

A VOLUNTEERING STRATEGY FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

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INTRODUCTION

1. The purpose of this briefing paper is to inform the Committee for Social Development's consideration of the consultation on the proposed Volunteering Strategy for Northern Ireland. The paper provides background information on the development of the strategy and its key objectives and proposals. The paper also explores the current profile of volunteering in Northern Ireland, briefly considers the strategy within the context of the current economic recession and the future community planning process, and looks at issues raised by some stakeholders in response to the consultation.

WHY IS A VOLUNTEERING STRATEGY NECESSARY? HOW WAS IT DEVELOPED?

2. A consultation on the first ever Volunteering Strategy for Northern Ireland was launched by the Minister for Social Development on 2 July 2009. The consultation paper, entitled '[Join In, Get Involved: Build A Better Future](#)'¹, sets out the Department's aim to "*involve more people in volunteer action in order to build a better future for themselves and the people of Northern Ireland*" and the Minister has set an ambitious target of almost doubling volunteering from approximately 282,000 volunteers to half a million². The proposed definition of volunteering, as set out in the consultation document, is "*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 undertaken freely and by choice, without concern for financial gain*".
3. The Department believes that there has not been a co-ordinated, planned approach to volunteering in Northern Ireland at a regional and local level since the end of the Active Community Initiative in 2004³. The Department agreed, as

¹ Department for Social Development (2009) 'Join In, Get Involved: Build a Better Future: A Consultation Paper on a Volunteering Strategy for Northern Ireland.

www.dsdni.gov.uk/index/consultations/consultations-join-in-get-involved.htm

² Department for Social Development. News Release. 'Wanted. Half a Million Volunteers – Ritchie'. 2 July 2009. www.northernireland.gov.uk/news/news-dsd/news-dsd-july-2009/news-dsd-020709-wanted-half-a.htm

³ The **Active Community Initiative** was a UK-wide initiative which aimed to "help rebuild a sense of community throughout the UK, by encouraging and supporting all forms of community involvement". In Northern Ireland, the Department for Social Development made available funding of £1.8m to deliver the initiative from April 2001 to June 2004. The initiative aims included bringing about a change in attitudes to volunteering and community involvement and increasing the number of volunteers. For further information on the Active Community Initiative see Department for Social Development (2006) Summary of the Evaluation of the Active Community Initiative April 2001-June 2004. www.dsdni.gov.uk/evaluation_of_the_active_community_initiative_summary_report.pdf

a legacy of the Year of Volunteering in 2005⁴, to produce a Volunteering Strategy for Northern Ireland.

4. In 2006 a **Volunteering Strategy Steering Group** was established to take work forward in the development of the strategy. The group comprised of representatives from public, voluntary and community, faith-based, business, sports and arts sectors⁵. The remit of the Steering Group was to approve the aims and objectives of the Strategy; agree any research used in the strategy; contribute to and agree to content and context of the strategy; agree the strategy's recommendations and intended outcomes; ensure, in so far as possible, that the strategy complements other strategies that have an impact on volunteering; and develop and agree a monitoring and evaluation process⁶.
5. In August 2007, the Minister for Social Development gave her agreement to take forward the development of the Volunteering Strategy. It is interesting to note that the Volunteering Strategy is also mentioned in the Programme for Government in relation to the promotion of active citizenship and sustaining volunteering, alongside a target to increase volunteering and active citizenship by 10% by 2012⁷.
6. In September 2007 research on the extent and scale of volunteering in Northern Ireland was published by the Volunteer Development Agency (funded by the Department for Social Development). The research report, entitled '[It's All About Time](#)'⁸, provides a comprehensive insight into volunteering in Northern Ireland, as well as measuring the extent of volunteering it also described the experiences of volunteers, the impact of volunteering on organisations and explores why some individuals chose not to volunteer. The findings of the research were to shape and inform the development of a Volunteering Strategy for Northern Ireland⁹.

PROFILE OF VOLUNTEERING IN NORTHERN IRELAND – 'IT'S ALL ABOUT TIME'¹⁰

7. 'It's All About Time' presented the findings of the third survey of volunteering in Northern Ireland, two previous surveys were carried out in 1995 and 2001. Some of the key findings of the 2007 survey are set out overleaf. One of the key messages emerging from the research is that there was a decrease in the estimated number of formal and informal volunteers between 2001 and 2007 (see Table 1).

