



Pathway for Volunteering

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Pathway for Volunteering

Introduction

Volunteers have played an essential role in providing support to communities across Northern Ireland during the Covid-19 pandemic. As Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs) transition through the current recovery stage of the pandemic, Volunteer Now has facilitated a series of Pathway for Volunteering workshops to explore how organisations are managing its impact. VIO's are presently re-introducing existing and developing new volunteer opportunities while looking to re-engage with existing volunteers and attracting new volunteers. Through the workshops representatives from local councils, health trusts, infrastructure organisations, youth, community development, sports organisations, disability, BAME, environmental, rural and women's sector have shared their experiences on how their organisations adapted services during the pandemic and continued to engage with their volunteers. In addition to hearing where organisations are presently at in this recovery stage, Volunteer Now has identified key priorities and challenges for organisations through the workshop discussions to help inform the development of a new volunteering strategy for Northern Ireland.

Setting the Context

The workshops drew on key findings, challenges and recommendations from two research reports conducted during the pandemic to determine if the experiences of the organisations saw similarities or differences in their volunteering response as the pandemic developed. The research reports were Mobilising Voluntary Action - Learning from Today, Prepared for Tomorrow (Mobilising UK Voluntary Action, January 2022) and Volunteering During the Pandemic and Beyond – A Northern Ireland Perspective (Queen's University Belfast, March 2021). All workshops commenced with a PowerPoint presentation highlighting the key findings from the research to set the framework for discussion. The research data for the two reports was gathered at different stages of the pandemic which enabled comparisons and differences to be highlighted to workshop participants to help gauge how their individual organisations adapted to the continually changing environment as restrictions were put in place and then as these restrictions were eased.

Mobilising Voluntary Action – Learning from Today, Prepared for Tomorrow

Research carried out by the Mobilising Voluntary Action Research group focused on the volunteering response to the Covid-19 pandemic, while also investigating the impact of the pandemic on volunteering and the Voluntary and Community sector. In Northern Ireland 96 organisations were sampled which included all 11 local councils, the 5 Health and Social Care Trusts and 80 others comprising of regional and local infrastructure organisations. The research gathered survey data from respondents during April to July 2021.

Key Findings

- Government support for infrastructure and community development was vital in mobilising the volunteering response as the COVID emergency developed
- A key problem identified was that the emergency response framework, built around council areas, had no formal role for volunteers
- Required a new structure to be established to provide the necessary coordination and information flows
- Volunteer numbers were higher than pre-pandemic levels, putting severe pressure on the capacity to channel this effort effectively
- Volunteering appeared to be informal with large increases in volunteering at a community level without the involvement of formal organisations
- Considered that informal volunteer-led community activities may be the slowest to return

Challenges

- Future planning difficult with depleted volunteering turnover and funding changes
- Re-engagement with existing volunteers
- New volunteers may not be able to offer same level of commitment
- Volunteer burnout and impact on mental health
- Additional resources needed to provide a safe environment
- Need to support rebuilding of volunteering in organisations

Recommendations

- Practical support for Volunteer-Involving Organisations (VIOs) to rebuild
- Comprehensive plan for spontaneous volunteering to be developed
- Need for relevant and strong public policy which enables and supports volunteering

Volunteering During the Pandemic - A Northern Ireland Perspective

Research conducted by the Social Market Research team in the School of Social Sciences at Queen's University Belfast gathered survey data from 1,003 respondents during late October 2020. This research focused on assessing the impact of the volunteering response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Key Findings

- 40% of respondents volunteering pre-pandemic increased to 69% during the pandemic
- Main areas of volunteering were food shopping, befriending, household tasks, collecting/delivering prescriptions and food support (not shopping)
- an increase in less formal volunteering
- decline in formal volunteering with organisations compared to pre-pandemic levels

