



NUI Galway



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Rural Volunteerism:
Impacting Development
and Sustainability



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Foreword

Volunteer Ireland is delighted to partner with NUI Galway to present this report on the impact of volunteering on rural communities. Rural Ireland faces unique challenges in terms of accessibility, connectivity and social isolation. Anecdotally, we had known that volunteering has a major impact in addressing these issues in rural communities and that volunteers are often seen to be the social fabric of a community. This project has allowed us to gather the evidence and gain better insight and understanding of the impact of rural volunteerism.

Dr Maura Farrell of NUI Galway led the project by delivering hands-on field research combined with an analysis of existing data held by Volunteer Ireland. The research included a desk based survey followed by interviews with individuals in rural communities. This report will showcase the real impact that volunteers have on rural communities across Ireland and highlight the benefits that a strong culture of volunteering has on local communities.

In 2017, Volunteer Ireland published a report exploring the positive impact that volunteering has on the volunteer. This report takes that one step further and explores the impact that volunteers have on their communities and the people in them. Examples that appear throughout this report, such as volunteering with the GAA or the local Meals on Wheels group, show how far reaching the impact of volunteering really is on rural communities. The many quotes in this report demonstrate that what's important to rural communities is not just the levels of service that volunteers provide but also the social connection, the sense of belonging and the pride in their local area that volunteering helps to foster.

While this report focuses on rural communities, volunteers make a significant impact across all communities in Ireland every day. The survey data along with the first hand experiences of those living in rural communities show that the impact of volunteering cannot be understated. In short, **volunteering builds stronger communities.**

Nina Arwitz

CEO

Volunteer Ireland

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Volunteer Ireland would like to sincerely thank all the students of class T1369 Geographical Perspective on Rural Change for all their hard work and efforts in carrying out the survey and interviews with volunteers. Their names, too many to mention here, can be found in Appendix B.

We also have a special thanks for all the volunteers who took the time with the students to fill out the surveys and take part in the interviews. Without them there would be no report.

None of this would have been possible without Dr Maura Farrell, NUI Galway who coordinated the project in NUI Galway and carried out the analysis and compiled the report.

In addition we would also like to thank the Rural Research Cluster Team, NUI Galway (Brian Leonard, Aoife Ní Fhlatharta, Dr Marie Mahon, Dr John McDonagh, Dr Therese Conway and Dr Shane Conway) and NUI Galway's Community Knowledge Initiative (CKI).

Thanks to our collaborative partners Galway Volunteer Centre for their insight and Pat Kennedy (eTownz Project) for his analysis and expertise.

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Introduction

Rural Ireland has witnessed dramatic changes in the last number of decades. Some areas have faced population decline, the depletion of services and emigration of young people, while other regions have witnessed a rapid rebound from the demise of the Celtic Tiger and are experiencing economic growth in line with advancing urban centres. One aspect of rural life that remains unwavering, irrespective of decline or growth, is the contribution and impact of rural voluntary work. On a consistent basis, tangible and quantifiable enhancements are made to the quality of life of rural inhabitants as a result of voluntary activity carried out in rural villages, towns and peripheral areas throughout Ireland. From GAA participation to 'Meals on Wheels', rural residents give of their time, energy and efforts for the betterment of their fellow citizens and their community. To explore the impact of rural volunteering, Volunteer Ireland in conjunction with Dr Maura Farrell, NUI Galway, Galway Volunteer Centre, Pat Kennedy (eTownz Project), The Rural Research Cluster Team, NUI Galway (Brian Leonard, Aoife Ní Fhlatharta, Dr Marie Mahon, Dr John McDonagh, Dr Therese Conway and Dr Shane Conway) and NUI Galway's Community Knowledge Initiative (CKI) carried out the following Rural Volunteerism research, commencing in late 2017 with a completion date in May 2018.

The following report, compiled by Dr Maura Farrell presents the research results. The research employed a two-fold methodological approach; namely quantitative data collected by Volunteer Ireland, analysed by Pat Kennedy (eTownz); and quantitative and qualitative data collected by Final Year Geography Students as part of a Project-Based Learning Approach, led by Dr Maura Farrell. Key results of the research highlight the essential contribution volunteers make to rural infrastructure, the rural economy, rural inhabitants, the social links in rural communities and rural people's sense of belonging and culture. In addition, research findings identify the need for financial support for rural voluntary activities while also highlighting the need for training and education for volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations to ensure the continuity of a high standard of volunteerism.

The report initially critiques rural volunteer literature, and produces a rationale for the findings of this research. The two-fold methodology is then outlined in detail, followed by the research findings, which is rich in data and opinion and highlights how volunteer work is 'vital to protecting, retaining, and maintaining rural communities' (Brennan, 2005: 60).

Literature Review

Introduction

Volunteerism is often considered the pillar of community work. In rural areas it can be the glue that binds what can be fragile and vulnerable. The activities carried out by rural volunteers in areas such as sport, health care or the environment creates connections and networks that bind rural communities and builds resilience and social capital. Formal and informal voluntary activity 'pervades the whole of the rural sector' (Rogers 1987, p. 87) and although both formats are evident in rural society, informal volunteering tends to have a slightly higher popularity rating (Birtch, 2017). Informal volunteerism can be helping out a neighbour or caregiving for someone in a local community, while formal (also unpaid) means that the volunteer is registered with a club, society or organisation. Irrespective of formal or informal activities, Gilster (2012) is of the opinion that volunteerism can make a considerable difference to rural society, becoming a form of social integration and promoting the development of social relationships and networks. Volunteers in rural areas however, face difficulties in excess of their urban counterparts. These difficulties are largely due to a lack of facilities, available funding, ongoing support and available and suitable transport and travel. Nonetheless, volunteerism has the ability to enhance communities and become a vital lifeline for rural regions facing dramatic change and fundamental restructuring.

Rural Restructuring and Volunteerism

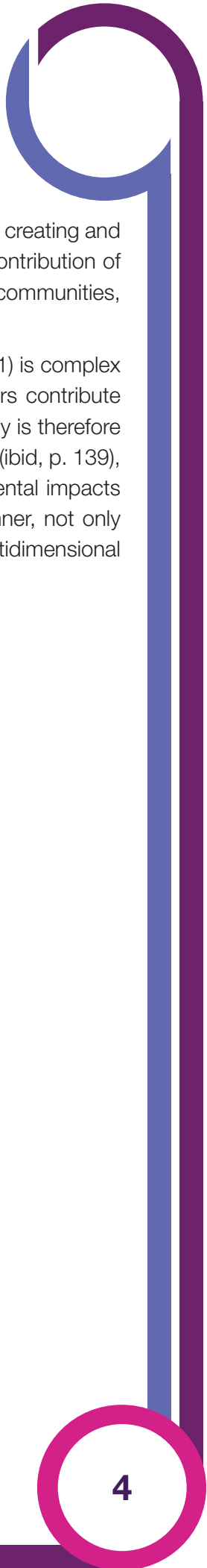

In the last two decades, rural areas have witnessed unprecedented change and transformations; driven largely by technological innovation, social modernisation and processes of globalisation (Woods, 2012). Many EU countries, including Ireland, experienced rural economic restructuring; resulting in a rise in rural service industries and in-turn a decline in the importance of agriculture. Social change has given rise to depopulation on the one hand and counter-urbanisation and new rural dwellers on the other. Issues around commuting, access and mobility are currently widespread in some rural regions, with many others facing problems of isolation, deprivation and poor service provision. Contemporary issues around the environment are also dominant in rural areas resulting in new Agri-environmental policy change and alternative rural land uses. The means and support for dealing with such change can often be limited for rural communities, resulting in a reliance on voluntary activities and the volunteer sector (Skinner and Hanlon, 2016). Subject to such change, Irish rural inhabitants have remained steadfast in their endeavour to retain community engagement, build capacity and enhance social capital. The post Celtic Tiger era however, was difficult, with austerity measures severely impacting rural community funding and support services. Harvey (2015) provided a clear overview of community and austerity policy from 2009 to 2014, which he suggested resulted in national spending on community