⁴ In 2004 the then Chancellor Gordon Brown declared 2005 as the Year of the Volunteer, in Northern Ireland volunteering activities were co-ordinated by the Volunteer Development Agency.

⁵ For Steering Group Membership see www.dsdni.gov.uk/index/voluntary_and_community/vcni-volunteering-strategy/vcni-volunteering-strategy-steering-group.htm

⁶ Volunteering Strategy Steering Group Terms of Reference, www.dsdni.gov.uk/index/voluntary_and_community/vcni-volunteering-strategy/vcni-volunteering-strategy-steering-group.htm

⁷ Department for Social Development (2009) op.cit. p14.

⁸ Volunteer Development Agency (2007) It's All About Time: Volunteering in Northern Ireland 2007. www.dsdni.gov.uk/index/voluntary_and_community/vcni-volunteering-strategy/vcni-research-volunteering-ni.htm

⁹ The Department for Social Development also held a number of public consultation events to inform the strategy – see www.dsdni.gov.uk/volunteering-strategy-for-northern-ireland-events.htm

¹⁰ Information in this section extracted from Volunteer Development Agency (2007) It's All About Time: Volunteering in Northern Ireland 2007.

Table 1: Estimates of total numbers of volunteers (1995-2007)¹¹

| Year | Formal Volunteers population estimate | Informal Volunteers population estimate |
|------|--|--|
| 2007 | 282,067 | 470,111 |
| 2001 | 358,493 | 759,000 |
| 1995 | 200,000 | 600,000 |

Table 2: Summary of 'It's All About Time' Research Findings

Volunteering in Northern Ireland

- In 2007 there was an estimated 282,067 formal volunteers over the age of 16 in Northern Ireland (21% of individuals surveyed in 2007 were formal volunteer¹², comparable figures for 2001 and 1995 were 29% and 18% respectively). [The survey is based on the results from face to face interviews with 1,020 individuals across Northern Ireland and the responses from 745 (24.4% response rate) of organisations that involve volunteers).
- Approximately 470,111 individuals were engaged in informal volunteering, an estimated 145,734 individuals were both formal and informal volunteers.
- In 2007 the overall economic value of formal volunteers, based on the Northern Ireland average wage, was £504m per year, the overall economic value of informal volunteers was £433m.
- Just under one third of all formal volunteers were engaged with a voluntary or community organisation in relation to their volunteering, the next most common type of organisations volunteers engaged with was church or religious bodies.

Who volunteers?

- Females are more likely than males to be formal volunteers (approximately 61% of all volunteers are female).
- Individuals between the ages of 16 and 24, and 35-49 are the most likely to volunteer. Individuals aged 65 and over were the least likely to volunteer.
- The most common types of volunteering activity are raising or handling money (32%) followed by helping to organise or run an activity or event (26%).
- 16-24 year olds were most likely to volunteer for organisations involved in sports or exercise based activities, 35-49 year olds most likely to be involved in organisations involving children's education (i.e. schools).
- The main ways in which people find out about volunteering activities are via word of mouth, i.e. through someone already involved in volunteering (such as friends or family) or through churches or religious organisations.
- In terms of activities that are undertaken most often, 70% of informal volunteers sat with or provided personal care (e.g. washing, dressing) to someone who was sick or frail on a weekly basis.
- Two thirds of all informal volunteers (66%) give between one and five hours over a period of four weeks to 54% in 2001.

¹¹ Statistical table extracted from "It's All About Time", p27.

¹² Formal volunteering is defined as unpaid voluntary work carried out with, or under the auspices of, an organisation. Informal volunteering is defined as unpaid or voluntary work conducted outside the auspices of organisations, often at neighbourhood level, but outside the immediate family.

Recruiting and Retaining Volunteers

- Approximately one quarter of all volunteers, formal and informal, would like to spend more time volunteering.
- The pressure of work commitments is the single most common reasons why individuals do not become more involved in voluntary activity.
- Overall respondents felt that articles/advertisements in local newspapers would be the most useful way of promoting volunteering opportunities.