Recommendations

- Create an environment which nurtures volunteering
- Review of the volunteering strategy
- Plan for welcoming back existing volunteers
- Create interesting roles and opportunities for new volunteers
- Effective integration of a range of digital communication platforms
- Reduced bureaucracy in response to more informal approaches to volunteering that have emerged through the pandemic

Highlighting the findings from the research led the points for discussion during the workshops:

- Recruitment, support and recognition of volunteers
- Development of volunteering opportunities
- Virtual volunteering and use of online digital platforms
- Role of infrastructure organisations
- Support needed and funding
- Review of volunteering strategy
- Need for further research

Learning from Workshops

Discussion from the workshops generally aligned with the findings from the research with participants indicating that their organisations had to initially suspend their normal volunteering activities in response to Government restrictions, meaning that existing volunteers had to step down from these roles. Some organisations indicated that they went from delivering all their services face-to-face to nothing as the pandemic developed. Other organisations indicated that they were able to adapt their volunteering opportunities to be delivered remotely while also introducing new volunteering opportunities in response to meeting local support needs, such as delivering food packages to those most in need within their local communities, delivering PPE to nurses or providing information to asylum seekers. For organisations where face-to-face opportunities had to stop, services such as advice, bereavement support, befriending and counselling were moved online or to telephone. This enabled existing volunteers to engage in new or adapted roles while also providing an opportunity for those newly interested in volunteering to get involved.

Ten themes emerged from the workshop discussions. Each theme below leads with the discussion and learning gathered, followed by suggestions of priorities to inform a new volunteering strategy for Northern Ireland.



1. Collaboration

Infrastructure organisations, VIOs, councils and health trusts highlighted their involvement in the local volunteering response to the pandemic. Examples of where community, voluntary and statutory worked together included a Community Response Network, Covid Emergency Volunteer Network and Community & Voluntary Sector Forum, structures established to help formalise the co-ordination of the volunteering response at local level. In one council area the Covid-19 response was based around District Electoral Areas (DEAs), harnessing the interest of people coming forward to volunteer and hearing directly from communities as to how volunteers could help. Networking was key to the volunteer response, working with communities and hearing what was happening on the ground and what support services were needed. This successful mobilisation of volunteers often depended on the strength of the infrastructure that was already in place. Networks were built on the existing relations between voluntary, community and statutory organisations across local council areas. These were viewed as being effective in how voluntary and community organisations and statutory authorities worked collaboratively, citing new and different ways of working to provide practical support for local communities. Councils found that they were working with groups that they had never worked with before and new mutual aid groups emerged as people responded to needs within neighbourhoods and communities. Considerable learning can be taken from how statutory bodies, infrastructure organisations and VIOs have worked together during the pandemic. It is important to capitalise on this collaborative approach and not revert to working independently of each other.

Organisations were required to look differently at their current volunteering roles and at different or new ways of working with other organisations. Examples of these included community transport schemes working with community organisations to provide a meals-on-wheels service, knitting projects being introduced remotely into care homes and councils forming strategic partnerships with British Red Cross to meet local need. Volunteers were considered to be the lifeblood of this response and the importance of organisations working in partnership was pivotal to delivering local support services. Community Champions or First Responders were quickly identified within communities. Seen as “trusted hands”, these Community Champions were able to signpost people locally to what help was available and how this could be accessed. This provided a quick and agile response to the pandemic, seeing who was available within the community and how support could be delivered to those who needed it most.

Priorities for Strategy

Building on the successful mobilisation of the volunteering response at local level, voluntary, community and statutory organisations should strive for greater connectivity and adopt a more collaborative working approach. This should harness the already existing relationships and explore ways of working that will maximise expertise and resources in delivering support services to local communities.

A programme of support provided by councils and infrastructure organisations should be developed and resourced for mutual aid groups which may decide to move forward in a more formal manner, for example, helping groups who wish to formalise by putting a constitution in place and applying for seed funding.

