



The Experience Bank

Project **Report**

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List of Abbreviations:

CA – Community Ambassador
 CFI – Community Foundation for Ireland
 DCVC – Dublin City Volunteer Centre
 VIO – Volunteer Involving Organisations

Acknowledgements

A pilot project is a great way of trying out some new concepts and approaches, but it is not possible to do this without people who are open to participate, to try something new and to reflect on their experiences.

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**An Roinn Forbartha
Tuaithe agus Pobail**
Department of Rural and
Community Development

The Project in Numbers

- 15 participating Volunteer Involving Organisations
.....
- 31 volunteer participants (55+)
.....
- 12 participants agreed to volunteer with 11 organisations
.....
- Advisory Panel / 5 volunteers (55+)
.....
- Community Ambassador Volunteer Programme / 6 volunteers (55+)

Executive Summary

The Experience Bank project was set up by Dublin City Volunteer Centre as a pilot project for the Dublin City area, running from September 2021 to May 2022.

The purpose of the project was to connect older people with Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIO), who value mature volunteers and their skills and life experience, to promote older people as active citizens and to build their capacity and potential to take on roles within their communities. It was also designed to address some of the barriers to volunteering experienced by people 55+.

The concept was to set up a “bank of experience”, showcasing volunteers’ lived experience, skills, and interest via a “volunteer profile”. VIOs could then browse The Experience Bank and select profiles of those volunteers they would like to engage with to explore possible volunteering opportunities.

Findings

- There is a definite appetite and need for **more targeted projects for volunteers aged 55+**. Volunteers and organisations both valued being part of a specific project as it created a **clear focus** and meant both were **available and ready to engage** within the **specific timeframe** of the project.

- The **concept** of The Experience Bank, to have volunteers create profiles to develop a bank of experience, and for VIOs to select volunteers from that bank, worked successfully and was very well received by both volunteers and organisations.
- The **personal support/coaching/brokerage** offered to the potential volunteers is key to the success of the project. This support helps the volunteers to work out what they are interested in and what they have to offer, in order to create a profile that positively reflects them as a person. This, in turn, improves the selection process for the VIOs. The support could be offered by DCVC staff but involving specifically trained Community Ambassador volunteers for peer support has proven to be successful and well received.
- There is scope to **further develop a revised Community Ambassador volunteer role** to provide the **personal contact and brokerage/coaching** that has been identified as being critical to the success of the project. The revised role could also involve more contact between Community Ambassadors and VIOs to increase their understanding of VIOs' needs and improve their ability to act as brokers between volunteers and VIOs.
- Having a Project Manager to act as a **point of contact** and to personalise and support the experience for participants, VIOs and project volunteers was important, specifically for this age group. The Project Manager is also essential to oversee the overall coordination and implementation of this kind of project. This role needs to be **properly resourced** to ensure a successful project outcome.
- Having an Advisory Panel made up of peers of the target audience was extremely valuable and added depth and expertise to the project.
- A focus on **personalised experience** and **one-to-one contact** was very successful and valued by volunteers as well as by the VIOs. VIOs felt the time was well invested, as it allowed for a more **focused "selection" process**. Volunteers felt more **appreciated**, felt that their **life experience was valued** and that they were "seen" for who they are and what they have to offer.
- **Personal contact** also played a key role in getting people to participate in the project (volunteering in general) in the first place, either through the Community Ambassadors or through DCVC staff.
- The project could be run without the outreach element, and instead **focus on people who have already registered** with Dublin City Volunteer Centre (i.e., who have already made the decision to look for volunteering).
- Participants appreciated the focus on their **life experience** rather than their skills. They felt this was more appropriate for their life stage, was more inclusive and better suited to reflect them as a person.
- Participants liked the idea of "putting themselves out there" and felt very positive about being "selected" by the organisations. This gave them more self-confidence and made them feel valued and wanted.

- **Running The Experience Bank project once or twice a year** with plenty of lead-in time would increase the success of the project: It would create more focus and time-bound engagement. It would allow VIOs to plan ahead and to consider participation in The Experience Bank project as part of their annual volunteer-recruitment strategy:
 - It would give more lead-in time to promote the project to VIOs.
 - The project could be signposted to volunteers with plenty of notice as part of other DCVC events and engagements, which would also tie-in well with retirement planning and give people the opportunity to consider volunteering before committing to join The Experience Bank.
 - A longer planning and implementation timeframe would allow space for Community Ambassadors to reach out to and to build relationships with local interest groups and potential volunteers (i.e. add a talk to the diary).
 - A longer project timeline would allow for a more accurate evaluation of the actual volunteer placements.
- As most volunteers did not start to actually volunteer within the timeline of the project, it was not possible to determine the impact of their volunteering experience on their sense of isolation and their feeling of making a contribution to their community. Regardless, **55%** of participants stated that through engaging with The Experience Bank project, their **sense of isolation had decreased**. **37%** of participants noted their **sense of purpose had increased**, while **45%** reported an **increase in their motivation to volunteer**.
- **80%** of the Volunteer Involving Organisation felt they **got suitable candidates** from The Experience Bank Project.