Volunteering in Organisations

- 38% of organisations reported that in the last five years the number of volunteers involved in their organisation has increased, 42% of organisations reported a decrease in the number of volunteers involved in their organisation.
- 77% of organisations stated that they could not operate without the support of volunteers.
- Organisations felt that the most common reason why individuals do not volunteer is that they have insufficient time.
- 37.5% of organisations stated that it would be easier to recruit volunteers if more resources became available to cover the activities of volunteers.
- Over 60% of organisations stated that having a dedicated volunteer manager had a positive impact on the recruitment and retention of volunteers.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE CONSULTATION PAPER ON A VOLUNTEERING STRATEGY FOR NORTHERN IRELAND – VISION, OBJECTIVES AND PROPOSALS

8. The Volunteering Strategy consultation paper [Join In, Get Involved: Build A Better Future](#) aims to build upon the positive aspects identified by 'It's All About Time' as well as addressing some of the challenges it identifies. The proposed **vision** of the volunteering strategy as set out in the consultation paper, is a society where:
 - a. Everyone values the part that volunteering plays in building strong communities and a healthy participative democracy; and
 - b. Everyone has the opportunity to have a meaningful volunteering experience.
9. The consultation paper outlines **five proposed objectives** and over 40 related proposals, these are summarised below:

Objective one: recognising the value and promoting the benefits of volunteering

Proposals including:

- **development of a Northern Ireland wide database** and website to support existing volunteers and to provide information on volunteering opportunities;
- providing a **range of volunteering information** in a variety of accessible formats;
- developing and implementing a **volunteer recruitment programme**;
- encouraging volunteer involving organisations to **publicly acknowledge the achievements of their volunteers** and to increase the importance they place on good volunteering practice;
- engaging with the **Northern Ireland media** to promote and influence attitudes towards volunteering and to provide opportunities for the recognition of volunteers;

Providing research and information services to the Northern Ireland Assembly

- promoting and encouraging **Employer Supported Volunteering** within Government and across the public sector, and encouraging employers generally to recognise the relevance of skills and experience gained through voluntary activity;
- encouraging **young people** to become involved in volunteering, helping them to **develop skills and gain experience** through voluntary activity;
- in line with the **Compact**, Government will seek to ensure that volunteering is protected from the unintended consequences of legislation and Government policy; and
- exploring **cross-border opportunities** and volunteering on an island wide basis.

Objective two: enhancing accessibility and diversity in volunteering

Proposals include:

- encouraging volunteer involving organisations to develop practices which enable them to involve a **diverse range of volunteers**, e.g. people with disabilities, older people and other under-represented groups;
- working across Government, the volunteering infrastructure and the insurance industry to **limit the potential for insurance to be a barrier** to volunteering;
- whilst ensuring the **protection of children and vulnerable adults**, exploring ways to mitigate any negative impact of policy/legislation on the recruitment of volunteers; and
- Tackling the barriers, actual and perceived, preventing **people on benefits** from volunteering.

Objective three: improving the experience of volunteering

Proposals include:

- encouraging and supporting **flexible, attractive and varied** volunteering opportunities, encourage family volunteering opportunities and 'turn up, take part' opportunities;
- improving **volunteer management practice** support and encourage volunteer involving organisations to gain accreditation;
- encouraging and supporting the **achievement of recognised qualifications** for volunteers that are appropriate and beneficial to the voluntary duties;
- continuation of a **small grants programme** to support local volunteer involvement;
- supporting **volunteers involved in management committees** to enhance their skills and knowledge base;
- supporting significant **regional, cultural and sporting events** to involve and recognise volunteers;
- building volunteer management skills in the **faith based sector**;
- encouraging the development of **volunteering within central and local Government** as a means of involving people in the delivery of public services; and
- where appropriate, encouraging funders to ensure the quality of volunteer involvement and management is of an effective standard when **awarding contracts**.

Objective four: supporting and strengthening the volunteering infrastructure

Proposals include:

- developing and implementing an **integrated regional and local infrastructure** which provides appropriate services to support volunteer involvement and the delivery of the strategy; and

- **reviewing existing funding structures** with the Department for Social Development to **create a comprehensive investment programme** to deliver the strategy and underpin the future of volunteering in Northern Ireland.