Much of the success of the volunteer response was infrastructure organisations and voluntary/community organisations working in partnership with statutory bodies. A continuation of collaborative working should be encouraged to form strategic partnerships. Recognition of the expertise, skills, knowledge and experience that the voluntary/community sector brings should be valued in supporting statutory bodies with the co-design of volunteer-involving programmes and activities.

Infrastructure organisations such as Volunteer Now have the opportunity while there is a recognition of

collaborative working to build on its existing networks and relationships to structure cross-sectoral fora and networks to enable statutory and voluntary/community representatives to meet regularly to share good practice and co-design volunteer-involving programmes.

Individual health trusts will have their own volunteering strategy however, there may be merit in having a regional strategy for volunteering in health trusts. Volunteering programmes and themes may differ among trusts however volunteering is the common thread which can provide a volunteering framework for volunteering within a health trust environment and help to set minimum standards.



2. Engaging with New and Existing Volunteers

At the start of the pandemic there was an overwhelming number of people wanting to help and get involved. Much of this was of a spontaneous nature, wanting to offer immediate help. As the pandemic progressed there has been a drop off in interest from new volunteers with the furlough scheme ending and people returning to work. Organisations are having to revert to relying on their existing volunteers. For those organisations with a strong team of volunteers this has been sustainable however for smaller organisations this remains a challenge as not all their volunteers have returned to volunteering. Some organisations indicated that they were not yet back to where they were at pre-pandemic, one organisation indicating that they had lost almost half of their volunteering team.

Environmental and conservation organisations were generally able to sustain their opportunities during the pandemic as many of these took place outdoors. These organisations were able to continue to involve their existing volunteers and saw an increased interest from new volunteers. These were often volunteers who had previously volunteered with other organisations pre-pandemic but who were not able to continue volunteering with their existing organisations as opportunities were suspended due to restrictions.

With the furlough scheme in place people had time to volunteer where previously work commitments would have meant that they didn't. Organisations were seeing an increase in volunteer interest due to this with some indicating that they were inundated with people wanting to volunteer. This however proved difficult to manage people's expectations and trying to find alternative roles. When organisations were not able to provide volunteering opportunities, potential volunteers were signposted to Volunteer Now, local volunteer centres and the Be Collective website.

Organisations also indicated that they saw an increase in interest from people who lost jobs during the pandemic and were now looking to engage in volunteering to learn new skills or gain experience to enhance job opportunities. Where organisations saw an increase in the number of young people volunteering with them, the need now for these young people to secure part-time work is proving to be a factor in the amount of time that these volunteers can give.

As organisations have started to re-introduce their volunteering opportunities and re-engage with their existing volunteers, there has been a contrast in how successful this is proving to be. Where volunteering opportunities were paused at the start of the pandemic, some organisations are finding a significant drop-off in their volunteering teams and as a result, have had to reduce the frequency of activities. Examples were given where organisations have had to reduce normal weekly activities to fortnightly or monthly and weekend out-of-hours support services have gone. All of which are a direct result of not having the volunteering capacity to run at pre-pandemic levels. As new variants emerged during the pandemic, some organisations had to work on a start/stop basis in getting back to face-to-face volunteering, particularly where their volunteers were clinically vulnerable and therefore at higher risk.

To ensure that volunteering opportunities were compliant with Covid-19 safety measures, organisations conducted risk assessments and provided PPE for volunteers, put up perspex screens where required, ensure well ventilated areas, mask wearing and hand sanitising. Risk assessments were initially conducted and reviewed as the pandemic developed to ensure that safety measures were met at all times. Some organisations have provided mandatory infection control online training for their volunteers. Organisations indicated that they listened to volunteers' concerns and requirements and then were able to put Covid-19 safety measures in place to ensure that they felt confident to return.

Some organisations indicated that they are finding that their pre-pandemic volunteering team remains largely intact and that their volunteers are looking forward and eager to return to face-to-face volunteering once opportunities open again.