1. Project Background

In recent years, Dublin City Volunteer Centre (DCVC) has extensively engaged with people over the age of 55. In 2015, DCVC conducted research into volunteering and people 55+ ([“EXPERIENCE COUNTS: Volunteering Amongst People aged 55+”](#)) to explore their motivation for, and barriers to, volunteering. There is widely accepted evidence of the benefits of volunteering for the age group of people 55+. This includes an increased sense of purpose and belonging to their community; a decrease in loneliness and isolation; and increased mental and physical wellbeing.

The Experience Counts research showed that some of the barriers inhibiting older adults from volunteering were personal ones, e.g., the lack of confidence that they had the relevant skills needed to volunteer. Other barriers also included the lack of knowledge about volunteering opportunities, and the lengthy, sometimes complicated, and impersonal application processes. People said they sometimes felt they were too old to volunteer and that they did not feel welcomed, while others said they simply were not asked to volunteer. The COVID-19 pandemic has since affected many older people disproportionately with requirements to cocoon or isolate and increased issues

like loneliness, isolation, and access to volunteering opportunities.

The Experience Counts research clearly demonstrated that the people 55+ who were experiencing barriers to volunteering, had nonetheless a range of benefits to bring to an organisation, such as maturity, experience, skills, availability and loyalty. At the same time, many Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs) are particularly interested in engaging people in this age group in volunteering to reap these benefits.

DCVC therefore identified the need to trial a different, more personalised recruitment approach to bring together volunteers 55+ and VIOs.

“From a volunteer perspective, it [the project] was well organised, user friendly, and positive.”

(Volunteer Participant)

2. Project Outline

The [Experience Bank project](#) was set up by Dublin City Volunteer Centre as a pilot project for the Dublin City area, running from September 2021 to May 2022.

The purpose of the project was to connect older people with Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs), who value mature volunteers and their skills and life experience and to promote older people as active citizens and build their capacity and potential to take on roles within their communities. The project was designed to address some of the aforementioned personal barriers to volunteering experienced by people 55+, based on the assumption that being “chosen” by a VIO would help to combat a volunteer’s feelings of lack of confidence, or their concerns about age or usefulness.

The concept was to set up a “bank of experience”, showcasing volunteers’ lived experience, skills, and interest via a “volunteer profile”. VIOs could then browse The Experience Bank and chose people they would like to engage with to explore the opportunity to volunteer with them.

The project aimed to:

- Offer a more personalised recruitment process for volunteers 55+ and VIOs.
- Create connection and emphasise personal conversations instead of channelling prospective volunteers through online application processes.
- Turn DCVC’s usual referral model on its head: rather than people searching for volunteering roles, they could be “found” by VIOs.
- Explore the idea to use peers to engage people from the age cohort through the Community Ambassador volunteer role.
- Trial the use of an advisory panel made up of volunteers 55+ for the project.

2.1. Project elements

- An Advisory Panel made up of people 55+ with volunteering experience to act as sounding board for the concept and implementation of the whole project
- Community Ambassador Volunteers, also aged 55+, to reach out to people in their local community who might have an interest in volunteering. They would talk to the participants to help tease out their life experiences, skills, and interests to create individual profiles for The Experience Bank.
- Dublin City Volunteer Centre (DCVC) would support participants with creating their profile¹ to share their

¹ See appendix for sample profile

interests, skills, lived experiences and preferences.

- DCVC setup an “experience bank” to showcase the participants’ profiles,
- Participating Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs) would browse The Experience Bank and choose a volunteer/a number of volunteers they would like to engage with for a specific task or project.
- Dublin City Volunteer Centre to facilitate the connection between the volunteer and organisation and supports them towards agreeing mutually satisfying parameters for the volunteer’s engagement with that organisation.

With this project, DCVC aimed to address two goals of the National Positive Ageing Strategy:

Goal 1: Remove barriers to participation and provide more opportunities for the continued involvement of people as they age in all aspects of cultural, economic and social life in their communities according to their needs, preferences and capacities.

Goal 2: Support people as they age to maintain, improve or manage their physical and mental health and wellbeing.

2.2. Proposed Project Outputs

- Min. of 3 volunteers 55+ recruited as part of an Advisory Panel
- 10 Community Ambassadors recruited and trained
- 30 participants signed up to The Experience Bank

2.3. Proposed Objectives / Measures of Success

- Participants feel they have made a meaningful contribution to their community.
- Participants feel their sense of isolation decreased.
- VIOs feel they got suitable candidates.

3. COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic was ongoing in 2021, and the country was in a Level 5 lockdown from January to May 2021. In March 2021, Dublin City Volunteer Centre (DCVC) was asked to support the national vaccination campaign and ran a large-scale volunteer programme from March to October at the Aviva Centralised Vaccination Centre. Thus, from a resource perspective for DCVC, September 2021 was the most suitable time to start this project. It also offered more stability for this type of project, which requires engagement with volunteers and members of the public. At this point, a large part of the population was double-vaccinated and there were fewer COVID-19 related restrictions. Activities were hampered again in December 2021 with rising COVID-19 cases, the arrival of Omicron and increased restrictions. This impacted the recruitment of the Community Ambassadors at the end of 2021.

The Advisory Panel had expressed the desire to have in-person training for the Community Ambassadors if possible. However, due to the deteriorating public health situation in Ireland and the public health advice to prevent the spread of COVID 19 in December 2021 and January 2022, DCVC decided to run the induction and training modules for the Community Ambassadors online. DCVC also decided to

postpone the Community Ambassadors' engagement in the community until the start of March 2022. The Community Ambassadors then set out to engage with potential volunteers in April 2022. While restrictions had eased at this stage, COVID-19 still posed major obstacles to reaching out in the community, i.e., many local groups had not yet resumed in-person meetings, people were still reluctant to meet and two of the five Community Ambassadors contracted COVID-19 in this period.