and voluntary activity being reduced by 35% to 45%. During this period, both volunteers and volunteer involving organisations were under financial pressures, but persistence and dedication ensured government policy refocused its efforts in more recent years, providing additional funding and support for community and volunteer involving organisations. A somewhat reenergised volunteer sector was evident in a report commissioned by Clann Credo (The Social Investment Fund), The Community Foundation for Ireland and The Wheel (2016), which provided evidence from over 560,000 people volunteering their time every year in Ireland's 11,500 community and voluntary organisations. Nonetheless, the report also called for public policy to prioritise 'the creation of an enabling an ecosystem to sustain and enhance Societal Value' (O' Connor, 2016, p. 7); a concept which resonates from the idea of using public, private and charitable resources to produce a good and just society. Volunteerism can play a considerable role in producing such a society, with Skinner and Power (2011) recognising the transformative power of volunteerism in creating a resilient society. Volunteers have the power and potential to create considerable impact in society and in rural society in particular, which faces fundamental changes in addition to considerable challenges.

Impact and Contribution of Rural Volunteerism

The positive impact of volunteerism on the mental health and well-being of the volunteer was recently noted in a report by Volunteer Ireland (2017). In examining rural volunteerism from a more holistic standpoint, it becomes apparent that the impact of voluntary activity is much more extensive. The work of the volunteer creates a ripple effect that resonates from the tangible and practical to the visionary and idealistic. Carnegie Trust UK in a Charter for Rural Communities in 2007, stated that 'growing the capacity of local people, agencies and professionals that support communities and build social networks founded on high levels of volunteering and skilled support is one of the prerequisites for vibrant rural communities' (p. 4).

The impact of rural volunteerism is extensive, affecting areas from sport and youth work to heritage, the environment and care of the elderly. Considering the care of our rural elderly, first and foremost and positioning volunteerism in the midst of rural change brings to mind critical transformations underway in the health and social care systems. While increasingly, rural areas are providing public and private formal caring facilities for the elderly; a vast amount of informal volunteers provide local meal services, respite, transportation and social inclusion activities (Joseph and Skinner, 2012).



Another example where rural volunteerism creates considerable impact is in the area of sport. Harvey et al. (2006) are of the opinion that sport in rural communities can provide a network between people of different classes, ages and race, thereby creating and enhancing social capital. The influential Putnam (1995) article picked up on the contribution of sport to rural communities, suggesting that it contributed to the social capital of communities, thereby strengthening collaborations, connections, trust and civil society.

Exploring the impact of voluntary activity, according to Haski-Leventhal et al. (2011) is complex with many academics and activists opting to use the amount of hours volunteers contribute 'as a proxy for impact' (p. 139). While the economic value of the volunteer's activity is therefore measured and sometimes valued by calculating the 'net worth of volunteer labour' (ibid, p. 139), this fails to provide a clear picture of the additional social, cultural and environmental impacts of voluntary activity. Examining the impact of rural volunteerism in a holistic manner, not only provides a clearer picture of the impact of volunteerism, but also highlights the multidimensional nature of voluntary activity in society.

Methodology

Two-Fold approach

The data collected for this report is based on a two-fold approach. The research was analysed by Dr Maura Farrell, following the collection of the data by Final Year NUI Galway, Geography students, under the supervision of Dr Farrell (NUI Galway). This methodological approach is based on the concept of Project-Based Learning, which increases academic achievement, while also enhancing the student's skill-base and knowledge. This part of the research took place from January to the end of April 2018 and included the collection of survey data from 607 respondents, and interviews from 60 rural participants, throughout fifteen counties, Cavan, Clare, Cork, Kildare, Longford, Donegal, Galway, Laois, Leitrim, Mayo, Roscommon, Sligo, Tipperary, Waterford and Westmeath. In preparation for the data collection all students undertook a desk-based study to identify the type of voluntary activity in their local area and key rural volunteers, who would be applicable to take part in the research.

The NUI Galway research was enhanced by data accumulated by Volunteer Ireland and analysed by project partners (VI, Pat Kennedy and Dr Maura Farrell). The analysis is based on data collected via the national volunteering database (I-VOL) which contains information from over 16,000 Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs) and 140,000 Volunteers. These VIOs and Volunteers are registered with local Volunteer Centres or Volunteering Information Services and the data set provides a record of volunteering activity across the country. Pat Kennedy analysed the data using an urban/rural definition based on the CEDRA (Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas) methodology of assigning a rural definition to all areas outside the 5 main Irish cities including all towns, villages and the countryside.

NUI Galway Rural Volunteerism Surveys

The research survey (Appendix A) was designed following a collaborative process between Dr Farrell, Volunteer Ireland, Galway Volunteer Centre and Pat Kennedy (eTownz). Once designed and a pilot survey completed, all participating students completed ten surveys in their own rural areas. In all, 607 rural individuals completed the survey, which contained 22 questions; all seeking to ascertain the level and type of rural voluntary activity in each area, as well as the impact such voluntary activity had on the rural town or village.

NUI Galway Rural Volunteerism Interviews

On the completion of all surveys, the interview process was undertaken to gain a more in-depth and qualitative overview of the impact of rural volunteering. Each student carried out one interview, with rural voluntary activists, who were purposively identified following the survey collection and/or the desk-based study of the area. Interview questions were again accumulated and standardised following

a collaborative process of the key individuals and groups involved in the research design. In all, 60 interviews were undertaken, providing a wealth of qualitative information on rural volunteerism and its impact and value to the sustainability and development of rural Ireland. For the purposes of this report the Interviewees will be identified by a number and an 'I' following a quote within the text. (For example, interviewee number 30 will be identified as (I. 30)).

Data Analysis

Survey data was accumulated by each student and entered into a predesigned Survey Monkey template. Automatic analysis from Survey Monkey was enhanced by quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data by Dr Maura Farrell and the research group. The interviews were amassed by Dr Farrell and using a process of thematic analysis and a relevant coding system the key themes from the interviews were selected.

