

EXPERIENCE COUNTS: VOLUNTEERING AMONGST PEOPLE *aged 55 and over* IN THE DUBLIN CITY AREA

SUMMARY REPORT AND BEST PRACTICE GUIDE
FOR VOLUNTEER-INVOLVING ORGANISATIONS



In the context of the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity Between Generations (EY2012), the Dublin City Volunteer Centres supported by Volunteer Ireland, commissioned a piece of research on volunteering amongst people aged 55 or older in the Dublin City area. The purpose of the study was to provide a clearer understanding of volunteering amongst the 55+ age group, with particular emphasis on the levers/motivations and barriers that influence this demographic either to volunteer, or not to volunteer.

The research methodology consisted of:

- Scoping interviews with volunteer involving organisations (VIOs) and Local Development Companies (LDCs) in the catchment area;
- Five focus groups with people aged 55 and over¹;
- 220 online and one-to-one surveys with those aged 55 and over;
- A workshop with over 20 representatives from local Volunteer Centres to 'test' and confirm findings.

This research produced rich qualitative findings and was completed in 2013. Based on this we were interested in knowing if our findings at a local level broadly compared with European and international research in this area. We were also eager to get more information and ideas as to how the Volunteer Centre and VIOs might recruit more people over the age of 55 to volunteer. To do this we commissioned a supplementary piece of research. The full report combines both sets of research.

Highlights of the Findings

Those involved in formal volunteering activity (through an organisation) would like to do more. They are typically involved in 'active citizenship' roles (defined by involvement in politics, local community or neighbourhood groups, trade unions etc.) or older people's interest groups i.e. active retired and befriending.

- The focus group respondents found it difficult to define and quantify their involvement in 'informal' volunteering activities. Some respondents referred to their volunteering activities within the home / family. However, despite this confusion, it is apparent that informal volunteers are very active. Their activities revolve around helping someone, with the level of activity varying from month to month, depending upon the needs of the person that the volunteer is helping at a particular time.
- While there are discrepancies in the rates of volunteering reported across EU countries, an EC survey² shows that those aged 55 and over in Ireland contribute slightly more than the EU average retired rate and generally spend more hours per month volunteering. However, there is room for improvement as rates of participation are higher again in the Netherlands and Finland. Our research in Dublin shows that the average number of hours per month is 15 which is in line with the EU figures.
- Wanting to help people was of great importance to the respondents, and was identified as a lever to formal volunteering. Notwithstanding the desire to help others, some respondents were also aware of the benefits that would accrue to them as a result of volunteering. There was an emphasis on the softer /social benefits of volunteering (making friends, thought that they would enjoy it) as opposed to any benefits associated with furthering a career and gaining qualifications.
- Respondents also outlined their preference for a personal approach to recruitment; those involved within the organisation

1 The focus groups were divided into two groups – active volunteers and those who had never volunteered or had not volunteered in recent years.

2 Special Eurobarometer 378, Active Ageing, EC 2012

were identified as the best people to recruit new volunteers and to provide them with more information about volunteering roles. The importance of receiving a warm welcome from a volunteer involving organisation was also highlighted. A large number of respondents stated that they would be dissuaded from volunteering if they did not feel welcome by an organisation.

- With a view toward retaining volunteers, it is apparent that 'reward' is what keeps volunteers involved. Common themes which emerged as reward included; a sense of achievement, of doing something 'meaningful', camaraderie and friendship, better balance in, and a break from the norms of daily life. A need to keep services going was also mentioned as a reason for staying involved. Recognition and structure were highlighted as being important to ensure that both parties are satisfied with the experience and that the exchange is as productive for both parties as possible.

What are the levers and barriers to volunteering among the over 55s?

It is important to remember that the older age cohort is not a homogenous group with identical motivations. The interests and experiences of a person aged 55 will differ greatly to someone over the age of 70. However, the background research has shown that the levers and barriers can be categorised under four main themes:

LEVERS

Active Citizenship

Older volunteers are motivated by a desire to help others and to give something back to their communities.

Personal Development

While older volunteers are not interested in gaining new qualifications or furthering their careers, they are interested in using, maintaining and/or sharing their existing skills.

Enjoyment

Older volunteers enjoy the sense of purpose and routine they gain from volunteering. They also enjoy the feeling of helping others and doing something meaningful for their community.

Time

It is clear from the research findings that the availability of time was very influential in a person's decision to volunteer.

BARRIERS

Financial & Time Considerations

Older volunteers are not immune to the current economic climate. Often referred to as the "Sandwich Generation", some are looking after and supporting both elderly parents and grandchildren, whilst also facing a longer working life as retirement age increases. There are also some misunderstandings about whether volunteering will have a negative impact on social welfare entitlements.