Objective five: delivering the strategy

Proposals include:

- establishing a **monitoring group** to monitor and report on the implementation of the strategy (comprised of senior representatives of central and local government, the voluntary and community, statutory and private sectors);
- undertaking an **evaluation of the strategy throughout its lifetime** with a **final report and recommendations** at the end of the strategy period;
- **conducting a survey** of the public and volunteer involving organisations at the end of the strategy period;
- encouraging volunteers and volunteer involving organisations to **get involved and remain involved** in delivering the strategy;
- encouraging public bodies such as **health trusts, local councils and education bodies** to get involved and remain involved in the strategy; and
- developing mechanisms to ensure that the cross cutting nature of volunteering is reflected in **close working between Government Departments** to deliver the strategy.

CONSIDERATION OF THE STRATEGY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE RECESSION AND IN THE CONTEXT OF COMMUNITY PLANNING

Current issue – the impact of the recession

10. It is important to consider the strategy in the context of the current economic climate with regard to its impact on volunteering and to also look to the future and how the strategy will sit within the proposed community planning model. In relation to the impact of the current recession, the volunteering strategy is a long term strategy and many issues which are relevant now may become less relevant as the effects of recession subside.
11. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the recession has had an impact on volunteering in a number of ways. There is some suggestion, for example, that the recession has actually led to an increase in volunteers as a result of rising unemployment^{13 14}. A recent survey conducted by the Volunteer Development Agency (NI) reported that that over the period January to March 2009, over half of the organisations responding to the survey reported the number of people applying to their organisation for volunteering opportunities had stayed the same, 36% reported an increase in volunteers, and 17% stated that numbers had decreased. The most common reasons cited for an increase in volunteers was that people wanted to increase their employability skills and the increasing interest in volunteering through recruitment campaigns. The most common reason for decreases in volunteering was that people had less time to volunteer

¹³ See YouthNet, Volunteering ‘flourishing in recession’.

www.youthnet.org/media&campaigns/pressreleases/volunteeringflourishinginrecession

¹⁴ Volunteering England Press Release. ‘Dramatic increase in number of volunteers as recession takes hold’. 21 April 2009.

www.volunteering.org.uk/News/mediacentre/2009+Press+Releases/Dramatic+increase+in+number+of+volunteers+as+recession+takes+hold.htm

because they were working longer hours, organisations also stated that the decrease was due to not having the funding for staff to manage volunteers¹⁵.

12. It has been suggested that consideration must be given to the costs associated with recruiting and managing volunteers and to the changing demographic profile of volunteers during times of recession. A paper by Professor Harris of Aston University highlights, for example, that the,

“...costs of recruiting and managing volunteers need special consideration at a time of recession. Even though some new volunteers may make themselves available, there is also likely to be a *loss* of volunteers due to factors such as the curtailment of employer-supported volunteering schemes, people seeking paid work to compensate family incomes depleted by other members losing their jobs, and stresses on volunteers who become burnt out when faced with increasingly complex, extensive or stressful tasks. The costs of recruitment may also rise if public sector organisations (e.g. hospitals) start to compete more fiercely for the pool of available volunteers as a response to their own resource constraints.

....It will be the case that opportunities will arise for recruiting volunteers from new sections of the population, but it will also be the case that the need for volunteers of a particular kind will change. For example, the strategic decision-making, business-planning and crisis management demands on governing bodies will inevitably increase as the recession deepens and so different skills and personalities may be required for volunteer boards. At the same time, some of the young retired and early retired who up until now seem relatively reluctant to volunteer (Davis Smith and Gay, 2005) may become more so inclined as their disposable income for leisure and travel is restricted”¹⁶.

