

Consultation on Working Draft of Volunteering Strategy 2020 – 2025 *Submission by the Citizens Information Board (January 2020)*

The Citizens Information Board (CIB) broadly welcomes the Working Draft of Volunteering Strategy 2020 – 2025. The draft reflects many of the proposals and suggestions contained in our response to the Consultation on the Development of a National Volunteering Strategy which we submitted to the Department in February 2019.¹

General comments

The overall thrust of the Strategy as set out in the Working Draft is very positive and welcome, in particular,

- Public information and more awareness programmes to enable volunteering by people from marginalised communities, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities
- A multi-annual funding approach
- An appropriate cost-recovery model for programmes delivered by the C&V sector
- Core funding for autonomous community and local development
- Developing newer and more contemporary forms of volunteer engagement
- An educational programme in partnership with youth organisations to change the perception of volunteering among younger people
- A programme aimed specifically at potential volunteers reaching retirement and those over 55
- A National Survey on Volunteering
- The delivery of a time and skills match programme and the introduction of a ‘pilot-project’ examining the potential for a ‘time-bank concept’ that allows people to volunteer hours that are then matched with the needs of Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs)
- A pilot project for professional mentoring as a support to volunteers

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https://www.citizensinformationboard.ie/downloads/social_policy/submissions2019/National_Volunteering_Strategy_CIB%20response%20_Feb_2019.pdf

- Support for the concept of task based volunteering as an alternative to role based volunteering

The commitment to establishing a Volunteering Strategy Implementation Group, chaired by the Department of Rural and Community Development, with representation from other relevant Government Departments, public bodies and stakeholders is welcome. It will be important to include representation from all sectors and age-groups in this group in order to widen the volunteer population base and to include groups that traditionally have had lower levels of volunteering.

The Department's five-year Strategy to support the community and voluntary sector in Ireland, *Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities 2019 – 2024* provides a necessary and important context for supporting and enabling volunteers to maximise their contribution. The implementation of this strategy obviously needs to go hand in hand with the Volunteering Strategy so as to ensure the necessary and vital contribution of volunteers *per se* is given due prominence.

The *National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland 2019-2022* is also important in creating a developmental infrastructure within which volunteers can contribute in innovative ways and provide a new model for delivering social support services.

The inclusion in the Draft of a number of volunteering scenarios is helpful and these provide a rich insight into the role and contribution of volunteers on a day-to-day basis.

Strategic Objectives

The five strategic objectives broadly reflect what needs to be done to promote and sustain a strong volunteering ethos based on active citizenship. These objectives reflect many of the points made in the previous CIB submission and we very much welcome this. However, the proposed strategic objectives as set out in the Working Draft do not, we believe, put sufficient emphasis on two important areas:

- 1) Developing a Government-wide and integrated response to developing and enhancing volunteering as a core component of active citizenship
- 2) Research as a key overarching strategic component

The need for a Government-wide and integrated response to developing and enhancing volunteering has long been identified. There is an obvious need to develop mechanisms to ensure that the cross cutting nature of volunteering is reflected in close working between Government agencies. Government Departments are repeatedly listed as stakeholders in the Working Draft. However, there is no meaningful reference to what relevant individual Government Departments are expected to do other than to the Department of Rural and Community Development. This is in marked contrast to the emphasis in the 2000 White Paper, *Supporting Voluntary Activity* which stated (p.166) that:

- Each Department will assess whether or not its policies in relation to particular areas of Community and Voluntary sector activity are clearly stated and in which areas there is need for policy development. Departments will take a proactive approach to policy development and be open to new ways of providing services which respond to needs as identified at local community level;
- Each Government Department will publicise at regular intervals comprehensive and accessible information on policies and services relevant to the Community and Voluntary sector;
- Each Government Department should identify the core services it is responsible for and where relevant the role of the Community and Voluntary sector in the provision of these services;

On the matter of research, it is noted that Strategic Objective 5 acknowledges the importance of ongoing research into the volunteering community² in developing informed, evidence-based policy beyond the lifetime of the Strategy. While this statement is important, CIB believes that it should be much broader and spelt out in detailed strategic actions as follows:

- Developing a clear nationwide picture of the nature and extent of volunteering and quantifying, as far as possible, the full extent of voluntary activity, including informal/‘good neighbour’ volunteering (the reference in the Working Draft to carrying out a National Survey on Volunteering is noted)
- Quantifying, as far as possible, the *social* and *public value*³ and *impact* (practical benefits to society, to those provided with help and support, and to volunteers themselves) and the *economic value*
- Identifying best practice in the effective management of the relationships between paid and volunteer staff in VIOs;
- How voluntary Boards of Management can effectively deal with the various challenges arising from ever changing requirements in relation to governance, employment law and health and safety.

