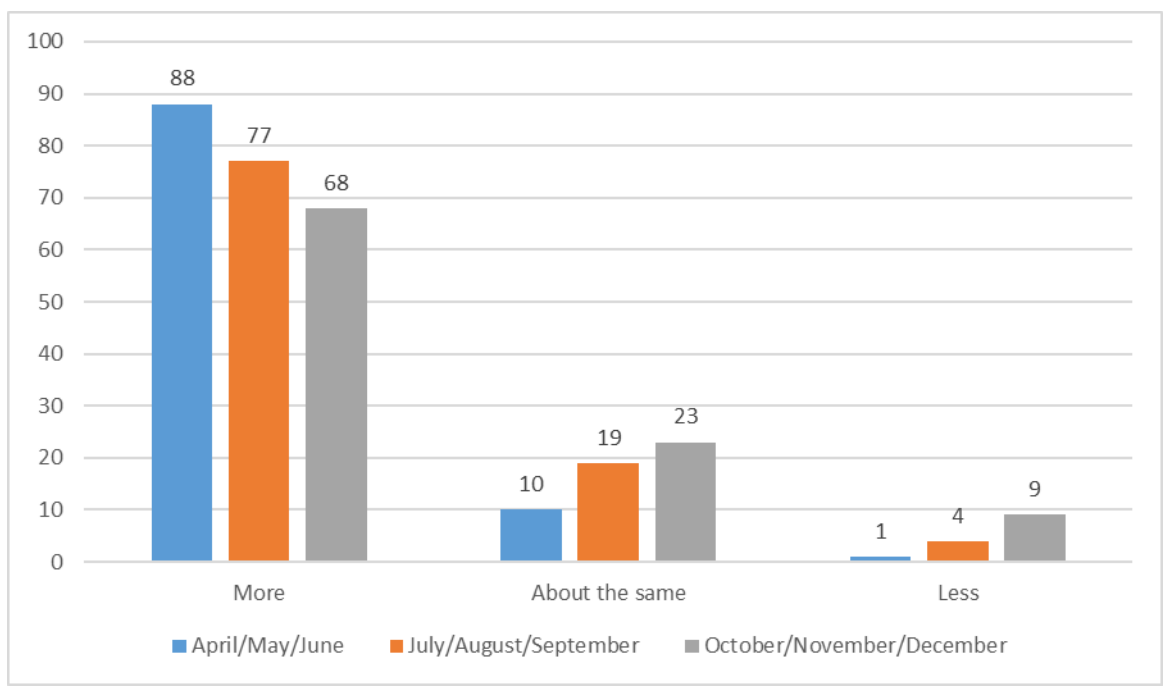
In terms of time spent volunteering in the preceding four weeks, 40% of participants had spent less than eight hours, 23% between eight and sixteen hours, with 17 spending seventeen plus hours. While nearly one fifth (19%) had not volunteered at all in that time, this was the case for 23% of

participants aged 16-54 years and 11% of those aged 55+ years. A higher proportion of those living in the most deprived areas (29%) and those living in urban areas (21%) had not volunteered, compared to those living in the least deprived areas and rural dwellers (15% and 16% respectively).

Volunteering at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic

In April 2020, NISRA launched the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Opinion Survey to capture how COVID-19 affected the lives and behaviour of people living in Northern Ireland. One question included in the survey, which is pertinent to this report, asks respondents if they feel people are doing things to help others more, about the same, or less since the Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. Figure 1 presents the responses for the period of April to December, and, as can be seen, the proportion of respondents who felt that people are doing more had decreased significantly over the pandemic period from 88% in the three months from April -June 2020 to 68% in October-December.

Figure 1: Do you feel people are doing more, about the same or less to help others since the Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak? (%)



Comparative findings from 2020 surveys in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Republic of Ireland on volunteering and the impact of COVID-19

Introduction

As noted previously, Volunteer Now commissioned a survey in 2020 to assess the impact of COVID-19 on volunteering before, during and after the pandemic. The Northern Ireland survey was based on a representative sample of 1,003 adults aged 18 years+. It was conducted using an online panel methodology and the fieldwork took place from 20 – 31 October 2020. Surveys using similar methodology and questions had been undertaken by Volunteer Scotland – 1,014 participants aged 16 years+; fieldwork conducted 22-29 June 2020; and Volunteer Ireland – 1,000 participants aged 15 years+; fieldwork conducted 16-30 September 2020. Acknowledging the differences in the age of respondents and the periods when fieldwork was undertaken, the Northern Ireland data are now presented and compared with the findings from the other surveys.