Introduction

Definitions of volunteerism are presented by academics and community activists with all agreeing its key principle is the commitment of time and effort for the benefit of community and society with no financial gain to the individual. Rural volunteerism is this and much more. Rural volunteerism is often the heartbeat of a rural community and the incentive which binds and connects individuals and community groups. It is the provision of services and facilities which would not exist without the work of the voluntary sector. In truth, volunteerism enhances the quality of life of Irish rural communities and enables individuals, families and community groups to sustain their culture and traditions and enhance their future potential. The results of this Rural Volunteerism research identified and portrayed the above sentiments, highlighting the extent of informal voluntary activity taking place and the need for continued and extended support for volunteers and volunteer involving organisations.

The following section of the report provides a clear outline of the data collected by NUI Galway, both surveys and interviews. Additionally, and interwoven into the report, will be analysis of data accumulated by Volunteer Ireland, Volunteer Centres and Volunteering Information Services throughout Ireland. Drawing on both the quantitative and qualitative data collected the report is divided into three key sections:

Section 1: Provides a profile of individuals and community groups engaged in voluntary activities in rural communities.

Section 2: The type of voluntary activity taking place in rural communities.

Section 3: The impact rural volunteerism has on the economic, social, cultural and environmental aspects of Irish rural society.

Section 1: Rural Volunteers – Profile

Rural Volunteers

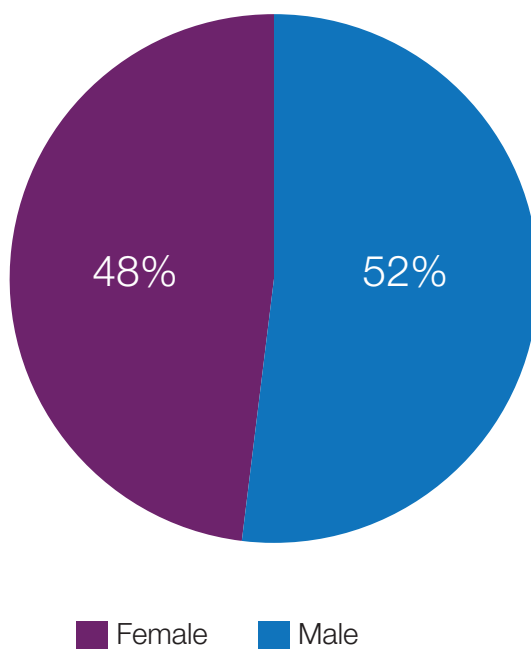
Over 600 surveys were completed and analysed with slightly more females (51.82%) than males (48.18%) responding to the NUI Galway survey (Figure 4.1). A variation shows in the national Volunteer Ireland (VI) data-set with nearly 70% female rural volunteers registered with VI and 30% males. The strength of the NUI Galway survey responses lie in the fact that over 90% of respondents (90.56%) have been involved or are currently engaged in rural voluntary activities. The age factor of volunteers is often cited as an issue by community activists, who suggest that voluntary activities in rural areas are often carried out by an older population. Alexander et al. (2012) however suggests, volunteering is related to a feeling of obligation or a particular enthusiasm about a project or local cause, rather than an age group dominating voluntary activity. The NUI Galway survey supports this thinking in that over 34% of rural volunteers surveyed were in the 18 to 25 age bracket and over 59% in the 25 to 64 age group (Figure 4.1). Similar to Alexander et al. (ibid) one of the sixty interviewees in this research alluded to the difficulty of getting people to engage in community volunteering, but also suggested engagement can be ignited by personal interest or a particular project:

“It is difficult to get people involved. Families are busy with their own lives, working and bringing children to various places. Unless people have a direct interest in a project they are reluctant to get involved. If the project benefits the individual in some or their interests are catered for, then volunteers will come on board. The feeling of ownership and benefit are important motivations” (l. 29).

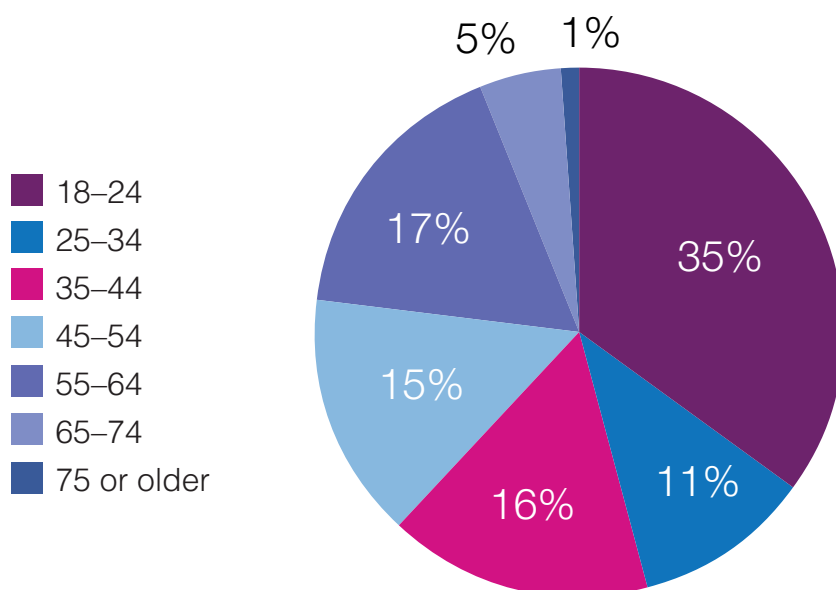
Similar to the findings of the NUI Galway survey, the VI data-set highlights that approximately 36% of rural volunteers are aged between 23 and 35 with 21% aged between 36 and 49 and 10% between 50 and 64. In all there is a good distribution of rural volunteers at different ages giving of their time in rural communities and too much burden is not being placed on one specific age demographic.

Gender and Age of Rural Volunteers – NUI Galway Survey

Gender of Rural Volunteers



Age of Rural Volunteers



Section 2: The Type of Voluntary Activities Taking Place in Rural Communities

Rural Volunteer Work

Over 90% of respondents to the NUI Galway survey engaged in some form of rural volunteering, with the type of volunteerism varying from sporting engagement to care services in local communities. The Word Cloud in Figure 4.3 provides a clear overview of the variety of engagement from volunteers with the larger words representing an increase in the amount of times the voluntary activity took place in each rural community. Club involvement of different varieties appeared most popular in rural areas, with over 38% stating they were involved in a club, with involvement in the GAA being the most popular. The survey respondents provided 577 names of different clubs, societies, charities and organisations they are involved in within rural areas- a staggering level of engagement and variety in volunteer activity in rural Ireland (Figure 4.4). The VI survey provided a clear overview of how rural volunteers engage with different organisations and become involved in volunteer work. 33% of rural volunteers use the internet to seek out volunteer opportunities in rural setting with 10% using word of mouth or referrals from another agency. The VI survey also showed additional methods of engagement for rural volunteers, which included contacting Volunteer Ireland, local Volunteer Centres and Volunteering Information Services, through schools and colleges, social media and local media.