² CIB commissioned research on volunteering.

https://www.citizensinformationboard.ie/downloads/social_policy/volunteering_research_report.pdf

³ Research on the public value of Citizens Information Services in Ireland.

https://www.citizensinformationboard.ie/downloads/social_policy/CIS_Making_an_Impact_2017.pdf

https://www.citizensinformationboard.ie/downloads/social_policy/CIS_Making_an_Impact_Technical_Report_2017.pdf

Funding: Need for a cross-Departmental Approach

The Working Draft states (p.25) that the Strategy will help to ensure that we move towards a more joined-up approach that supports and recognises the important role that volunteers and VIOs have to play and that they are supported accordingly. This important statement, we believe, needs to be spelled out in detail in respect of not only the Department of Rural and Community Development but in respect of all statutory agencies and bodies which have a role in funding services and initiatives where there is strong volunteer component at either management or service delivery level. In this regard, it is noted that the 2000 White Paper, *Supporting Voluntary Activity* states (p.164) that Government Departments and State agencies will outline clear criteria and procedures for their funding arrangements for the Community and Voluntary sector. This is an ongoing requirement and should be referenced in the Strategy.

There is a related need for commitment to a comprehensive investment programme to deliver the strategy and to underpin the future of volunteering in Ireland.

Locating the Volunteering Strategy within a local social Inclusion context

As well as integration with the *Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities 2019 – 2024* Strategy, for the Volunteering Strategy to be fully effective there must be a balanced partnership between central and local government. CIB believes, therefore, that it would be important that the Volunteering Strategy is clearly located within a social inclusion context at local level. The Strategy presents an important opportunity for the co-ordination of volunteering opportunities to be linked to local social inclusion and community development processes. As part of their social inclusion remit, the Local Authority should be recognised as the body with the responsibility of coordinating statutory and voluntary initiatives relating to social inclusion in order to achieve local wellbeing. The aim of Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs) is to enhance the strategic planning and coordination of local and community development activity. The Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) aims to improve the life chances and opportunities of those who are marginalised in society, living in poverty or in unemployment, through community development approaches and targeted supports.

The integration of volunteer-involving organisations (and their representative organisations) in local community development structures should be a primary consideration in order to ensure that the role of volunteers remains fully visible and acknowledged accordingly. To this end, consideration should be given to including in the Volunteering Strategy a requirement for all Local Authority areas have their own local volunteering strategies. Such strategies should include targets for increasing the level of volunteering in local communities and developing mechanisms for stimulating volunteering among marginalised groups, including, in particular, people with disabilities.

Additional Points

The series of actions set out in the Working Draft under the various strategic components must be supported by a 'clearly articulated work plan' which includes lines of accountability. The action plan should include a commitment by Government to review the strategy on an ongoing basis taking into account actual specific outputs under each strategic component, outcomes, general impact and social return on investment from volunteering activities.

The Section on Evaluation (7.2) should commit to developing key performance indicators in respect of each strategic component and action.

The role of volunteering as a route to new employment for many people, e.g., those who are returning to the workforce after taking time out for home-making and child-rearing roles should be emphasised. The commitment in the Strategy to promoting volunteering to job seekers through the INTREO centres and social welfare offices is important and has clear potential in enhancing the pathways to work process in that volunteering can help to develop skills for employability and for new career pathways.

There is scope for stronger and more explicit reference in the Strategy to the potential significant role for volunteers in raising awareness of the effects of climate change and highlighting actions that can be taken at local community level in this regard.

Finally, and very importantly, ownership of the strategy must be wider than the Department of Rural and Community Development in order to fully deliver on the Strategy's vision. While the Department should act as a 'driver' of the Strategy, other statutory agencies must be centrally involved in its delivery.