Despite the delays, the project was successfully completed at the end of May 2022.

4. Project Evaluation

Overall, The Experience Bank project was considered to have been very successful by both the participating volunteers and Volunteer Involving Organisations. The number of people who agreed to volunteer with one of the VIOs was very high (38%) in comparison to the regular referral-based work (20%) of DCVC, and feedback on the concept were very positive.

Some of the aspects of the project did not quite work as initially set out, but very valuable regardless. The next chapters will go into more detail on each of the relevant aspects.

“I found it helpful to list my interests/experience and then to be "selected" by an organisation whose needs matched them.”

(Volunteer Participant)



4.1. Advisory Panel

The Advisory Panel provided advice and input from a peer perspective and formed the project team together with the Project Manager. The recruitment of the Advisory Panel was completed successfully in early October 2021. It comprised of two women and three men from different backgrounds and local areas in Dublin. All were over the age of 50 and had previous volunteering experience.

The Advisory Panel reviewed, discussed and shaped the project concept, timeline and action plan, the role description for the Community Ambassador role, the approach to volunteer and VIO recruitment, the design of the volunteer profile form and the sign-up processes. One Advisory Panel member played a key role in the recruitment of the Community Ambassador volunteers. The project team produced a project logo as well as a suite of social media materials and a [project flyer](#) for project participants. The Advisory Panel had a strong input into how best to represent and appeal to people 55+, and in the design and content of the materials.

The Advisory Panel met on Zoom on a bi-weekly or monthly basis as required by the project phase (9 meetings in total) to discuss the various aspects of the project and its implementation, review documents, share ideas and feedback and act as a sounding board for the Project Manager. They also provided ongoing advice and input into documents and project materials via email and telephone.

The engagement of the Advisory Panel was very successful. They provided extremely helpful input for the project and support for the Project Manager. Their perspectives and insights were invaluable and played a key role in the success of the project.

All Advisory Panel members stated that they found the role enjoyable and rewarding.



4.2. Community Ambassadors

Once the required communications materials were created, the recruitment drive for ten Community Ambassador Volunteers commenced in November 2021. The role was promoted through partner organisations in the Irish Community and Voluntary sector, Activelink, emails to DCVC's database, at DCVC's regular "Experience Counts" coffee morning and through personal contacts. It was targeted at people 55+ with an interest in reaching out to and working closely with people, in order to promote The Experience Bank project and to support participants with creating their profile.

The initial response to the Community Ambassador volunteer role promotion was slow. The feedback we received was that many people were still very much afraid of COVID-19 and reluctant to engage. This is something that was confirmed anecdotally by other organisations working with older people in Ireland at the time. People were especially worried about committing to a volunteering role that would involve physical contact with people in the community. The pool of suitable volunteers was therefore slightly smaller than expected. However, after we extended the period for applications, in mid-December 2021, six very capable and motivated volunteers aged 55+ (four females, two males) joined the project as Community Ambassadors.

DCVC designed two training modules for the Community Ambassadors to provide them with solid training in the following areas:

- Information provision and reaching out in the community
- Active Citizenship and Community Development
- Interview skills
- Volunteer engagement
- IT and using provided project templates
- Dealing with challenging situations

All six Community Ambassadors successfully completed the two training modules on 3rd April 2022. After the training, they were provided with tools and materials to carry out their role. These included:

- Volunteer Code of Conduct
- A DCVC Email address
- Access to MS Office products
- Templates to create the volunteer profiles and track their activities
- The Experience Bank flyers with personalised contact information
- A branded fleece jacket and Volunteer ID
- PPE
- Support Meeting with peers and Project Manager on 21st April
- Ongoing support from the Project Manager (phone & email)

Unfortunately, one of the Community Ambassador volunteers had to pause their engagement due to work commitments and was subsequently not able to engage in the role.



Picture: Two of the Community Ambassadors, Derval Conway (left) and Marian Murphy in their branded volunteer uniform

Reflections from the Community Ambassadors:

"The preparation/training for the ambassadors was really good. The recruitment was thoughtful."

"Maybe starting in August/September, when groups are planning programmes for the year, contacts could be made offering a Community Ambassador to come and speak. It would mean having someone on call for a longer time, but less intensively."

"I enjoyed the opportunity to get people to think again about volunteering."

"It worked fine – I believe Covid and the tight schedule impacted the programme"

"I definitely enjoyed setting up the profile with the participants, it was so interesting finding out about other people's experiences in life."

4.3. Participant and VIO Recruitment

The project reached out to potential participants via two avenues:

1. Through the Community Ambassadors.
2. By sending targeted emails to people 55+ already registered with Dublin City Volunteer Centre.

In addition, some people had expressed an interest in being project participants when they heard about the project as part of the recruitment drive for the Community Ambassador volunteer role.

Five Community Ambassadors took up their role and engaged with people between the start of April and first week of May 2022. They successfully used personal contacts to reach out to friends, family, neighbours and associates. They also talked to local groups they were already involved in, or reached out to groups in the community like sports clubs and local community groups.