Type of Rural Voluntary Work



Names of Rural Organisations



Time and Training for Rural Volunteers

The time rural people allocate to volunteering was both surprising and humbling with 62% of respondents dedicating their time on a weekly basis to activities and nearly 11% engaged in daily volunteering activity. Activities included raising funds, Meals on Wheels for elderly people, training children and young people for sporting clubs, town development work and officiating at charity events, to name but a few. Over 43% of rural volunteers had received some form of training for their volunteer role, from sports training and team facilitation to first aid and leadership training. However, over 56% of respondents had received no training for the activities they were undertaking, a recurrent theme throughout the interviews with volunteers as well. Many interviewees suggested that the need for training and undertaking a vetting process may prevent people engaging in local voluntary activities rather than encouraging their involvement. The following comments were representative of several comments received:

"In relation to dealing with project and youth work, there is a lot of red tape on things in comparison to twenty years ago. Now there are trainings, such as child protection etc. There is a lot of paper work and training too" (l. 35).

"First of all people are so busy now – there's two parents working and they're young parents so they find it hard coming home and then they have their children and going out again and also with all this transparency in governance and all of that you have to do Garda Vetting and there's all of that as well involved in it, and that is difficult because in every club you join you have to do the Garda Vetting and I know it's essential but it does take your time" (l. 41).

"It is becoming increasingly difficult to get people involved and most committees are reliant on a small dedicated group of people. The reason I believe that it is hard to get people involved in volunteering, is everyone leads hectic lifestyles, which are very work orientated and leave little extra time for social activities. Also, I think some people can be scared off with all the paper work involved. Many people would potentially like to help but when you mention Garda vetting and relevant courses, some which are mandatory, many people just lose interest" (l. 43).

Rural Volunteerism and Sport

Key areas of rural voluntary activities appear prominent following the surveys and interviews carried out by the NUI Galway Geography students. Sport, care services and local charity and town development engagement rate highest. The interviews in particular offered a wealth of qualitative data and a clear picture of the level and type of engagement taking place in rural areas. For many interviewees, a large proportion of rural volunteering revolved around sport and sporting clubs; the GAA, Rugby, Soccer and Athletics for example. Lawson (2005) supports the empowering factor of rural sport, suggesting it creates vibrant social networks, which in turn produces social trust, cooperation and collaboration. One interviewee in particular highlights the importance of sport volunteerism for his rural area:

"If you go into the social sphere, what you would possibly also say is the sporting area, and the interaction that occurs because of it, the GAA club would at all times over the years be run by volunteers who would give their time freely, regularly all through the year to maintain the club and to run the club and to ferry young people back and forth to play sport and provide a social engagement of the spectators that go with it. Again, voluntarily. It's very difficult to imagine the community without it. Voluntary work has a tremendous impact on rural areas like this" (l. 37).

Support for volunteerism in peripheral rural areas was also evident in a quote from another interviewee who stated that:

"I believe that the identity and culture of a community thrives under local volunteerism especially in the Gaeltacht region whereby volunteers actively maintain the cultural services, such as the GAA, to the town. These services are important as they benefit the community as a whole and provide events for physical fitness and social interaction" (l. 57).

Rural Volunteerism and Care Services

Rural society is increasingly pressurised by a lack of services and facilities with our most vulnerable in society often needing additional assistance from community groups and individuals. According to both the NUI Galway survey and the interviews, rural communities are increasingly active in areas of care giving, particularly with rural elderly, children and young people with special needs. One volunteer stated that:

“Volunteers play a vital and important role in communities and add to both the social and cultural parts of that community in a pretty big way. They do this through their involvement in the different organisations in the area: mainly the GAA, Tidy Towns, Civil defence, Order of Malta, Community councils and the Heritage committees, the Lions Club would also be another big one where people would contribute their time and energy to promote different projects and fundraise. Also you have the care of the elderly, you have the St. Vincent De Paul, you have Age Action. You also have young at heart which is a local one here in Athy – they are another group, something similar to Age Action. These kind of things [volunteering to help the elderly] are socially good for people who may need social interaction desperately, as you know there is a huge problem with isolation for older people especially in far out areas” (l. 46).

Another volunteer interviewed by an NUI Galway student emphasised the response of the local community to people with autism in a rural area of County Cork:

“The biggest volunteer drive in our local area has got to be the annual tractor run for the Kilbrittain Autism Unit. Every year a set of volunteers set up a tractor run to support the needs of the autism unit and to provide essential facilities to keep the unit going. Every year they raise thousands to provide life changing resources to families of those with Autism” (l. 59).

Rural Volunteerism and Local Development

Ireland’s Action Plan for Rural Development (2016) outlines over two hundred and seventy actions for the economic, social and cultural development of rural Ireland. These ‘Actions’ ranging from the delivery of the LEADER Programme to Flood Relief Services has attached government funding of up to €60 million. Careful consideration of the Action Plan however highlights the need, not only for intergovernmental cooperation for the success of the plan, but also for the involvement of rural volunteers. The research survey and associated interviews highlight a high level of rural volunteer engagement in rural development in many rural areas. One interviewee in particular highlights the importance of rural volunteers to development in many rural areas:

"I believe that without volunteers a large amount of community facilities would simply not be available. Volunteers contribute to the social and cultural identity in our area by empowering people and helping them identify needs in the community be it recreational, footpaths, public lighting and by a combination of volunteering through fundraising or providing their services or their skills, life skills, work skills/job skills free of charge to the community, each generation are tasked with the development of facilities with local government and central government looking after towns and cities due to the prominent population" (l. 8).

A similar response from a volunteer in the County Galway village of Abbeyknockmoy also highlighted the importance of volunteers to local development projects:

"The last thirty to forty years, the community centre and the church for example, were improved and also car parks and even the grotto was built in Knockroe hill, which was built for the millennium project by volunteers. Improvements to the graveyard such as up keeping them, even back to the 1980s when Abbeyknockmoy ran a campaign for mayor of Abbey in order to fund the community centre. In more recent areas we have the development of the picnic area and of the playground at this moment and time. Probably ongoing development is the biggest impact as well as creating community spirit and involvement. Pride of Abbeyknockmoy has a big impact on volunteers in our community" (l. 35).

Section 3: Impacts of Rural Volunteerism

Infrastructural Impact of Rural Volunteerism

Contemporary Ireland is enjoying early signs of prosperity with rising employment figures and increases in the return of its post Celtic Tiger emigrants. Renewed economic prosperity however, can often be concentrated in urban centres or some revitalised larger rural towns. Why prosperity occurs in some rural areas and not others can often be explained by policy, increased funding and spatial proximity to a thriving urban centre. One factor which can contribute to rural sustainability, development or revitalisation, and one often overlooked, is the work carried out by local volunteers. The NUI Galway survey and interviews not only emphasized the imperative nature of the work carried out by rural volunteers but also highlighted what rural areas would look like or become if resources and support was not given more freely and readily to those who give of their time and efforts.

In examining the impact of rural volunteerism, the survey respondents were asked to assess the impact of the infrastructure in and around rural voluntary activities. Table 4.1 provides a clear overview of the overwhelming support for rural volunteering with nearly 91% either strongly agreeing or agreeing that “Rural volunteers provide a valuable service that would not otherwise be available”. Similarly and again overwhelmingly, the majority of respondents strongly agreed or agree with statements such as; “Without volunteers, many people would be left without help and/or services” (93.28%); “Because of volunteer’s people’s access to other services in the community increases” (92.28%); “Volunteers strengthen local connections/networks” (93.77%) and finally the statement “Volunteers help develop local enterprise, jobs and innovation” was strongly agreed or agreed with by 80.37% of respondents.