13. ‘Volunteering England’ (the national volunteering development agency for England) has set out **nine key ‘recession challenges’** for Government (both local and central), volunteer-involving organisations, and the private sector in order to maximise the potential of volunteering in contributing to economic recovery. Although again it should be noted that the effects of the recession may diminish during the lifetime of the proposed Volunteering Strategy for Northern Ireland many of the challenges highlighted by Volunteering England are relevant to the current climate of volunteering in Northern Ireland. The challenges are as follows¹⁷:

¹⁵ Volunteer Development Agency (2009) Volunteering and the Recession. [www.volunteering-ni.org/what we do/publications/?action=download&documentID=475](http://www.volunteering-ni.org/what_we_do/publications/?action=download&documentID=475) This was an email survey carried out with Volunteer Development Agency member organisations. On average the organisations surveyed had around 20 volunteers each, 76 out of the 311 organisations responded to the survey, a response rate of 24%.

¹⁶ Harris, M. (2009) Managing the Impact of the Recession on Voluntary Action: A paper prepared for presentation to the ESRC/NCVO/VE Seminar on ‘Voluntary Action and the Economic Downturn: Threats or Opportunities’, p5. 7 April 2009.

¹⁷ Volunteering England Press Release. ‘Volunteering England lays out ‘Recession Challenge’. 11 December 2008.

www.volunteering.org.uk/News/mediacentre/2008+Press+releases/Recession+Challenge.htm

For Government – central and local

- To acknowledge that volunteering is a route to new employment for many people, it can develop skills for employability and for new career pathways;
- Now is the time for national investment in volunteering and to involve greater numbers of people in volunteering in order to encourage national and personal economic renewal; and
- Volunteering must be resourced, recruiting and organising volunteers costs money and support must be given to local infrastructural bodies; and
- JobCentrePlus and the Department for Work and Pensions should value volunteering for the ways it supports people into paid work. Current DWP regulations allow time for volunteering and this need to be applied fairly across local job centres.

For Volunteer-Involving Organisations

- Do not cut back on volunteer management to save money, this would be a false economy – invest in volunteers.
- Be careful not to displace paid staff with volunteers, it may save money in the short-term but it undercuts the harmonious working relationships which volunteering depends on.

For the Private Sector

- Don't cut back on social responsibility activities in hard times, now more than ever volunteer-involving organisations need the time and money that the private sector can provide.

For Private, Public and Voluntary Organisations

- Employer Supported Volunteering can help staff through the economic crisis and develop new transferable skills, encourage your organisation and your employees to volunteer.
- There is a need to build new partnerships to turn current constraints into new opportunities, use the current economic conditions to set up new possibilities for working with volunteers.

14. Many of the themes identified in the nine challenges are already threaded through the objectives and proposals for the Volunteering Strategy for Northern Ireland. However, what is evident is that given the current economic climate and the potential for volunteering to contribute to economic recovery, an imminent roll-out of the strategy is crucial.

Future issue – community planning

15. The Volunteering Strategy consultation paper states that the Department will undertake to consider and consult on models to provide an integrated regional and local infrastructure to support volunteering and the delivery of the strategy taking into consideration factors such as the Review of Public Administration. The significance of placing the Strategy within the context of community planning is an issue highlighted by NILGA's response to the consultation.

16. NILGA believe that the strategy presents an opportunity for the co-ordination of volunteering opportunities to be linked to the community planning process and that local councils must be recognised as the body with the responsibility of co-ordinating public sector partners to achieve local wellbeing. NILGA also state that for the Volunteering Strategy to be effective there must be a balanced partnership between central and local government and that the Department for

Social Development should support the new councils in development council strategies for volunteering. NILGA also believe that it is crucial that the Volunteering Strategy for Northern Ireland is implemented with adequate resources and funding for volunteers and that the Department should implement structural arrangements that facilitate co-terminosity with the new council boundaries through volunteer support centres in each of the new areas¹⁸.

17. One only has to look to the community planning model in Scotland, for example, to observe the integration of volunteer-involving organisations (and their representative organisations) in local community planning structures. In Scotland, for example membership of many Community Planning Partnerships (led by local authorities) involve local voluntary services bodies, who along with other statutory, community and private sector bodies help shape local Community Plans. This helps to integrate volunteering with range of local public services such as health, sports, youth work, crime reduction through diversionary activities, employment etc. In addition to this, many local authority areas have their own local volunteering strategies. Targets for increasing the level of volunteering in local communities is also measured through targets set out in Single Outcome Agreements¹⁹.
18. The successful integration of the Volunteering Strategy for Northern Ireland and volunteer-involving organisations and their representative bodies into the future community planning processes/community planning structures will be crucial to the long term success of the Volunteering Strategy.