Priorities for Strategy

For organisations it has been a case of continually **managing risk** throughout the pandemic and responding to individual volunteer's confidence in returning to volunteering. Up to date and clear information and guidance should be provided by government departments, local government and infrastructure organisations to support VIOs through the Covid-19 recovery stage to create a safe environment for volunteers to return to face-to-face volunteering.

There is an opportunity for organisations to **learn from each other** in how they are managing a return of pre-pandemic volunteering opportunities. Infrastructure organisations have a part to play in gathering examples of good practice and sharing information to benefit other organisations, particularly for smaller organisations that may be finding re-opening volunteering opportunities challenging with depleted volunteering teams.

Ongoing promotion of the Be Collective online volunteering platform to provide a comprehensive information source for those interested in volunteering. The drop-off in the high numbers of new volunteers coming through at the start of the pandemic may well be due to other commitments such as work. There may still however be an interest in volunteering and a **targeted promotional campaign** could be considered offering a range of opportunities to fit with the time commitment these volunteers can now offer.

Volunteering can be seen as a **pathway to employment** providing an opportunity to gain qualifications, skills and experience. Infrastructure organisations have a role in supporting VIOs in developing well-structured, quality opportunities to encourage individuals to consider how volunteering can enhance opportunities for employment. Emphasis should be placed on encouraging individuals to consider a career in the voluntary and community sector. Providing an enabling environment will allow individuals to progress and in doing so add strength to the voluntary and community sector.

There is an opportunity now to **re-ignite corporate volunteering** with business returning their staff to the workplace and community organisations re-opening their facilities. For those staff who had time to volunteer while on furlough, this may be a means of re-engaging their interest and for VIOs to be creative in being able to offer a range of hands-on and virtual employer supported volunteering opportunities.

3. Informal Volunteering

The rise in informal volunteering during the pandemic was significant to the volunteering response within local communities. People's motivations to volunteer appear to have changed and organisations have had to completely rethink how volunteers are looking to engage. There is a suggestion of volunteers wanting to move away from the weekly commitment of volunteering to a more ad hoc approach to volunteering – the term “Volunteering-lite” was suggested. For some people they don't consider themselves as volunteers, simply doing something within their community without the label of volunteer as such and would not necessarily want to sign-up as a volunteer.

A balance needs to be struck for informal volunteering to ensure that the proper safeguards are in place for activities and service delivery. Being creative and flexible to engage volunteers without them being put off by excessive and lengthy bureaucracy. A simple registration for a one-off activity may be all that is required. Recognition also needs to be given to those volunteers who contribute their time to campaigning for others. Where this is done in an informal manner it is important that the voices of people from excluded communities are heard and to understand where they are coming from and how can they be better supported.

It is important to make sure that volunteering is not just about helping out but also seen as fun. Particularly for those interested in spontaneous volunteering, simply asking the question – how can you be generous with your time today?

Priorities for Strategy

In re-building for the future, organisations need to embrace current trends around **informal, episodic and spontaneous volunteering** and be proactive in developing micro roles and virtual/remote volunteering opportunities.

Greater recognition of the **contribution that informal volunteering makes** within our society and consideration given to how this can be measured and supported.

Review the **requirements to support informal volunteering** ensuring that the necessary safeguards are in place without stifling its spontaneous nature.

Understanding the reasons why people volunteered during the pandemic would be useful to help build a **volunteer crisis response for the future**, evaluate volunteers' experience of volunteering during the pandemic and to gauge continued interest in volunteering.

4. Volunteer Management

Organisations were able to adapt recruitment and selection procedures for volunteering roles that required references and additional checks. At the start of the pandemic Access NI checks and response for references were swift and with the approval of electronic signatures, this meant that the normal time taken for volunteers to start volunteering was significantly reduced. This greatly facilitated a quick volunteer turnaround to meet the required response to deliver support services. To add greater efficiency some organisations moved their recruitment and induction training online where previously this was all done face-to-face.