Volunteering during COVID-19 (since March 2020)

Levels of volunteering during COVID-19

Recognising that COVID-19 has been linked to an increase in more informal/localised volunteering, the survey began by asking participants if they had given any voluntary/unpaid help during COVID-19 (since March 2020) in each/any of the following ways:

1. Through a charity, formally organised group, club or an organisation like the NHS.
2. Through an informal group set up by people in your area to support and help others in your local community.
3. As an individual to help other people outside your family, or to support your local community.

For clarity of presentation in figures and tables these are referred to respectively as:

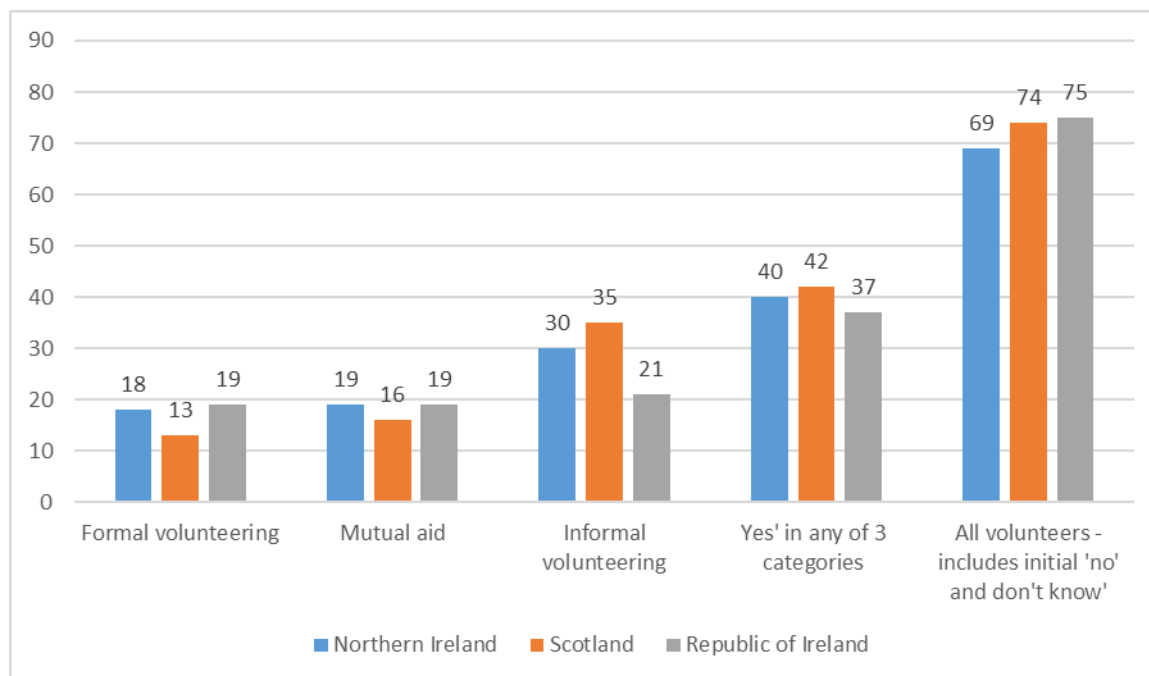
1. Formal volunteering.
2. Mutual aid.
3. Informal volunteering.

As detailed in Figure 2, in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, the proportion of respondents volunteering through formally (18% and 19% respectively) and/or informally organised groups (19%) are virtually the same; the figures in Scotland are lower, particularly with regard to formal volunteering (13% and 16% respectively). While three in ten participants in Northern Ireland volunteered at an individual level, this figure was lower than in Scotland (35%) but nine percentage points higher than that reported in the Republic of Ireland (21%). In Northern Ireland 40% of participants indicated that they had volunteered during the pandemic in any/all of the three categories; the proportion was slightly less than that recorded in the Scotland survey (42%) and slightly more than in the Republic of Ireland (37%).