The Recruitment Process

Our research has shown that older volunteers value a personal approach to recruitment - matching their skills and interests to activities rather than an online registration. There appears to be a perception that organisations' selection processes are too structured and bureaucratic, meaning there is a time lapse between expressing an interest in volunteering and receiving a response from an organisation. This gives the volunteer a bad first impression of the organisation and can make them feel unwelcome and unmotivated.

Information & Communication

While the number of older people using technology continues to increase, there is still a significant number who do not use or have regular access to the internet. Feeling comfortable or confident online can be a barrier.

The correct use of language when communicating with older adults is very important to avoid stereotyping.

Personal Barriers

Older volunteers may lack confidence in what skills, abilities and values they can bring to an organisation.

term basis without the perceived pressure of having to make a long-term commitment.

- Run a myth busting campaign to inform older volunteers that there are no restrictions on the number of hours or type of unpaid work that those in receipt of pension payments can do.

The Recruitment Process

- Recruitment of older volunteers cannot be solely reliant upon the internet; a flexible and personal approach is required. Host a 'Volunteer Information Fair' or open evening/coffee morning and present information in a non-digital format with staff, volunteers or clients from your organisation.
- Create a friendly and welcoming environment. A 'Buddy System' (whereby a volunteer is matched up with another volunteer or mentor) or 'Bring a Friend' are great ways to make new volunteers feel more comfortable.
- Offer help with completing Garda Vetting forms. Think about ways to help retain volunteers' interest and engagement with the organisation while they are waiting on their vetting form to be returned. Keeping in touch with the volunteer during the process is very important. You might also like to run part or some of your training during this period.

Appropriate Use of Images

- Ensure your website and promotional materials do not give the impression that only one type of volunteer is welcome, but that you are open and welcoming to everyone in the community. Do you have any positive images of older volunteers in action, for example?
- There are no "bad" images, but there are images that stereotype and inappropriately portray the incredible range of individuals in the "older" age cohorts.



Language used and methods of communication

- There are no "bad" words, but there are words which will be more successful in attracting and representing older adults i.e. older persons, prime-time, independent, experienced, mentor, coach. Avoid using words such as 'senior' or 'retired' when advertising new roles.
- The more the language and imagery reflects the needs or wants of the people being targeted, the more successful your communication will be, i.e. show older people across the full range of voluntary activities and functional abilities, reflect the wide range of interests of older adults and include older adults who may use assistive devices.

Recommendations for Volunteer Involving Organisations on Involving Older Adults

Active Citizenship & Recognition

- Highlight the multiplier effect of a volunteer donating their time. For example, one hour of a volunteer's time could help 'X' number of people.
- Emphasise the end goals of the volunteering activity (why the volunteer is needed, and the impact it will have for the organisation) and provide feedback throughout the process.
- A localised recruitment campaign will help to attract more volunteers.
- Advertise in local newspapers, social groupings, newsletters and places people frequently visit.

Enjoyment

- Promote the physical and mental health benefits of volunteering.
- Regular meetings and gatherings allow volunteers to socialise and provide feedback on their volunteering experiences.
- Volunteer discount card - similar to student discount cards rewarding volunteers with discounts in participating shops, theatres, restaurants etc.

Personal Barriers

- Build confidence in volunteers. Reach out to existing community groups on the ground, identify those people who are already volunteering on an informal basis and acknowledge any previous informal volunteering activities carried out by the applicant during the recruitment process.
- Skill swapping workshops/'skills schools' are a great way to encourage volunteers to 'swap' skills by teaching/training other volunteers in something they are experienced in, e.g. teaching someone how to bake in exchange for a computer lesson. Skill swapping also enables potential volunteers to identify their relevant skills and suitable volunteering roles.

Financial & Time Considerations

- Local and convenient volunteering opportunities for older people will keep travel time and costs down. Promote and facilitate carpooling and community transport to increase affordability and accessibility for older volunteers.
- A 'Trial Period' enables volunteers to try out activities on a short-



About Dublin City Volunteer Centre

Dublin City Volunteer Centre was established in January 2014 from a merger between Dublin City North and Dublin City South Volunteer Centres. Dublin City Volunteer Centre is a member of Volunteer Ireland, the national volunteer development agency and support body for volunteer centres in Ireland.

The mission of Dublin City Volunteer Centre is to help individuals find meaningful opportunities to volunteer and to build the capacity of not-for-profit organisations to involve volunteers in their work.

We share the vision of Volunteer Ireland to have a society in which: Everyone has access to volunteering opportunities that are fulfilling and engaging, and which contribute to the development of community and the betterment of society. Volunteers are respected for the time and effort they contribute.

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