Emphasis was placed on the need for VIOs to have trained staff/volunteers equipped with the necessary skills and experience to manage a volunteer team. Greater preparedness within organisations to involve volunteers and a clear plan for the management and support of volunteers was seen as an essential. For some organisations volunteer management is often an add on to a staff member or volunteer's role, putting additional pressure on those delegated with this task. Staff in statutory agencies can be stretched in their role with the additional responsibility of volunteer management. Additional resources are needed to build the capacity of volunteer management within organisations.

There is also greater emphasis needed on retention of volunteers and appreciation shown by organisations of their volunteering team. Achieving the Investing in Volunteers standard is one way for organisations to show the value that they place on their volunteers however this may not be within reach for some organisations. Consideration should be given to how this can be resourced to make this accessible for organisations. Organisations can learn from each other, share good practice and adopt a more joined up approach to volunteering. Working better together and sharing good practice can greatly assist organisations in achieving common goals with regards to volunteer support and management.

More support is required for organisations to develop and implement volunteer management. One-off training initially equips organisations with the tools and knowledge for developing and managing volunteering however more could be offered to assist organisations in putting learning into practice. This could be provided through mentoring programmes where organisations have a designated mentor over a set time to help build capacity and empower staff and volunteers within organisations to do for themselves.

Priorities for Strategy

Organisations should consider the value that volunteers bring to their organisation and reflect on the need for **quality management and support** for what can often be the organisation's biggest resource.

Need for those within VIOs who have a responsibility for management and support to have the necessary training, resources and support to carry out this role effectively. **Greater investment** is needed in offering staff and volunteers who carry out this role the opportunities for accredited training to not only enhance their skills and knowledge, but also to develop their career.

Volunteer management is vital in having a well-motivated and effective volunteer team and **funding opportunities** should be made available for organisations to **fully resource this area of management**.

The complementary role that volunteers play alongside paid staff should be valued and volunteers are seen as being involved and not used. Need for **clear volunteering roles** and specifications and training provided to organisations in the development of these and the management of a staff/volunteer team.

Capacity building programme put in place to assist organisations with the necessary skills and knowledge to successfully implement volunteer management. This could be through training, mentoring support or shared volunteer management resource across a number of organisations.

5. Volunteer Wellbeing

For existing volunteers who were stood down by their organisations as volunteering opportunities were paused, there was concern expressed that there was a loss of social connection and of their community support network. With these volunteers unable to engage in other volunteering opportunities and now almost two years out of volunteering, concern was expressed on the impact on their mental health and wellbeing. Organisations gave examples of how they had kept in touch with existing volunteers, through regular newsletter updates, virtual coffee mornings, mindfulness sessions or simply by lifting the phone. For those volunteers who may have had to shield during the pandemic or for those clinically vulnerable, there was an indication that some of these volunteers remain hesitant about returning to volunteering as organisations have been able to re-open their face-to-face opportunities.

From organisations supporting mental health there was concern of volunteer burnout and the impact that the pandemic has had on volunteers' mental health. There was a suggestion that community groups are exhausted through managing the demands and pressures during the pandemic – some groups are on their knees and struggling to get people on board. There is real concern that some smaller community volunteer-led activities will be lost. A peer support network connected to mental health organisations was suggested as a way of assisting organisations with the mental wellbeing of their volunteers. During the pandemic the *In This Together* programme run by Rural Community Network offered a series of workshops to community practitioners, community workers and volunteers to help build resilience and enable them to continue to play a positive role throughout the pandemic.

Priorities for Strategy

Getting involved in volunteering is viewed as having a positive impact on an individual's mental health. Looking at the 5-ways to wellbeing, volunteering offers a fundamental human need of being connected to your community, being active, taking notice of your environment around you, continued learning through life and giving something back to help others. **Promoting positive mental health and wellbeing** should be a duty of care for organisations and as such organisations should be supported through appropriate training and resources to equip them in supporting their volunteers.

Developing a toolkit for organisations to help with the recovery stage of the pandemic, providing guidance on creating a safe environment for volunteers to return and helping to build volunteer confidence in doing so.