While the Community Ambassadors were very motivated and tried their best to bring people on board for The Experience Bank, they encountered a number of challenges:

- The timeframe was too short to engage with people who had not yet heard about Dublin City Volunteer Centre or even considered actively look for volunteering. These people needed time to think about volunteering and did not understand

“the rush” with creating a profile for The Experience Bank.

- People were reluctant to commit to a project: Some were concerned about possibly not being available; some others had plans in the months ahead; others again said they would consider volunteering once retired.
- The Community Ambassadors’ personal contacts were already volunteering or not interested/too busy/ had other reason not to engage.
- Local Community Groups had not resumed meeting in person because of Covid-19.
- The project timeframe was too short to build relationships with local Community Groups in order to arrange a visit/talk.
- Some concerns about who would have access to their data (even though profiles were anonymous on a first-name only basis and all relevant GDPR procedures were in place).
- Some people stated they would prefer to choose from a list of roles with a clear outline of commitments rather than “putting themselves out there”.

The email sent to people already registered with Dublin City Volunteer Centre received a lot of initial interest. The Project Manager telephoned a large percentage of the people to chat through their life experience and to help write their profiles. She also emailed the profile sign-up form to some of the people who had expressed an interest so they could complete the form by themselves, with the option of asking for

support. Two Community Ambassadors also met with people (in person or on Zoom) who had expressed an interest via the email campaign (rather than just focusing on their own “recruits”), to talk things through and help with setting up the profile. This worked really well.

At the end of the outreach period, 31 participants had agreed to join the project and created a profile for The Experience Bank. Six out of 31 participants were recruited directly by a Community Ambassador. Two people had expressed an interest earlier in the year through the Experience Counts Coffee morning, while 23 came through the email campaign. Out of the 12 people who agreed to volunteer with a VIO at the end of the project, 11 had come through the initial email campaign and 1 through DCVC’s monthly Experience Counts coffee morning. All were already on DCVC’s database.

Dublin City Volunteer Centre promoted The Experience Bank project to all affiliated VIOs, outlining the project concept and specific timelines. An online information session was run by the Project Manager on 28th March 2022 to share more details and give an opportunity to ask questions. The response to the project call was very positive, and 36 VIOs expressed an initial interest in participating. Due to the tight timeline some organisations were not able to go ahead. 15 organisations completed the Terms of Reference and joined the project.

4.4. Connecting Volunteers and VIOs

The 31 volunteer profiles were collated in a work document and shared with the Volunteer Managers/ Coordinators in the 15 VIOs. Due to the pilot nature of the project and limited time and resources, it was decided to use this very simple format. The profiles were anonymised (first name only) and included information about the person’s life experience and skills, what they are looking for, location, preference for travel and general availability.

The VIOs were given access to the document on the same day. They were given a week to browse through the volunteer profiles. The 15 organisations selected between two and seven volunteers from The Experience Bank. They shared their choice with the Project Manager at DCVC, who then checked with the participants whether they were happy to go ahead. Once this was agreed, the Project Manager introduced each “matched” Volunteer Manager and volunteer by email, providing their contact details. The VIOs were asked to take the initiative and to arrange conversation on the phone or an in-person or virtual meeting to talk to the prospective volunteer about how they might get involved. Volunteers were encouraged to keep an open mind at this stage and to engage in the conversations before making up their mind about whether or not they would like to commit to volunteering with the VIO.

The results of the selection/connection process were as follows:

- Out of 31 participants, 29 people were selected by a VIO, often by multiple organisations (maximum 3).
- It was noted that the two people who were not selected had indicated a very specific area of interest or availability. The Project Manager reached out to these two volunteers to support them with using other avenues to find a suitable volunteering opportunity.
- The 15 VIOs selected between 1 and 7 people to engage with.
- Although this was not envisaged when the project was initially set up, three volunteers browsed through the list of participating organisations and expressed an interest in connecting with them. Two of these “additional” connections led to successful volunteer agreements.
- 27 people responded after the initial “selection”, of which 23 went ahead and connected with the respective VIOs. The other four decided not to go ahead before they had a conversation with a VIO. Reasons for this were: ill health, having found another volunteering opportunity, or unsuitability of the offer.
- Out of the 23 volunteers who connected with a VIO, 12 volunteers agreed to start in 15 volunteering roles by the end of the project. Most of the volunteer roles involved some form of induction, training or screening process, which meant that

a majority of the participants did not start volunteering within the lifetime of this pilot project.

- Out of the 15 VIOs, 7 had agreed an engagement with one volunteer at the end of the project, while three VIOs had taken on two volunteers.
- Volunteer roles agreed to included: befriending patients at a hospital, assisting at a museum shop, supporting older people; helping with telephone support for donor care, volunteering on a committee, supporting reception and administration, helping with finances, designing a programme for clients, stewarding and supporting events as part of the Community Volunteers programme, offering English language support, and being a board member.
- The volunteer roles had commitments of various lengths.

4.5. Volunteers' Experience

Feedback from participating volunteers was collected through a focus group discussion (6 participants) that took place “in-person” at Dublin City Volunteer Centre on 17th May 2022, an online survey (17 participants) and informal conversations on the phone. The volunteers really embraced the pilot nature of the project and were happy to share their opinions and to give constructive feedback.