Acknowledging that people may find it difficult to think of themselves as volunteers, or of the help they provide as volunteering, respondents who had answered 'No' 'Don't know' when asked if they

had provided unpaid help to others during the pandemic were presented with a list of designated activities and asked to consider if they had helped in any of these ways. In the Northern Ireland survey, of this group (60%) who initially identified as non-volunteers, nearly three in ten (29%) subsequently said that they had provided help in at least one of the designated activities (discussed further below). As detailed in Figure 2, when these respondents are combined with those who had, from the outset, said they volunteered in any/all of the three categories (40%), the overall proportion of respondents who provided voluntary/unpaid help (all volunteers) had increased to 69%. Following a similar pattern, the overall figure for Scotland increased to 74%, initially 42%, and in Republic of Ireland to 75%, initially 37%. It is not possible to categorise this figure for 'all volunteers' into formal volunteering, mutual aid or informal volunteering.

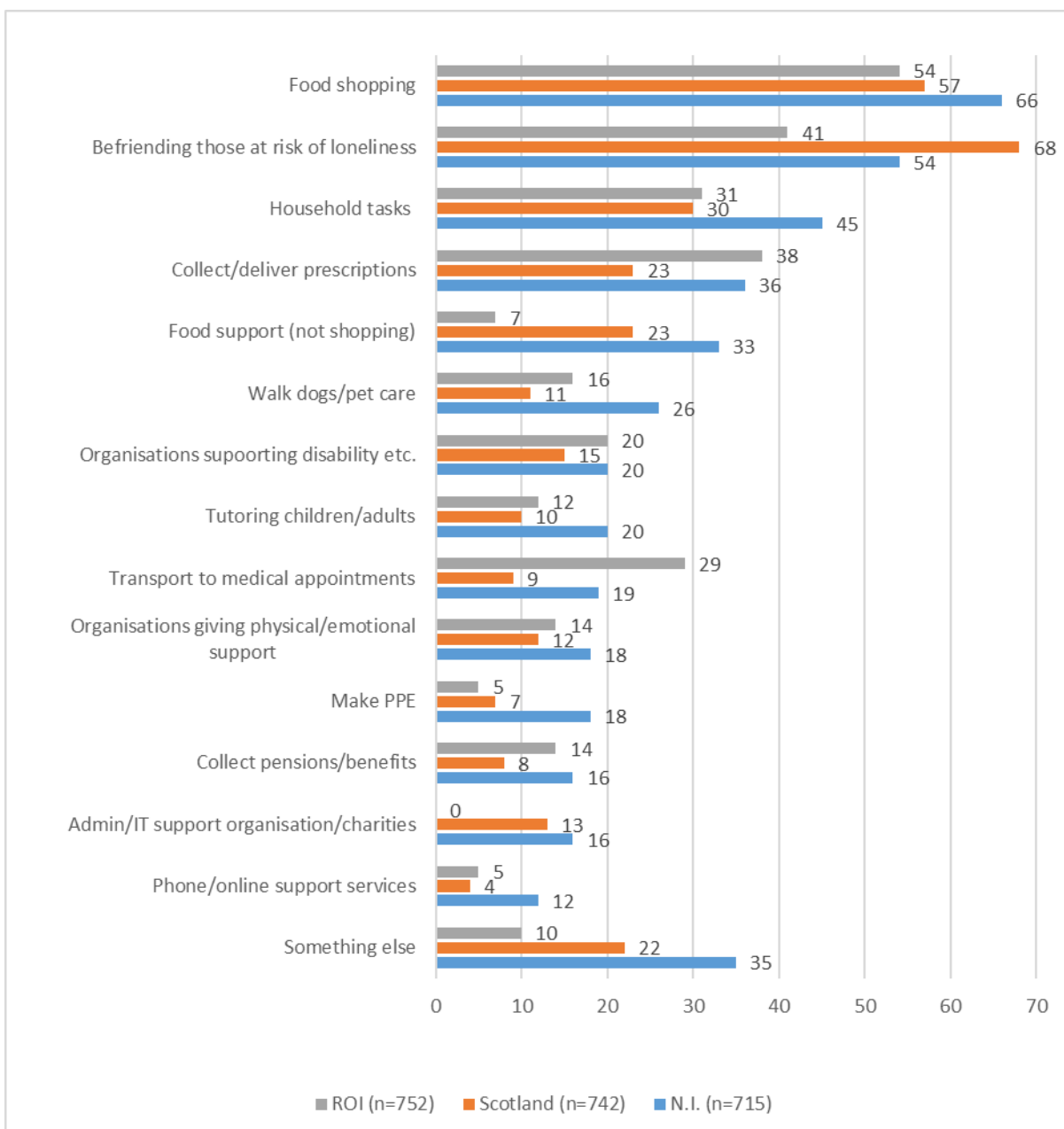
Figure 2: Voluntary/unpaid help during COVID-19 (March 2020 to date of interview) (%)