6. Digital Transformation

In response to the need to maintain service delivery, where possible organisations were able to move volunteering opportunities online which enabled some volunteers to continue their volunteering. Many organisations also went remotely to hold Board/Committee meetings and offer ongoing support for volunteers using online digital communication platforms. Volunteers were provided with training and support to deliver online courses using Zoom. Additionally, the necessary training, support and equipment was provided to volunteers working from home on telephone helplines.

There was an indication that for some volunteers they would prefer to engage in virtual volunteering. Organisations have piloted virtual volunteering opportunities such as a virtual telephone befriending where volunteers provide support to those who may be feeling lonely or isolated by telephone or Skype/WhatsApp/Zoom video call.

A benefit of virtual volunteering is that it has the potential to cut down the carbon footprint of volunteering with meetings, induction training, support, ongoing training and service delivery being carried out without volunteers having to travel. By going online, it has also widened the reach of projects, e.g., Volunteer Now's befriending project has been able to increase its geographical spread of volunteers beyond the Belfast area and has also been able to involve more volunteers with a disability.

While this worked in many cases for the organisations, it was clear that some of their volunteers were not comfortable with this form of volunteering and were unable or reluctant to use online digital communication platforms. Where this has been the case organisations have kept in regular contact with volunteers by phone and although this means of communication is more time demanding, organisations felt that it was important to do this to ensure that volunteers felt connected to the organisation and informed of developments. Additionally, to help volunteers adapt to online communication and volunteering, organisations have offered training in the use of Zoom. A new role of Digital Champion has been introduced by organisations to upskill their volunteers and inform them of online safety and organisations have made greater use of social media platforms such as WhatsApp to keep in touch with volunteers.

Priorities for Strategy

Online digital communication platforms certainly offer organisations an effective means of extending volunteering opportunities and efficiently communicating with volunteers. It is important however that **volunteers are not left behind** by the focus on a greater need for remote volunteering and online communication.

Training is needed to **build the confidence** of those who may be reluctant or hesitant in the use of online communication. The necessary resources need to be made available to offer equality of opportunity to volunteer so that **volunteers from areas of high deprivation are not excluded**, for example, access to laptop or phone and data. Additionally, provision needs to be made for those living in areas where **broadband connectivity is of such poor quality** that they are not able to participate remotely.

Support, training and resources are needed to allow organisations to develop **virtual volunteering** opportunities and for volunteers to be confident and skilled in virtual volunteering.

A hybrid approach needs to be offered to allow volunteers choice in how they want to volunteer and be provided with training and support by organisations. Organisations also need to build skills to use digital networks to recruit and support volunteers. Younger people in particular expect these processes to be done online and organisations need to develop skills in this area.

7. Funding

Organisations indicated that government funding was crucial in enabling them to adapt and sustain their volunteering support. Local councils were key in the administration of funding programmes and, in some cases, worked with local voluntary and community representatives in helping co-design the administration of Covid-19 relief monies and had community liaison officers in place linking in with communities on a daily and weekly basis. Examples of funding support were provision of PPE, Covid fogging machines for premises, Zoom licences for online communication and training, and support travel expenses for volunteers.

In addition to funding support the advice and guidance provided by infrastructure organisations proved useful in helping to put Covid safety measures in place. Moving forward councils can play a key role in working with infrastructure organisations to develop a pool of mentors trained in volunteering good management practice (similar to mentoring programmes within Council Community Planning models) and promoting volunteering through their websites and supporting safeguarding best practice.

Priorities for Strategy

Funders to recognise the contribution that volunteers make to programme delivery and accordingly **build in volunteer support costs to funded programmes.**

Assistance for organisations in **measuring the impact of their volunteers** to strengthen funding opportunities and evaluate funded programmes.