One interviewee in particular emphasised the networking opportunities created through volunteering which enhances social capital within the rural community and creates opportunities for rural development, job creation and improved quality of life:

“If you take housing schemes that have been developed here, they provided fairly short-term construction employment, if you take something like the nursing home which was inspired and brought about, initially, by voluntary effort; that provided quite a lot of building work and as well as that, and I’m talking in recent times in this case, and it also now provides up to forty jobs both full-time and part-time on a permanent basis. The same can be said of the crèche, and the young people, the children’s facilities. That again was brought about by voluntary effort and help from the state as well of course, but inspired locally and that provides I understand about six jobs now. So, you could take a lot of instances where real money has been generated because of voluntary work and voluntary initiatives” (l. 35).

Another interviewee focused on services provided by volunteers, which is a considerable saving to the state and tax payer:

“I volunteer for two organisations, Cope, which is a charity for the homeless and provides meals to people who are ill, old or incapacitated and also in another organisation, Ability West who provide services to people with intellectual disability. People contribute to both organisations entirely on a voluntary basis and give of their time, their skills, and their experiences. Without those contributions the state would have to provide services at a cost” (l. 45).

In an era where rural areas are increasingly pressurised by change and struggling to sustain and develop, the enhancement of social capital from volunteer networking can, according to Birch (2017), result in the ‘cross-pollination of people, resources, ideas and opportunities creating a stronger, more resilient community (p. 4).

Rural Volunteerism and Infrastructure

Question Posed	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Volunteers provide a valuable service that would not otherwise be available	68.07%	28.91%	2.18%	0.50%	0.34%
Without volunteers, many people would be left without help and/or services	60.84%	32.44%	4.37%	2.18%	0.17%
Because of volunteer's people's access to other services in the community increases	52.85%	39.43%	5.70%	1.51%	0.34%
Volunteers strengthen local connections/ networks	61.28%	32.49%	5.05%	0.84%	0.17%
Volunteers help develop local enterprise, jobs and innovation	42.95%	37.42%	16.11%	2.85%	0.34%

Economic Impact of Rural Volunteerism

A 2010 Directorate General Education and Culture (DG EAC) Report outlined the importance of calculating the economic value of voluntary activity and although such measurement is not accepted in some EU countries, there is an increasing need to place an economic value on that voluntary activity. While the NUI Galway study did not place a monetary economic value on rural volunteerism, it did however collate people’s perception of the economic impact of volunteerism in their rural area. Five questions were posed and again the majority of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed.

When asked if voluntary activities carried out in their rural area “Saved on public spending by relieving pressure on public services”, nearly 83% (82.83%) either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement and only a small number disagreed (3.47%). Slightly less people strongly agreed or agreed when asked if they felt that voluntary activity “Increases funding coming into the community” (74.55%) with over 20% neither agreeing nor disagreeing and over 4% disagreeing with the statement. An examination of the interviews showed that many people felt strongly on this issue, with several comments alluding to ‘fundraising’:

“It is the volunteers who raise up all the money for our local regatta. The community benefit from it as they see a tradition being celebrated. I guess you could say, many tourists come to see the hookers in the regattas and that would make the local shops and pubs busier” (l. 5).

“Volunteers raise a lot of money for communities e.g. collecting for good causes like cancer on Daffodil Day....it encourages locals and local business’ to contribute to their own community” (l. 11).

“Volunteers take on the responsibility of organising events for example, fundraising, raffles, charity football games, concerts and many other events. The money raised is used to upgrade facilities and buy equipment. Clubs and social centres in my area survive on fund raising, private donations and company sponsorship” (l. 12).

The survey also showed a high percentage of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with the following economically related statements: Rural Volunteerism, “Improves people’s employment chances and financial wellbeing” (68.65%); and it “Enables more people to live independently” (78.48%). Finally, the statement, “If people had to pay for all the services provided by volunteers, they would not be able to afford such work on a regular basis” was presented to the survey respondents and overwhelmingly they strongly agreed or agreed (87.77%).

The interviewees were specifically asked if they felt that rural volunteerism had a financial impact on their rural areas and the response was overwhelmingly positive with the following two comments representative of some of the key themes raised:

“Yes, most certainly they have had a positive financial impact on our community. The roles in which volunteers have taken up in our community would be costly if they were not being done for free by these people. If the work they are doing was not being done for free, I’m not sure would the community be able to afford it” (l. 9).

"I do think that volunteers have had a financial impact on the community. Speaking from my own experience down the years with my local GAA club various volunteers have given up their time and their expertise for instance in the development of the club grounds and the building of club facilities like the clubhouse, dressing rooms etc. We are lucky to have a number of tradesmen involved in our GAA club and they give up their time really to work on these projects. Without their help in these developments I don't think we would have this level of facilities we have in our club. These people were of fantastic help in reducing the costs of doing buildings such as clubhouse, dressing rooms etc. A result of which is our younger people coming up now have very good facilities where they can play sports" (I. 39).

Economic Impact of Rural Volunteerism

Question Posed	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Saves on public spending by relieving pressure on public services.	40.92%	41.91%	12.21%	3.47%	0.66%
Increases funding coming into the community.	34.05%	40.50%	20.33%	4.30%	0.50%
Improves people's employment chances and financial wellbeing.	28.55%	40.10%	25.25%	4.79%	0.66%
Enables more people to live independently.	36.26%	42.55%	15.89%	3.64%	0.66%
If people had to pay for all the services provided by volunteers, they would not be able to afford such work on a regular basis.	52.40%	35.37%	9.26%	2.15%	0.33%

Rural Volunteerism and how it Impacts on Local Inhabitants

Volunteerism is about giving of your time and effort freely to help and assist others in your community. When seeking to discover the impact that rural volunteerism has on local rural communities the NUI Galway survey posed a series of questions and again the respondents either strongly agreed or agreed. When asked if voluntary activity “Enhances the personal development of individuals within the community e.g. vocational or job related skills”, nearly 94% responded positively. The following questions posed provided similar responses with survey respondents either strongly agreeing or agreeing: Voluntary activity in rural areas “Enhances the mental health and wellbeing of people in the community” (91.75%); “Impacts on people’s belief that they have something worthwhile to contribute to the community” (94.39%); “Enhances people’s willingness to get involved in local activities” (91.90%) and finally when asked does rural volunteerism “Impact on people’s ability to cope and organise their lives”, people again responded positively with over 79% either strongly agreeing or agreeing.