Types of volunteering during COVID-19

Respondents who indicated that they provided voluntary/unpaid help in all/any of the three volunteering categories were asked to choose the types of voluntary/unpaid help they provided from the list of designated activities; as noted above this list was also presented to respondents who, initially, had indicated that they were not involved in volunteering. Figure 3 presents the proportion of ‘all volunteers’ in each of the survey areas and the activities they were engaged in. While the proportion of respondents engaged in each activity may vary, Northern Ireland being higher in most cases than Scotland and the Republic of Ireland, there is generally a similar pattern in regard to the popularity of activities. However, in the Republic of Ireland ‘transporting people to medical appointments’ is more popular than in either Northern Ireland and Scotland, and conversely ‘providing food support (other than shopping)’ is less popular. While the top six activities would, undoubtedly, have been undertaken pre-pandemic, by their nature they are likely to have become more important during lockdown, and, arguably, they are also the types of activities that would lend themselves to more informal/localised volunteering.

Figure 3: Respondents undertaking the following activities in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Republic of Ireland (%)

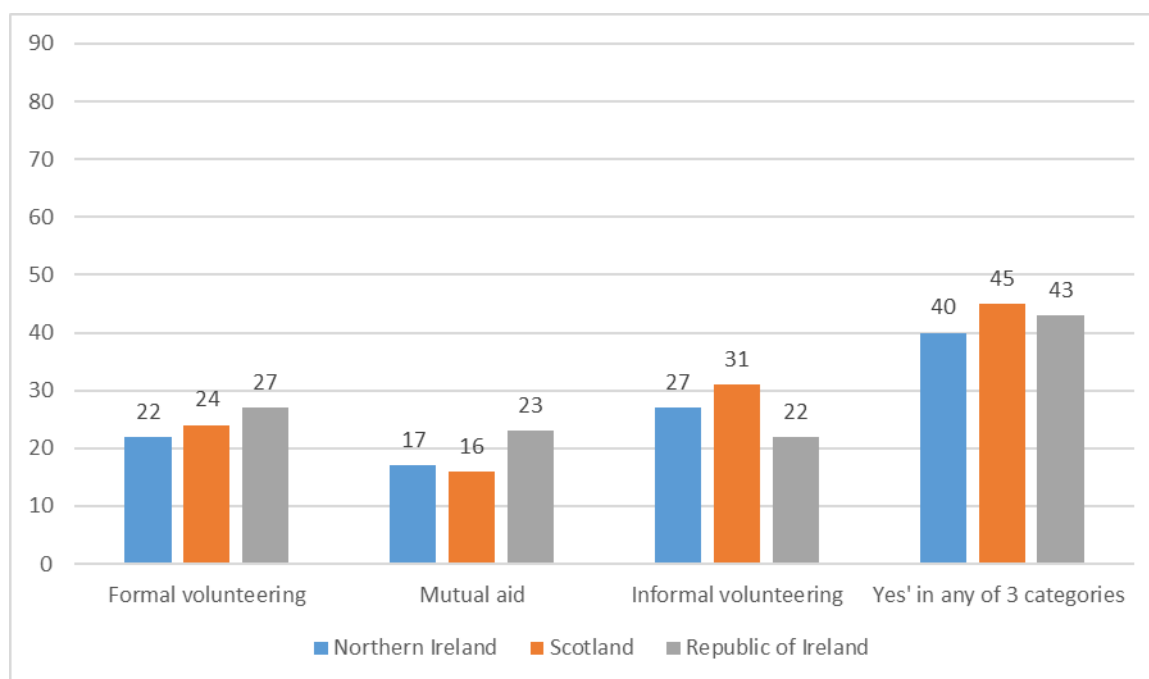


Levels of volunteering pre COVID-19

Respondents were asked if they had provided any voluntary/unpaid help to anyone other than family members in the twelve months preceding COVID-19, i.e. March 2019 to February 2020, (See Figure 4). If assessed purely in terms of respondents who indicated they volunteered in the three given categories, participation levels pre COVID-19 were quite similar to those recorded during the pandemic. However, as noted above, participation levels during COVID-19 increased significantly when respondents, who initially said they had not volunteered, were asked to consider the list of volunteering options (see Figure 3 for details). In Northern Ireland, the