Statutory organisations to work with voluntary and community organisations in **co-designing funding programmes.**

Scoping exercise of voluntary and community organisations across local council areas to determine what services are being delivered. Support provided by local authorities and infrastructure organisations to VIOs to encourage **partnership working to access funding opportunities** and share resources to maximise programme delivery.



8. Making Volunteering Inclusive

Organisations indicated that more needs to be done to make volunteering inclusive to all. One example highlighted was how volunteering can offer asylum seekers and refugees the opportunity to connect to communities, increase their confidence and improve their language skills. Providing training can help them to develop skills to do for themselves and support others in their community. Volunteering as mentors allows for a better understanding of the language and culture of a community, enabling them to hear the stories and issues of others, therefore better identifying the relevant support needed. Current projects are operating where volunteers have been recruited from refugee communities and provided with training, support, iPads and data to deliver training to others within their communities.

An inclusive approach to volunteering can harness the skills that ethnic minority communities bring, often well-educated and keen to build their confidence in speaking English while wanting to connect to local communities and improve their opportunities for employment while helping to prepare them for work.

The importance of talking to under-represented groupings was highlighted to hear what they want and how they feel they can participate in volunteering. Information on volunteering needs to be in an accessible format with websites easy to navigate around. Promotion of volunteering can be a way of evidencing and showing that diversity is welcome in Northern Ireland.

International volunteering has not only been affected by the pandemic with restrictions on international travel but also through the increased costs because of Brexit to offer opportunities for international volunteers. Organisations who involve international volunteers indicated the importance of this type of volunteering and the challenges for them with increased costs that they are not able to cover and do not wish to pass on to the individual volunteers.

Priorities for Strategy

Imagery used to promote volunteering needs to reflect diversity to encourage those from under-represented groupings to come forward to volunteer. We are more likely to volunteer if we see someone like ourselves in volunteering.

Accessible information on volunteering is essential for the promotion of volunteering opportunities, how to get involved, access to training and support. Needs to be made available in accessible formats, for example, Braille, large print, languages other than English and sign language interpreters.

Develop **case studies to profile and encourage others from ethnic minority** communities to participate. Profile organisations who have adapted processes and developed opportunities for people from ethnic minorities to volunteer and provide training to organisations to enable them to do so.

Greater awareness needed around **digital poverty**, in some cases there may only be a single phone shared between a family and no access to internet or equipment such as laptops or tablets.

Share learning from current projects involving under-represented groupings to **highlight models of inclusive practice** and enable organisations to increase the diversity of volunteering teams.

Involvement of international volunteers brings a richness of culture and diversity to organisations and a different dynamic to their volunteering teams. Support and resources should be considered for organisations to continue the involvement of international volunteers.

Promotion and development of volunteering opportunities – **support provided for organisations to design attractive and accessible volunteering opportunities** to encourage a wider representation of the community to volunteer.

9. Succession Planning

It was suggested that there is an ageing population in volunteering. Organisations shared concerns for the future as long-serving experienced volunteers step away, in addition to challenges faced in recruiting the next generation of volunteers. Consideration could be given to new and younger volunteers shadowing experienced volunteers to aid learning, skill development and confidence to undertake the responsibility of governance and leadership within organisations. Succession planning needs to be at the forefront of organisations thinking, embracing change and proactively encouraging a new generation of volunteers to come through.

Having had time off from volunteering over the course of the pandemic, volunteers have re-evaluated their priorities and the amount of time that they want to give and simply do not want to return to volunteering at the same level of commitment. In addition, some volunteers have moved on to other organisations getting involved in opportunities that required a less demanding time commitment.

With greater pressure being placed on boards and committees to meet their governance responsibilities, organisations are finding it challenging to recruit new volunteers. Support is needed for organisations at all levels but particularly for smaller organisations in governance training and this is where infrastructure organisations and governing bodies can play their part.

To support succession planning organisations should be encouraged to think about the continued purpose of their organisation, who is under-represented or indeed not at the table, and what can they learn from others through networking and field visits. Infrastructure organisations have a key role to play in offering support to grass roots organisations helping them to determine strengths and weaknesses, challenging function is still relevant, looking at emerging needs, linking to other organisations and building resilience.