Some of the results clearly demonstrate the positive experience participants had:

- The volunteers' feedback on The Experience Bank project overall was extremely positive (scored 4.59 of 5 in the survey).
- 88% of participants thought The Experience Bank project was an effective way to connect people with VIOs.
- 84% of volunteers thought the project should be run again, while one person thought it would work better to integrate this approach into existing processes at DCVC, rather than running it as a separate project.
- Since participating in The Experience Bank project:
 - 79% of people stated that their sense of purpose had increased.
 - 68% stated that their sense of isolation had decreased.
 - 75% felt that their motivation to volunteer had increased.



Overall, volunteers spoke highly about the concept of The Experience Bank project. The feedback centred around four themes:

I. Focus on life experience

People really appreciated that the project focused on life experience. Some stated that they felt this process was “less like a job application” [compared to regular application processes].

“I felt it was way less like a ‘market’ and more about participation and involvement.”

Another volunteer talked about feeling “invisible” after being out of the workforce for decades while she raised her children and felt the lack of current work experience posed a barrier even to applying for volunteer roles. By contrast, this process felt more inclusive and that the VIO had “seen her”.



II. Being “selected” by an organisation

Participants stated that they liked the idea of “putting themselves out there” and felt very positive about being “selected” by the organisations. This gave them more self-confidence

and made them feel valued and wanted.

"I felt valued."

"It boosted my confidence, which was great for me."

"The organisations came to me."

"A good feeling, that I had been "selected" based on a matching exercise."

"I found it helpful to list my interests/experience and then to be "selected" by an organisation whose needs matched them."



III. Structured approach to search for volunteering

The participants acknowledged that the process of getting involved was straightforward and helped speed up their search for volunteering opportunities. They felt that it enhanced their experience of searching for roles, and that the concept was a very good way to find "a good fit" for both the volunteer and VIO. The volunteers also noted

that being part of a specific project meant that the organisations were ready to take on volunteers and that something would be happening in a timely manner.

"The project worked well as a connection tool, or middle-man. It brought together organisations who had specific requirements with volunteers who possessed those skills. It streamlined the process for all who took part in the project."

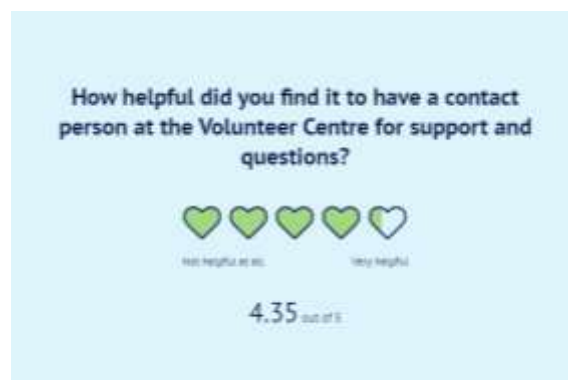
"The whole process was very straightforward and no waffle!"

"Like speed dating, there are endless volunteering options and this helped to make it more focused."

"Excellent way of getting the right 'fit' for both parties."

"I think it gives organisations the power to proactively find volunteers matching their needs."

"I think all was good because it was optional and very specific for all parties involved without wasting time!"



IV. Support offered by the project team

The volunteers very much appreciated the opportunity to talk to a Community Ambassador or to the Project Manager about their experience, skills and interests. They found it helpful to have a “middle-person” helping with focusing their search and making the connections. They also very much liked having the “backup” and support from the project team and having somewhere to ask questions or help resolve blockages when required.

For example, when asked what they liked about the project, participants stated:

“Having the support of The Experience Bank behind me.”

“Felt less vulnerable.”

“The opportunity to chat things over with the Project Manager.”

“I found the Project Manager, extremely kind, helpful and professional.”

“The preparation and work the Project Manager and team did.”

“It helped focus my search to what suited me and what I was looking for. Saved so much time. Bit like an employment agency.”

These findings strongly suggest that The Experience Bank project has reached its goals to address some of the barriers to volunteering for people 55+, such as lack

of confidence, low self-esteem, lack of information and poor access to volunteering opportunities. The opportunity to have a personal conversation with the Volunteer Manager rather than sending in an “application” or having to fill in forms also created space for a more person-centred approach and allowed for both the volunteer and the VIO to explore the details of a possible engagement before committing to it.

In terms of constructive feedback or what could be improved on, participants commented on the practicalities of setting up the profile, i.e., offering drop-down boxes for specific skills or having consistency in terms of the author of the profile.

Some people also commented on the possibility of integrating the project with DCVC’s existing services, rather than being a stand-alone project. Others thought that expanding the project to include more volunteers and VIOs would likely require a more sophisticated set-up/system.

The volunteers noted the essential role of Dublin City Volunteer Centre in providing this support, and the need for appropriate resourcing to provide this service to volunteers and VIOs.

Some other volunteer comments:

- *“Hopefully this continues after the project as it is a very efficient method of pairing volunteers with organisations.”*

- *"Keeping people involved and having a place/area where the emphasis is on (seems to me) abilities is something this organisation does well."*
- *"A very positive experience overall."*
- *"Keep the project running!"*

4.6. VIOs' Experience

Feedback from organisations was collected through informal phone conversations, two focus groups (25th May and 26th May) and an online survey (10 responses).

The project was very well received by the participating VIOs. All organisations were responsive and largely adhered to clearly outlined processes and deadlines around the selection of, and conversations with, the participants.