proportion of respondents who engaged in formal volunteering (22%) pre COVID-19 was higher than during the pandemic (18%). While a similar trend was evident in the other two regions, the difference in Northern Ireland was less pronounced than in Scotland (24% v 13%) and the Republic of Ireland (27% v 19%). In Northern Ireland, the proportion of respondents volunteering pre and during the pandemic with informally organised groups was similar (17% v 19%); in Scotland the figure remained the same (16%); while in the Republic of Ireland the proportion of respondents engaged pre pandemic (23%) was higher than during the pandemic (19%). In terms of informal volunteering, the proportion of respondents in Northern Ireland who did so during the pandemic (30%) had increased slightly from pre pandemic levels (27%). This was also the case in Scotland (35% and 31%), while in the Republic of Ireland there was virtually no change (22% and 21%).

However, if the proportion of respondents who had provided unpaid help in any of the volunteering categories in the year preceding COVID-19 is compared with all volunteers (those who initially said 'yes' plus those who had initially responded 'no' and 'don't know') who engaged in any voluntary/unpaid help during the pandemic significant differences are evident. In each region the pre pandemic figures increased by around thirty percentage points - Northern Ireland pre pandemic 40%; during pandemic 69%; Scotland 45% to 74% and Republic of Ireland 43% to 75%.

Figure 4: Voluntary/unpaid help in the year before COVID-19 (March 2019 to February 2020) (%)



Frequency of volunteering pre COVID-19

As detailed in Table 1, the frequency of volunteering pre COVID-19 in each category in Northern Ireland and Scotland was similar. Around four in ten respondents indicate that they volunteer either weekly or monthly and around one fifth less than once a month. In the Republic of Ireland nearly one half of respondents in each volunteering category were likely to volunteer on a weekly basis.

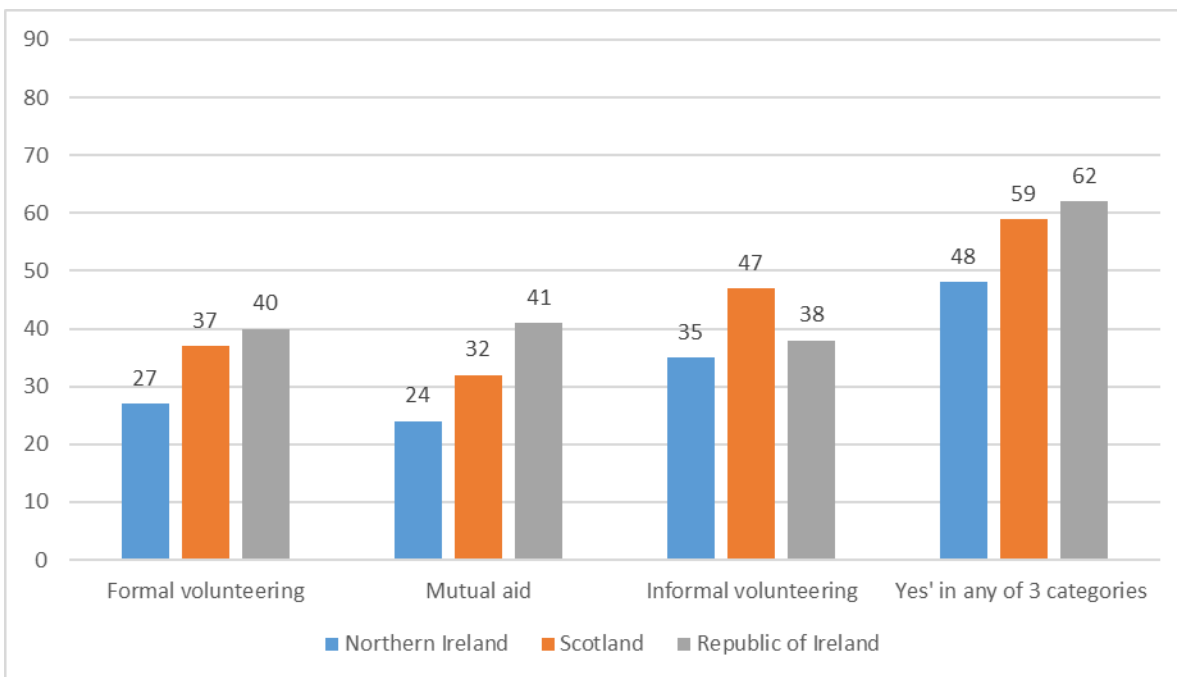
Table 1: Frequency of pre COVID-19 volunteering