SOME OTHER ISSUES IDENTIFIED BY STAKEHOLDERS

19. The consultation for the Volunteering Strategy closed in November 2009 and the Department is to brief the committee on the consultation responses. Provided below is a summary of issues raised by some of the stakeholders to the consultation (i.e. a summary of some of the issues raised by those who have published their consultation responses online at the time of writing this paper). Please note, however, that this is **not** intended to be a definitive list of issues or a reflection of all the consultation responses as this will be provided by the Department at a later stage. The summary merely provides the Committee with some early indications of some of the issues that have been raised.

¹⁸ NILGA draft response to the consultation paper on a Volunteering Strategy for Northern Ireland. www.nilga.org/uploads/docs/nilga%20final%20response%20to%20vol%20strat.doc

¹⁹ **Community planning** is defined as a process by which public services in a local area are provided and the planning of that provision takes place. **Community Planning Partnerships** are statutory partners in the community planning process, it is led by the local authority and membership can include health boards, fire and police services, transport, enterprise, community and voluntary sector bodies, private sector organisations. **Single Outcome Agreements** (SOAs) are a means by which community planning partners agree their strategic priorities for a local area and express these as outcomes, the SOA must show how local outcomes contribute to the Scottish Government's national priorities. For further information see www.improvementservice.org.uk/community-planning/

SOME EMERGING ISSUES²⁰

- The strategy must be ‘action orientated’ and be supported by a ‘**clearly articulated work plan**’ which includes **lines of accountability**. The action plan should include a commitment by the Government to review the outcomes of the strategy and articulated how volunteering will be supported beyond the lifetime of the strategy (Volunteer Development Agency);
- There must be clarity at the outset about where **funding/resources** will come from in order to make the proposals a reality, there must be a comprehensive investment programme to support the implementation of the strategy (Volunteer Development Agency);
- The **bureaucracy involved in the recruitment of volunteers** is excessive and the procedures required to join an organisation as a volunteer can be disproportionate (NILGA);
- It is important to recognise that many **local arts and cultural groups** are operated entirely volunteer led groups and initiatives and that there must be increased recognition for the myriad of small and less formal groupings (Voluntary Arts Ireland);
- Opportunities for people to volunteer should be made available in a **simple and uncomplicated manner** and **clearly advertised** (NILGA). An easily accessible, high quality **single Volunteering website/database** for Northern Ireland is an essential part of the Strategy (VSB);
- Councils should develop a **local volunteering strategy** as part of the community planning process (VSB);
- VSB suggest that consideration should be given to establishing and resourcing an Inter-Departmental Panel or Commission on Volunteering and Civil Engagement to **oversee and report annually** during the lifetime of the strategy; the Volunteer Development Agency would welcome a **multi-agency monitoring group**, representative of all sectors and levels of personnel to oversee the implementation of the strategy.
- There should be a **mobile volunteer resource** which travels across Northern Ireland (e.g. at events, shopping centres, leisure centres, community centres etc) to provide the public with information about volunteering (VSB);
- **Ownership of the strategy** must be wider than DSD to deliver on the Strategy’s vision (VSB); this was a point reiterated by the Volunteer Development Agency who believe that DSD should act as a ‘driver’ to the Strategy but that other statutory agencies, private sector and voluntary and community bodies should be involved in its delivery.

²⁰ Extracted from consultation responses from NILGA - www.nilga.org/uploads/docs/nilga%20final%20response%20to%20vol%20strat.doc; VSB - <http://soap2.tibus.com/vsb/filestore/documents/VSB%20Response%20to%20Strategy%202009.pdf> ; Voluntary Arts Ireland www.vaireland.org/cgi-bin/website.cgi?tier1=ireland&tier2=policy%20consultations&tier3=NI%20policy%20reply#14103 ; draft response of the Volunteer Development Agency - www.volunteering-ni.org/what_we_do/publications/?action=download&documentID=507

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