Most of the participating VIOs were happy to participate in a pilot project and engaged well with the evaluation of the project. There was a clear ask for the project to be run again/on an ongoing basis.

The positive feedback was reflected in the following outcomes:

- The VIO feedback on The Experience Bank project overall was very positive (scored 4.1 of 5 in the survey).
- All VIOs were actively recruiting for volunteers when they joined the project, so participation was relevant and timely for them.
- The majority of VIOs felt that they had found a suitable volunteer

(scored 4 out of 5 in the survey), with the type of skills/experience they were looking for (scored 4.3 out of 5) through The Experience Bank project.

- 80% of VIOs felt that The Experience Bank project is an effective way to connect people 55+ with organisations looking for volunteers (survey).
- 80% VIOs felt that the project should be run again (survey).
- The VIOs found it extremely helpful to have a contact person at the Volunteer Centre to coordinate the project and make introductions (scored 4.8 out of 5 in the survey).

"Very well organised project. The preparatory work done made it very easy to connect/relate with volunteers." (VIO)

Three key themes emerged from the feedback gathered from Volunteer Involving Organisations:

I. Clear and easy-to-follow concept

Participating Volunteer Managers stated that they liked the concept and that they felt the goals and the process of project were very clear. They found it very useful to have a

bank of volunteer profiles that included specific and relevant information. This allowed them to get an idea about the potential volunteer and how they might be a good fit for their own criteria – before meeting the person.

“Choosing people from the bank was good as in you would see what the person was interested in, and you could get a sense of the person (...). I thought that worked out very well.”

Volunteer Managers also felt the project was a good way to reach out to people who might not previously have known about their organisation:

“Whereas with this [project], the organisation is contacting them, they might not know anything about the organisation but it’s an opportunity for the organisation to have that conversation and then see if it’s of interest. I liked that.”

Some Volunteer Managers stated that having a very clear idea about what volunteer/life experience/skills they were looking for helped selecting “a good fit” from the list of profiles.

II. Targeted project for 55+ audience

Most of the participating Volunteer Managers were specifically interested in recruiting volunteers from the 55+ life stage, as, from their experience, people from this age cohort were a very good fit for their volunteer role, due to their life experience, availability, suitability for the tasks at hand, commitment and positive approach to

volunteering in general. They therefore found it very useful to have a programme specifically aimed at this target audience.

Some of the Volunteer Managers felt that participants of The Experience Bank project were more engaged and prepared to make a commitment than people coming through other channels, and that they were more likely to be looking for “something longer term”.

“People who came were very interested in engaging, which was great. Because sometimes, people might be interested but it might be hard to get in touch. (...) With this group, I found they were just ready to go.”

Some also thought that participating in a focused project like The Experience Bank might have made the prospective volunteers feel more comfortable, as they knew it was “for them”.

“Because the programme was specifically aimed at people 55+, the people who applied, they were comfortable that they were in the right programme. Maybe when it’s really general, people might think ‘they don’t want people like me’.”

The Volunteer Managers felt that fact that the potential volunteers were taking part in a specific programme meant that they were “ready to go”, which made it much easier for the VIO to engage with them.

At the same time, the fact that VIOs participated in a specific programme

reassured the volunteers that they were actively recruiting and ready for a conversation with them. (The commitment to be available to engage in the project was a key component of the sign-up process for VIOs).

A number of Volunteer Managers commented on the extremely high calibre of the volunteers on The Experience Bank project, and how they struggled with selecting people as there were so many with amazing skills and experience whom they could have imagined having as part of their volunteer team.

"The enthusiasm came across. It gave me a great boost to read them [the profiles]. To know that there are great people out there, willing to give."

III. The value of a personalised process

A number of the participating Volunteer Managers reflected on the value of having a personal conversation with a potential volunteer.

While some would always meet with a volunteer as a standard part of their volunteer recruitment process, some others really appreciated the very personalised approach of this project and felt that the conversation was an important part of it. Specifically, they saw the value of a "middle-person" (DCVC staff or a Community Ambassador) having

an initial conversation with a volunteer, to help them focus on what they would like to offer, what motivated them and what they would like to get out of their volunteer experience. This conversation with the volunteer when creating their profile was considered to be crucial, as it ensured the profile captured sufficient detail about the volunteer to allow the Volunteer Managers to assess their suitability for their organisation. They felt that where this was done well as part of the project, it led to a more positive outcome and experience for both, the volunteer and the VIO.

"It was interesting. That personal contact, you can't replace it. (...) It is what makes it. You get a sense of the person, and they get a sense of you (...). Anybody moving into something different, whether you are leaving a high-powered job or are a mother who has raised her children and isn't sure what she has to offer, it's that personal contact that really changes things."



Some other points raised:

- A number of VIOs failed to secure a volunteer. The reasons included (sometimes unexpected) family commitments, health issues, changes of plans, extended retirement dates and not having enough time/already having too many other commitments. This was disappointing for the VIOs and was interpreted as a lack of interest in the organisation by some Volunteer Managers, especially when the volunteers did not communicate that they were no longer interested. However, there was also an understanding among Volunteer Managers that “life happens” for volunteers, even when they have the best intentions. It was also noted that it might be a good approach in the future to select additional volunteers to allow for this natural drop-off.
- When asked about the process of searching through the volunteer profiles on The Experience Bank, some of the Volunteer Managers commented that searching through a word document with 31 profiles was feasible and appropriate. However, they suggested that if the project was to run on a larger scale and if there were more than 40 profiles on The Experience Bank, they would prefer to set up a more sophisticated database with a search function that would allow them to narrow down their search, as it would be impossible to look through every profile in detail.