%			
	Northern Ireland	Scotland	Republic of Ireland
Formal volunteering			
At least once a week	38	40	48
Less than once a week but at least once a month	39	38	28
Less than once a month	21	19	22
Don't know	3	5	<1
Mutual aid			
At least once a week	42	40	47
Less than once a week but at least once a month	37	38	30
Less than once a month	19	19	21
Don't know	2	5	1
Informal volunteering			
At least once a week	44	43	46
Less than once a week but at least once a month	36	35	34
Less than once a month	17	17	20
Don't know	4	4	1

Levels of volunteering post COVID-19

Respondents were asked if they felt they would volunteer in all/any of the three volunteering categories once COVID-19 was over and the lockdown was lifted. As detailed in Figure 5, in Northern Ireland just over one-third of respondents said they would volunteer as an individual, 27 per cent with a formally organised group and nearly one quarter with an informally organised group. In Scotland, while following a similar trend to Northern Ireland, a higher proportion of respondents indicated their intention to volunteer, 47% as an individual, 37% with a formally organised group, and 32% with an informally organised group. Intentions in the Republic of Ireland were more uniform across the volunteering options with around four in ten respondents indicating their intention to volunteer in the future in each category. Overall, just less than half of the respondents in Northern Ireland (48%) indicated that they would volunteer in the future compared to around six in ten of those in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland (59% and 62% respectively).

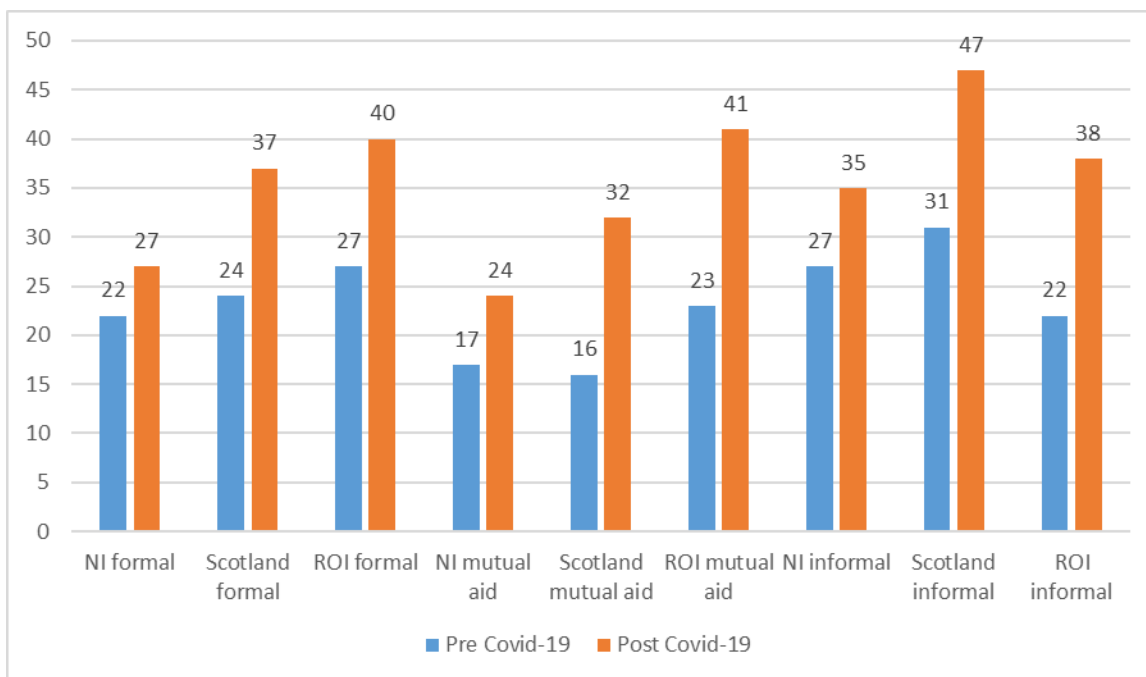
Figure 5: Projected voluntary/unpaid help post COVID-19 (%)