Rural Volunteerism and how it Impacts on Local People

Question Posed	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Enhances the personal development of individuals within the community e.g. vocational or job related skills.	50.17%	43.40%	5.12%	0.83%	0.17%
Enhances the mental health and wellbeing of people in the community.	51.82%	39.93%	6.44%	1.49%	0.17%
Impacts on people's belief that they have something worthwhile to contribute to the community.	52.97%	41.42%	4.29%	0.66%	0.17%
Enhances people's willingness to get involved in local activities.	44.13%	47.77%	7.44%	0.66%	0.00%
Impacts on people's ability to cope and organise their lives.	35.37%	44.13%	16.53%	3.47%	0.17%

The interviews carried out as part of the research again provided an array of comments, which highlighted the positive and varied impacts rural volunteerism has on the lives of local people. People most impacted were the young people involved in sport and older people who wished to remain in their homes. One interviewee stated that:

"We have volunteers that would be weekly volunteers, such as volunteers in our local GAA club. They would take kids out, especially very young kids out at the weekend and then all ages are out during the week training, and it has them as part of suppose a team, and team work and without them it just wouldn't happen because we would not have the money to fund it. So, I think that is a huge impact on the community. We also have a huge community that would go around calling on the elderly ensuring that they are ok and to see if they need anything, such as Meals on Wheels and that kind of work. Without this the older citizens in the community would be at a loss" (l. 15).

"There's Meals on Wheels, a social club, an ambulance service (Order of Malta), and there's the Lyons Club. They do a lot of work for the community and do fundraising and the rotary club do similar activities. Soroptimist is a female version of the Lyons Club or Rotary Club and they do a lot of volunteer work. Other types of volunteering, include my son who is a very good musician and he goes around to older peoples' residences and plays music for them and it has been shown to be very good for people with Alzheimer's or dementia" (l.21).

Volunteers can significantly impact on the lives of rural people from all ages and under many banners. The significance of what volunteers mean to local people became very apparent when interviewees were asked what their local area would be like if a complete or partial decline in voluntary activities were to happen. Some suggestions were as follows:

"I think that the community would struggle without the work of volunteers. I think that the volunteers in the community do play a very important role. The volunteers put in so much work and commitment by dedicating their time, skills and most importantly themselves to the community. For example, in the local GAA club there are caretakers, grounds keepers, coaches and trainers who all give up their time to help the team succeed. This enables the whole community to come together to support the team or even be part of the team. There is a lot of fund raising done by the volunteers in the area which plays a vital role as there is not a lot of government funding because it is such a rural area. Through the work of volunteers and the funds they raise, it gets pushed back into the community. It enables regeneration projects and contributes to local development in the area and even helps families that are struggling financially" (I. 1).

"If people didn't volunteer at the park run it just wouldn't happen so it get the community involved, increases physical activity and its social as well. It gets people involved and socialising, you can go for a cup of tea or coffee afterwards at the tennis club and it improves community spirit. Then the community first responder scheme, hopefully it will save lives" (I. 21).

"I suppose the community would be a lot less close knit if there were no volunteers. Usually the activities volunteers are involved with would bring people together and make the community tighter. This would mean people probably wouldn't know or be friendly with many from the local area as they are with volunteers. Because of this people would be less likely to look out for each other as they wouldn't know each other situation thus not want to intrude. There would be a lot less going on in the community especially for the youth. Organisation such as the GAA would not be able to take place. This would have a huge effect on the health of many people within the community as for some the GAA is their source of exercise" (I. 22).

Rural Volunteerism: Issues and Concerns

In seeking an opinion from interviewees and survey respondent 'on a rural area without volunteerism', many issues and concerns in and around rural voluntary activity and the commitment it receives from local and national government were raised. Although the level and extent of positivity towards rural volunteerism was both significant and substantial, volunteers themselves were quick to highlight issues of concern and the need for support from local areas, additional volunteers and state aid and support. The following comments are only some of the multitude of comments provided by volunteers in rural areas who are concerned by lack of volunteers and or funding for activities which they know enhance their local areas and the quality of life of local residents:

"If more people help around the community it shares the work load".

"Without volunteers, C.F patients' lives would be negatively affected. We rely on volunteers to fundraise for research to mentor newly diagnosed patients and to provide a culture of organ donation".

"The government wouldn't pay for half the work that the volunteers do. So, without the volunteering going on in our area, we could run into problems with crime and problems with youth and just a messy, run down village".

"Not enough people volunteering! It is left to the same few in every community. Volunteers can be taken for granted and overworked".

"The rural areas get less resources and less support from the Government or Government agencies as there is less emphasis put on smaller rural areas such as Glenfin".

"The local community needs a new network for volunteering. Needs new people as people are getting tired of the same thing".

"In terms of my volunteering, many migrants have come from very harsh backgrounds/situations and so just two hours a week can give them something to look forward to. It can be so beneficial to their mental health and well-being! ".

"Very important in filling in gaps in local infrastructure overlooked by government".

"I do not feel that enough is being done in the area for immigrants and those seeking asylum".

"Volunteers play a significant role in the community and the work they do isn't recognised/ appreciated enough".

*"More people could become involved if there was more knowledge and advertising of the help needed".
"Animals are in trouble without the ASPCA and without volunteers the ASPCA could not exist especially since they get very little funding".*

"Many of the organizations, societies, services would not be available without people volunteering in the community".

"Often undervalued, volunteering organisations often duplicate work; perhaps synergies of resources would attract funding??? Funding enables lots more voluntary work to be carried out".

"It is vital to help support the vulnerable and marginalised at a time when government funding is insufficient".

"Volunteers provide support to people which wouldn't otherwise exist as government funds wouldn't be available to provide it to the same extent e.g. meals on wheels services, street outreach services... Locals know the needs of the community and work towards bettering that community".

Volunteerism Creating Social Links in Rural Communities

Networking, cooperation and linking people together in rural communities can be a driver for community development, innovation and entrepreneurship. It can also provide people with a sense of community spirit and local involvement, which in-turn enhances the longer-term prospects for rural areas to survive in times of economic austerity or population decline. When asked if voluntary activity impacted on the creation of social links in rural communities, the response was again exceptionally positive. “People’s access to support and information networks” was significantly increased or increased (88.55%) by voluntary activity, while “People’s sense of being part of the community” was also significantly increased or increased (92.6%). Volunteering also significantly increased or increased “People’s sense of having a say in local matters” (81.68%), and similar findings were produced when people were asked if “The number of contacts that people can call on increased” (87.76%) or if “People’s participation in local campaigns or community actions increased” (84.85%).

One interviewee clearly reflected the results of the survey when she highlighted the impact voluntary activity has on her local community:

“The biggest impact for me has been the strengthened network(ing) within the community. Although it is intangible, the change was evident. We very quickly became a cohesive community – sharing ideas about other areas for improvement, supporting each other and even building friendships in many cases. Volunteering allowed the opportunity to engage with a diverse collection of people, whose paths would most likely never have met otherwise” (l. 3).