- The relatively short timeframe of the project was mentioned a number of times. While most Volunteer Managers operated well within the given timeframe, it was suggested that advance planning would make this project even more useful and successful for them. It was suggested that the project run for a set period once or twice per year and to give a lot of notice to Volunteer Managers to allow them to plan participation as part of their volunteer-recruitment cycle, and thus, to have a rough timeline in their head from the start of the year.

4.7. Reflections

- Involving an Advisory Panel made up of peers of the target audience/project participants was extremely successful. They offered invaluable perspectives, insights and reflections and played a key role in the driving the project.
- The idea to reach out to people not previously registered with Dublin City Volunteer Centre in the Community Ambassadors’ local area did not really work. Instead, the Community Ambassadors (CAs) largely based their conversations on existing networks of interest, friends and family; most of these were not located in their immediate local area.
- However, having Community Ambassadors to act as points of contact, to provide information, to motivate and support the potential

participants with creating their profile worked very well and was well received by the project participants.

- The Community Ambassadors successfully recruited a number of participants and the systems and support provided by DCVC worked well to facilitate that process.
- The Community Ambassadors gave largely positive feedback about the experience but noted that a longer-term timeframe for their engagement would be more suitable for the Community Ambassador role and task at hand.
- Covid-19 had a significant impact on the project: two Community Ambassadors contracted the virus during the project period, which drastically reduced their availability for the project; many local interest groups were still not meeting at the time of the project; members of the public were still reluctant to engage in volunteering because of restrictions and the fear of getting ill.
- When asked for feedback, the Community Ambassadors suggested that this project and volunteer role could work well on a long-term/ongoing basis rather than a short-term project. This would allow for better planning, i.e. to arrange meeting/talks with community groups, to build relationships and to give potential participants sufficient time to consider and plan their engagement.

- Volunteer Involving Organisations also noted that the timeline for the project was tight. Some were not able to participate in the project at all due to the timings involved. Others suggested that a much longer lead-in time would allow them to include a project like this in their annual volunteer engagement planning process. For example, if they knew early in the year that the project was running in September/October, they could hold off with volunteer recruitment over the summer and then be ready to fully engage and make the most of The Experience Bank.
- Participants appreciated the focus on their life experience rather than their skills. They felt that this was more appropriate for their life stage, more inclusive and better suited to reflect them as a person.
- Participants liked the idea of “putting themselves out there” and felt very positive about being “selected” by the organisations. This gave them more self-confidence and made them feel valued and wanted.
- The Experience Bank concept worked well for both parties, the volunteers and the VIOs. For the volunteers, taking part in the project meant a more structured, focused approach to searching for volunteer opportunities. VIOs appreciated the opportunity to browse through people’s profiles so they could get a better idea of the person before meeting with them.

- The role of a “coach” or “broker” (Community Ambassador or DCVC staff) was crucial in supporting potential volunteers with teasing out what they had to offer and what they might be interested in. For volunteers, this specifically addressed barriers around confidence and “feeling wanted”, while for VIOs, a more thought-through profile meant a higher likelihood of finding a good match.
- Being part of The Experience Bank project meant both volunteers and VIOs were engaged, more committed and “ready to go”.

they are interested in and what they have to offer, in order to create a profile that positively reflects them as a person. This, in turn, improves the selection process for the VIOs. The support could be offered by DCVC staff but involving specifically trained Community Ambassador volunteers for peer support has proven to be successful and well received.

- There is scope to **further develop a revised Community Ambassador volunteer role** to provide the **personal contact and brokerage/coaching** that has been identified as being critical to the success of the project. The revised role could also involve more contact between Community Ambassadors and VIOs to increase their understanding of VIOs’ needs and improve their ability to act as brokers between volunteers and VIOs.
- Having a Project Manager to act as a **point of contact** and to personalise and support the experience for participants, VIOs and project volunteers was important, specifically for this age group. The Project Manager is also essential to oversee the overall coordination and implementation of this kind of project. This role needs to be **properly resourced** to ensure a successful project outcome.
- Having an Advisory Panel made up of peers of the target audience was extremely valuable and added depth and expertise to the project.
- A focus on **personalised experience** and **one-to-one contact** was very successful and valued by volunteers as well as by the VIOs. VIOs felt the time was well invested, as it allowed for a more

5. Findings

- There is a definite appetite and need for **more targeted projects for volunteers aged 55+**. Volunteers and organisations both valued being part of a specific project as it created a **clear focus** and meant both were **available and ready to engage** within the **specific timeframe** of the project.
- The **concept** of The Experience Bank, to have volunteers create profiles to develop a bank of experience, and for VIOs to select volunteers from that bank, worked successfully and was very well received by both volunteers and organisations.
- The **personal support/coaching/brokerage** offered to the potential volunteers is key to the success of the project. This support helps the volunteers to work out what