Post COVID-19 volunteering compared with pre COVID-19

Figure 6 compares anticipated post pandemic volunteering with pre pandemic levels across the three survey areas. In Northern Ireland post COVID-19 engagement in mutual aid and informal volunteering were projected to increase by seven and eight percentage points respectively (24% v 17% and 35% v 27%) in comparison to pre-pandemic levels, with a five percentage point increase in formal volunteering (27% v 22%). Comparing post and pre pandemic figures in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland, the projected increases in mutual aid were sixteen and eighteen percentage points respectively (32% v 16% and 41% and 23%), informal volunteering sixteen percentage points (47% v 31% and 38% v 22%), and formal volunteering thirteen percentage points (37% v 24% and 40% v 27%).

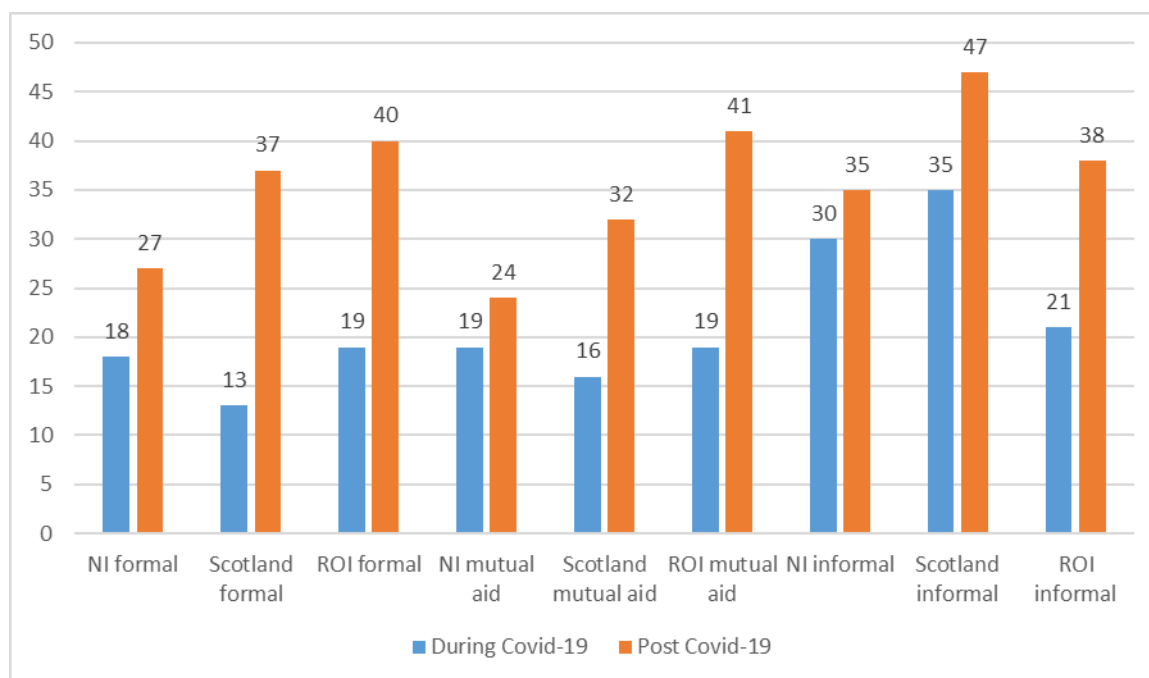
Figure 6: Voluntary/unpaid help pre and post COVID-19 (%)



Post COVID-19 volunteering compared with volunteering during COVID-19

Figure 7 compares anticipated volunteering post COVID-19 with volunteering during COVID-19 across the three survey areas. In Northern Ireland post COVID-19 engagement in formal volunteering was projected to increase by nine percentage points (27% vs 18%) in comparison to that given during COVID-19, with a five percentage points increase in mutual aid and informal volunteering (24% vs 19% and 35% vs 30% respectively). Comparing figures for volunteering post and during COVID-19 in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland, the projected increases in formal volunteering were twenty-four and twenty-one percentage points respectively (37% v 13% and 40% v 19%), mutual aid sixteen and twenty-two percentage points (32% v 16% and 41% v 19%), and informal volunteering twelve and seventeen percentage points (47% v 35% and 38% and 21%).