How Rural Volunteerism Impacts on the Social Links in a Rural Community

Question Posed	Significantly increased	Increased	Stayed the Same	Decreased	Significantly decreased
People’s access to support and information networks.	33.50%	55.05%	10.44%	0.51%	0.17%
People’s sense of being part of the community.	48.57%	44.03%	5.88%	0.50%	0.34%
People’s sense of having a say in local matters.	32.94%	48.74%	15.63%	1.01%	0.34%
The number of contacts that people can call on.	41.51%	46.22%	9.41%	0.84%	0.34%
People’s participation in local campaigns or community actions.	33.67%	51.18%	12.63%	0.34%	0.67%

Cultural Impacts of Rural Volunteerism

Academics often discuss the heterogeneity of rural areas (Woods, 2012; 2017; McDonagh et al. 2010), which places emphasis on the diversity that exists in rural regions. No two rural regions or areas are the same, a fact which is often underscored by the diversity of an area's culture and environment. When asked if rural voluntary activity impacted on local people's sense of belonging, the responses from 597 surveys was again encouraging and very positive. "Participation in cultural, environmental and leisure activities" either significantly increased or increased a sense of belonging amongst rural inhabitants (83.58%) while over 67% of respondents stated that "Understanding and tolerance between different cultures" was significantly increased or increased. This issue was also highlighted in the VI survey which shows that over 15% of volunteers registered on the national volunteering database (I-VOL) are non-nationals, and are engaged in local voluntary activities. The VI survey showed engagement in rural areas with volunteers from such countries as Brazil, Spain, Italy, UK, India, America, Poland France and Nigeria. Nearly 80% of respondents felt that "Opportunities to engage in cultural and leisure activities such as art, theatre and hobbies" was significantly increased or increased as a result of volunteering. Additionally, nearly 74% of respondents felt that "Opportunities for increased social inclusion for migrants and marginalised groups and individuals" significantly increased due to volunteering. Finally, over 92% of respondents were of the opinion that "People's sense of belonging to the community" either significantly increased or increased as a result of local volunteerism.

The interviews carried out as part of the research provided rich and insightful comments, supporting the survey findings and clearly accentuating how rural people's sense of belonging in their rural areas is enhanced and positively impacted by local volunteerism. The following comments again represent some of the many key themes which emerged, ranging from culture to marginalised groups:

"The Feis Ceoil in this area of Carna in Connemara was very well-known over the years and it added greatly to the cultural status of the area. You had many well-known singers who became not alone nationally but internationally known who actually first sang or performed at that Feis Ceoil. A very good example is Seosamh Ó hÉanaí or Joe Éinniú, who was highly regarded in the United States at folk festivals, on television stations and in universities and among folklorists and others who studied that part of culture and heritage. Now, he started his life in singing publicly at the Feis in Carna, and many more, and they fostered the Sean-nós tradition because people came and organised the Feis voluntarily. That's one very practical example of how the cultural identity of an area like this has been strengthened because of volunteers" (l. 37).

"I think volunteering in general brings people from a wide variety of backgrounds together when they would normally not mix. In the local area there has been a large increase in migrants and they need to be integrated into the community. Local volunteers give these people the opportunities to access services and resources and meet new people. This also allows locals to experience these new cultures for example music, food, languages etc. The community now has a very high level of integration with people from other countries which are hugely due to volunteers providing services that allow social interaction" (l. 42).

How Rural Volunteerism Can Impact People’s Sense of Belonging to the Community

Question Posed	Significantly increased	Increased	Stayed the Same	Decreased	Significantly decreased
Participation in cultural, environmental and leisure activities.	29.48%	54.10%	13.74%	0.67%	0.00%
Understanding and tolerance between different cultures.	23.15%	44.63%	27.01%	0.84%	0.00%
Opportunities to engage in cultural and leisure activities such as art, theatre and hobbies.	27.52%	52.35%	17.62%	0.00%	0.17%
Opportunities for increased social inclusion for migrants and marginalised groups and individuals.	25.84%	48.15%	18.79%	1.34%	0.50%
People’s sense of belonging to the community.	48.91%	43.55%	5.19%	1.01%	0.17%



Conclusion

The survey and interviews carried out as part of a Project-Based Learning research assignment for Final Year NUI Galway Geography students laid the basis for the research presented in this report. Data collected by Volunteer Ireland and analysed by Pat Kennedy from the eTownz Project enhanced and accentuated the findings of the research. The research was initiated in October 2017 and finalised in May 2018 and in all has produced a wealth of findings relating to rural volunteerism.

Key findings include:

- Voluntary activity taking place in rural areas is both formal and informal with informal activity being more prevalent .
- Voluntary activity through rural clubs, particularly sport, was most popular with caring services also proving very popular.
- Volunteering carried out in rural development activities, such as Tidy Towns, culture and the arts was also significant in rural settings.
- The amount of time rural volunteers give freely to their communities was significant with over 62% of survey respondents giving time weekly to activities.
- The impacts of rural volunteerism were varied and highly impressive. In all areas of impact from the Infrastructural Impact of Rural Volunteerism to volunteerism impacting on rural culture, the response was overwhelmingly positive. In all cases the majority of respondents felt that volunteerism positively impacted on the lives, activities and social capital of rural inhabitants.
- Issues of concern for volunteers and the continuation of voluntary activity in rural areas include a lack of volunteers, inadequate support from local and state government and a need for continued support and training.

To conclude, the final input is left to the volunteers themselves who provided the following word cloud to describe rural volunteerism - the larger words indicating the increased amount of times the word was repeated:

Figure 4.5: Rural Volunteerism Described by Survey Respondents



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Appendix A

Questionnaire No.: _____

Location: _____

Students Name: _____

Student ID: _____



NUI Galway

As part of my final year Geography Degree, I am taking part in a course project which examines the impact of volunteer work in my local area. I would sincerely appreciate your help in filling out my survey. It will take you approximately 10 minutes.

Participant Profile

1. Gender: Male Female
2. Age: 16-30 30-55 55-70 70+
3. How long have you lived in the area?
0-2 years 3-5 years 5-10 years 10+ years
4. Do you work locally?
Yes Occupation: _____
No (Retired, Students etc.) _____
5. Do you volunteer in any local group, organisation, charity etc.?
Yes Name/s: _____
No
6. Type of Organisation/s: (e.g. sport, youth work, elderly caring, Tidy Towns, etc.)
7. What kind of volunteer activities do you engage in? (For example: raise funds, training sports teams etc.). Please describe:
8. Are you registered with your local Volunteer Centre or Volunteering Information Service?
Yes No

9. Which of the following answers are relevant to how much time you spend on volunteer work in your community (including, meetings, fund raising, activities etc.)?

- Daily Approximate hours: _____
 Weekly Approximate hours: _____
 Monthly Approximate hours: _____
 Other Please specify: _____

10. Have you ever have received training for volunteer work?

- Yes Type of training: _____
 No Reason: _____

Community Impact Of Volunteering

To assess the impact of volunteers on the local community, please indicate, by ticking the appropriate box.

A. Infrastructure

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Question Posed	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not Relevant
Volunteers provide valuable services that would not otherwise be available.						
Without volunteers, many people would be left without help and/or services.						
Because of volunteers people's access to other services in the community increases.						
Volunteers strengthen local connections/networks.						
Volunteers help develop local enterprise, jobs and innovation.						

B. Economic – The help/services provided by volunteers may have economic effects on the community.

Do you agree or disagree that volunteer activities contributes to the following?

Question Posed	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not Relevant
Saves on public spending by relieving pressure on public services.						
Increases funding coming into the community.						
Improves people's employment chances and financial wellbeing						
Enables more people to live independently.						
If people had to pay for all the services provided by volunteers, they would not be able to afford such work on a regular basis.						