- focused “selection” process.** Volunteers felt more **appreciated**, felt that their **life experience was valued** and that they were “seen” for who they are and what they have to offer.
- **Personal contact** also played a key role in getting people to participate in the project (volunteering in general) in the first place, either through the Community Ambassadors or through DCVC staff.
 - The project could be run without the outreach element, and instead **focus on people who have already registered** with Dublin City Volunteer Centre (i.e., who have already made the decision to look for volunteering).
 - Participants appreciated the focus on their **life experience** rather than their skills. They felt this was more appropriate for their life stage, was more inclusive and better suited to reflect them as a person.
 - Participants liked the idea of “putting themselves out there” and felt very positive about being “selected” by the organisations. This gave them more self-confidence and made them feel valued and wanted.
 - **Running The Experience Bank project once or twice a year** with plenty of lead-in time would increase the success of the project: It would create more focus and time-bound engagement. It would allow VIOs to plan ahead and to consider participation in The Experience Bank project as part of their annual volunteer-recruitment strategy:
 - It would give more lead-in time to promote the project to VIOs.
 - The project could be signposted to volunteers with plenty of notice as part of other DCVC events and engagements, which would also tie-in well with retirement planning and give people the opportunity to consider volunteering before committing to join The Experience Bank.
 - A longer planning and implementation timeframe would allow space for Community Ambassadors to reach out to and to build relationships with local interest groups and potential volunteers (i.e. add a talk to the diary).
 - A longer project timeline would allow for a more accurate evaluation of the actual volunteer placements.
 - As most volunteers did not start to actually volunteer within the timeline of the project, it was not possible to determine the impact of their volunteering experience on their sense of isolation and their feeling of making a contribution to their community. Regardless, **55%** of participants stated that through engaging with The Experience Bank project, their **sense of isolation had decreased**. **37%** of participants noted their **sense of purpose had increased**, while **45%** reported an **increase in their motivation to volunteer**.
 - **80%** of the Volunteer Involving Organisation felt they **got suitable candidates** from The Experience Bank Project.

6. Appendix

6.1. Budget

- Grant awarded by the Community Foundation for Ireland: €5,000
- Total programme costs: €7,023.29 (includes DCVC's contribution to the project)

6.2. Sample profile

FIRST NAME: Alison

ABOUT ME: I am a freelance editor and writer. I'm a mum of four adult children, and I really love spending time and working with young adults. When I lived in France as a student, I taught English and have done that on and off since, which I have enjoyed a lot.

In my spare time I love spending time in the outdoors: I like being out and about on the bike, hillwalking and kayaking. I am a keen swimmer and do a lot of outdoor swimming all year around. At the moment, I am training for a swim in Killary Harbour. I love animals and we had a lot of family pets over the years.

I AM LOOKING FOR:

I'm keen to share my writing and editing skills, i.e., by helping with putting together a newsletter or writing/reviewing materials or helping other people develop the skills to do it.

Would enjoy teaching English.

Interested in doing something with young adults.

I am generally open to ideas and would like to do something that is fairly routine/ regular or project based.

LIFE EXPERIENCE:

- Professional editing and writing experience
- TEFL qualification
- Teaching experience
- Creative and social skills

LOCALITY: Dublin 6

PREFERENCE FOR TRAVEL/ DISTANCE: I have a car; happy to travel within in Dublin

AVAILABILITY: Preference for afternoons and evenings but can be flexible.

6.3. Survey findings

6.3.1. Volunteers

How do you feel about the project overall?



4.59 out of 5

How do you like the name "The Experience Bank"?



Don't like it at all

Love it

4.65 out of 5

How helpful did you find it to have a contact person at the Volunteer Centre for support and questions?



Not helpful at all

Very helpful

4.35 out of 5

Why did you join The Experience Bank project?

Please select all that apply.

I was actively looking for volunteering.	5	29%
I wanted to try all available avenues to find a suitable volunteering opportunity.	5	29%
I was asked to join.	1	6%
I liked the idea.	3	18%
I was curious to see which organization might select me.	0	0%
It was a good way to hear from an organization I might not know anything about.	2	12%
I wasn't sure what I had to offer and thought this might help.	0	0%
I wasn't sure where to start looking so liked the idea that I would be offered something.	1	6%
Other	0	0%

Were you actively volunteering when you joined The Experience Bank project?

Yes	7	41%
No. But I have volunteered in the past.	5	29%
No. But I have attended other Dublin City Volunteer Centre events in the past.	1	6%
No. I have applied for volunteering in the past but wasn't successful.	2	12%
No. This is the first time I am looking for volunteering.	2	12%
Other	0	0%

6.3.2. Volunteer Involving Organisations

How do you feel about the project overall?



4.1 out of 5

Do you think The Experience Bank project is an effective way to connect people 55+ with organisations looking for volunteers?

Yes	8	80%
No	1	10%
Not sure	1	10%
Other	0	0%

Please rate the following statements:

◀ The project concept and processes were clear and easy to follow. ▶



Don't agree at all

Very much agree

4.7 out of 5

How helpful did you find it to have a contact person at the Volunteer Centre to coordinate the contacts and make introductions?



Not helpful at all

Very helpful

4.8 out of 5

Please rate the following statements:

◀ I found a volunteer with the type of skills/
experience I was looking for. ▶



Don't agree at all

Very much agree

4.3 out of 5

Please rate the following statements:

◀ The calibre of candidates was very high. ▶



Don't agree at all

Very much agree

4.6 out of 5