Sectors who are finding attracting new volunteers difficult such as sport may need to rethink where they target their recruitment and look to attracting people who have no direct connection with the sector. Traditionally, there has been an over reliance on parents or people who have played the sport. Rather than relying on volunteers who have participated in a sport or have a particular interest in it, organisations could consider developing opportunities that will attract people from a wider range of backgrounds who will come forward to volunteer because they can put their existing skills and experience to good use or feel that they can make a difference.

Priorities for Strategy

Governance training should be provided to support volunteers in this often challenging and demanding role within organisations.

Infrastructure organisations to lead on **delivery of training in succession planning** for VIOs.

Last major research on volunteering in Northern Ireland was All About Time in 2007 and whilst NISRA has been producing annual research it does not go into the detail required. It's All About Time, for example, collected data from organisations. The NISRA research does not give detail about informal volunteering and due to the pandemic it has not been undertaken in full over the last 2 years and so there is a bigger gap in basic information. There is also no consistent collection of data on young people's (under 16) volunteering. Therefore, **new research in volunteering is required**. Up-to-date research would be useful in determining trends in current volunteering and help to feed into succession planning for organisations.

10. Value and Recognition

The impact of the volunteering response during the pandemic has been widely recognised and praised. It was also clear that voluntary sector organisations stepped up to the plate in harnessing this volunteering response to support communities. This recognition of what volunteering brings to society should not be considered as something that happened only as a result of the pandemic but something that is ever present within our communities and should be continued to be valued and indeed enhanced.

Councils could take a more leading role in promoting, supporting and recognising volunteering. Council websites could have dedicated volunteering pages promoting volunteer-involving council projects, signposting to volunteering opportunities on Be Collective, showcasing monthly Volunteer Champions to highlight the difference volunteering makes in the community and recognition events such as civic/Mayors' receptions and annual awards. The challenge within councils and other statutory bodies is to get buy-in at higher levels, to recognise the impact that volunteering makes. This could set the agenda for volunteering being recognised as improving the quality of life for all within our communities and statutory bodies could consider appointing advocates for volunteering to lead on this.

Organisations highlighted the loss of the Millennium Volunteers programme to recognise young people in volunteering.

Priorities for Strategy

Needs to be a greater recognition of the impact that volunteers make - annual awards can highlight this but more could be done by government departments, statutory bodies, infrastructure organisations and VIOs to keep volunteering front and centre throughout the year.

Need for **replacement of Millennium Volunteers for young people**. A programme should be developed which offers opportunities that will build skills, knowledge and experience to support young people into employment. Additionally, recognition for the organisations in the part they play in supporting young people through their volunteering journey.

Conclusion

Communication is key to the development of a volunteering strategy. This should take place at all levels with government departments and regional infrastructure bodies effectively consulting with grass roots volunteering. The development of a future volunteering strategy should not simply be a linear approach to what is already there but should be based on research and evidence gathered from across the sector, both regionally and local. It is important to learn from volunteers' and organisations' experience through the pandemic both at a regional and local level and to build this learning in to the development of a strategy.

While the Department for Communities take the lead in the development of a volunteering strategy for Northern Ireland, volunteering underpins all aspects of our society and there should be engagement with all government departments, volunteer involving groups from all sectors and the volunteer infrastructure support bodies in the process of developing a new volunteering strategy.



Pathway for Volunteering - Summary

1.
**Build
collaboration**

2.
**Engage new
and existing
volunteers**

3.
**Encourage
informal
volunteering**

4.
**Build volunteer
involvement
skills**

5.
**Support
volunteer
wellbeing**

6.
**Enable digital
transformation**

7.
**Invest in
volunteering**

8.
**Make
volunteering
inclusive**

9.
**Plan for a new
generation of
volunteers**

10.
**Recognise
and value
volunteering**