C. People – The help/services provided by volunteers may impact the development of local residents. Do you agree or disagree that volunteering impacts on these aspects of the local community?

Question Posed	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not Relevant
Enhances the personal development of individuals within the community e.g. vocational or job related skills.						
Enhances the mental health and wellbeing of people in the community.						
Impacts on people's belief that they have something worthwhile to contribute to the community.						
Enhances people's willingness to get involved in local activities.						
Impacts on people's ability to cope and organise their lives.						

D. Social – Below are listed some of the ways in which the community may be affected through the social links made as a result of the volunteers’ work.

Do you believe that any of these have increased or decreased in the community because of the volunteers?

Question Posed	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not Relevant
People’s access to support and information networks.						
People’s sense of being part of the community.						
People’s sense of having a say in local matters.						
The number of contacts that people can call on.						
People’s participation in local campaigns or community actions.						

E. Cultural – Volunteers’ work can have an effect on some people’s sense of belonging to the community.

Have any of these increased or decreased in the community because of the volunteers?

Question Posed	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not Relevant
Participation in cultural, environmental and leisure activities.						
Understanding and tolerance between different cultures.						
Opportunities to engage in cultural and leisure activities such as art, theatre and hobbies.						

Opportunities for increased social inclusion for migrants and marginalised groups and individuals.						
People's sense of belonging to the community.						

11. Could you provide 3 words that come to mind when you think of the impact volunteer work has on your local community?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

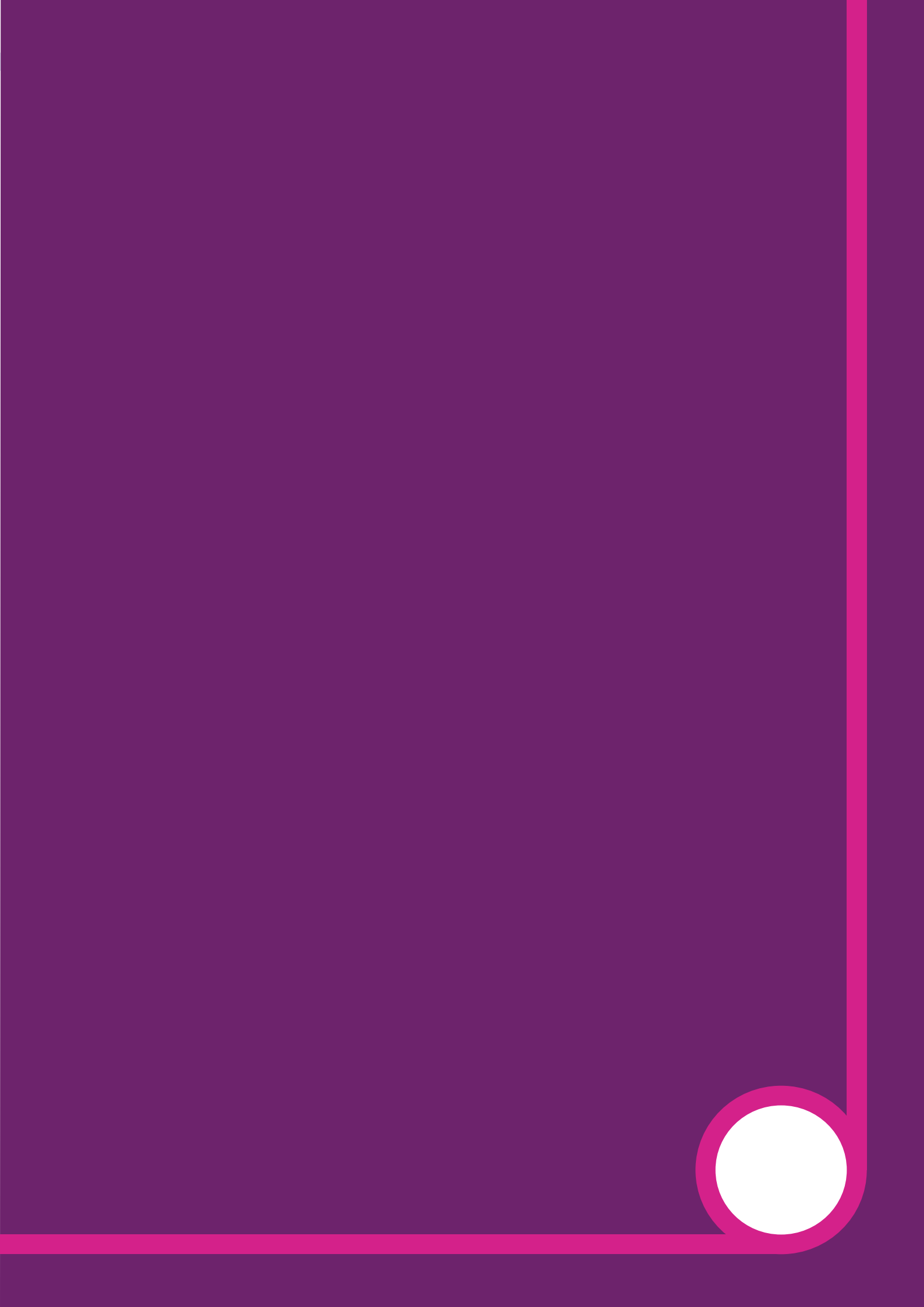
12. Please provide any additional comments on the importance of local volunteer work in your community:

Sincere thanks for taking the time to answer my survey questions!

Appendix B

The following 70 students were all part of the data collection for the NUI Galway Research used in this report :

Michelle Bonner	Odhran Boyle	Rory Brennan
Alan Broderick	Rebecca Carty	Lauren Clancy
Eimear Coll	Eoghan Concannon	Michelle Connolly
Des Costelloe	Eoin Curry	Niall Daly
Sophie Delaney	Conor Dolan	Brian Dooley
Niamh Duignan	Irene Feely	Jamie Finn
Erina Flannery	Roseleen Gallagher	Paul Healy
Aiden Helebert	Rory Heskin	Sarah Higgins
Aishling Jacob	Vivienne Kearney	Cathal Kelly
Matthew Kelly	Mark Kenny	Louise Kiernan
Nicole Kilkenny	Dara Killalea	Katie Killoran
Gary Kinneen	Patrick Kirrane	Daniel Kirwan
Karen Lawlor	Laura Lynn	Niamh Maguire
Caoimhe Mahon	Kirsten Mc Cormack	Carmel Mc Govern
Padraic Mc Grath	Conor Mc Hugh	Chloe Mc Loughlin
Hughie Mc Manamon	Megan Mc Menamin	Jenna Monaghan
Dylan Moran	Alison Murray	Brid Ni Ghriofa
Michelle Nic Dhonnacha	Aishling O Donnell	Conor O Donovan
John O Grady	Cormac O Hora	Bernadette O Mahony
Claire O Reilly	Rebecca O Shaughnessy	Aoife Reamsbottom
Carol Reilly	Ben Roberts	Thomas Roulston
Darragh Scully	Harry Smith	Karen Sweeney
Brian Tobin	Aisling Towey	Michelle Treacy
Mary Weadick		



supporting volunteering in ireland



volunteer centres



volunteer ireland



volunteering information
services