Figure 7: Voluntary/unpaid help during and post COVID-19 (%)



Time commitment to volunteering post COVID-19

Respondents who indicated that they intended to volunteer post COVID-19 were asked about their planned time commitment post pandemic in comparison to what they spent pre COVID-19. As detailed in Table 2, one half of respondents in Northern Ireland indicated that they would spend a lot/a little more time compared to just over three in ten in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland.

Table 2: Anticipated time commitment post COVID-19 compared to pre COVID-19 (includes respondents who say they will volunteer post COVID-19)

%			
	Northern Ireland	Scotland	Republic of Ireland
A lot more time	12	7	8
A little more	38	24	25
About the same	38	62	61
A little less	5	3	3
A lot less	1	2	<1
Don't know	6	2	1

Discussion

Findings show that in Northern Ireland the slight rise in informal volunteering during the pandemic was offset by a similar fall in formal volunteering when compared to pre-pandemic levels. In Scotland, there was a decrease of 11 percentage points in formal volunteering during the pandemic compared to pre COVID-19 and a four percentage points rise in informal volunteering, and in the Republic of Ireland formal volunteering fell by eight percentage points while informal volunteering remained virtually unchanged. However, assessing volunteering during the pandemic to include all respondents who indicated that they had been involved in any of the specified volunteering activities increased volunteering levels considerably. While this increase cannot be attributed precisely to any of the three volunteering categories, the activities that respondents were most involved with aligned closely with the types of local/community based activities that have reportedly increased in response to the demands of lockdown.

The proportion of respondents who said they intended to volunteer in the future had increased across all three survey areas. However, in Northern Ireland that proportion (48%) was somewhat lower than in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland (59% and 62% respectively). One contributory factor to this difference could be the timing of the surveys. In Northern Ireland the survey was conducted in October whereas in Scotland it took place in June and the Republic of Ireland September 2020. Different levels of COVID-19 restrictions and infection rates in each jurisdiction during the fieldwork periods, alongside developing discussions around the roll-out of vaccination programmes and the effect these might have on how we manage the COVID-19 epidemic, could all be contributory factors with regard to volunteering intentions. Arguably, initial interest may wane or individual circumstances change the longer restrictions of movement are in place. However, while respondents in Northern Ireland were less likely to say they would volunteer post COVID-19, those who did so when asked to assess their future time commitment in comparison to that given pre-COVID-19 were more likely to say they would commit more time than respondents in Scotland or the Republic of Ireland.

This report provides a timely reminder that during the pandemic we have seen an increase in volunteering, in particular in less formal volunteering. This has been accompanied by a decline in formal volunteering with organisations compared to pre-pandemic levels. This was to be anticipated, as many organisations which normally involve volunteers have been limited in their operations. It is extremely encouraging that the feeling is that engagement in all types of volunteering will increase post pandemic. While this projected growth is to be warmly welcomed, it is worth noting the growing negativity evident in the NISRA Coronavirus (COVID-19) Opinion Survey, where the proportion of respondents who felt that people are doing more to help others had decreased significantly over the pandemic period from 88% in the three months from April -June 2020 to 68% in October-December.

The key question is - What next? What can we do to sustain enthusiasm and provide support while lockdown and/or restrictions remains in place? How do we continue to engage the substantial number of new people who have shown a willingness to continue their involvement in volunteering after the pandemic? From a public policy perspective, it is important to create an environment which

nurtures volunteering and an urgent review of the Volunteering Strategy is required to ensure it is still relevant post pandemic. Organisations need to plan now how they welcome back their existing volunteers and how they create interesting roles and opportunities for new volunteers who want to continue to give their time. The effective integration of a range of digital communication channels as well as flexibility and reducing bureaucracy will all be important as we respond to the more informal approaches that have emerged during the pandemic. Undoubtedly, there will be challenges, but rather than reinforcing a rigid distinction between formal and informal approaches, responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted how, with care and mutual appreciation, formal and informal volunteering can operate along a mutually supportive continuum (Wilson, McCabe and MacMillan 2020). There is an opportunity to see growth in volunteering and everyone involved should seize this opportunity.

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Volunteer Now delivers services across Northern Ireland. We have offices in Belfast, Antrim, Enniskillen and Newry. Registered Office: Skainos Centre, 239 Newtownards Road, Belfast, BT4 1AF. Charity Registration No. NIC101309. Company Limited by Guarantee No. NI602399. Registered in Northern Ireland.

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