



volunteer centre

Ionad d'Oibrí Deonacha na Gallimhe

GALWAY

What Difference Can You Make?

A research study examining the Successes
and Challenges experienced by Asylum
Seekers finding Volunteer Work in Galway

Research Funded by



Contents

Introduction and Background to Research	p.3
Data from Questionnaires	p.4
The Focus Groups	p.5
What Support does Galway Volunteer Centre offer?	P.11
How can GVC further support asylum seekers interested in volunteering?	p.12
What Volunteer Involving Organisations can do to overcome Challenges?	p.14
What aids Successful Volunteering Experiences?	p.14
Summary and Conclusion	p.15

Introduction and Background to the Research

Galway Volunteer Centre provides support and information to members of the public on volunteering in Galway. Since opening in 2006 over 3,500 people have registered with the centre. Approximately **10%** of this population are asylum seekers currently living in direct provision centres.

In the last three years the centre has observed that feedback from asylum seekers around their experiences of volunteering in Galway has highlighted that many challenges are faced for this group in accessing suitable volunteer placements. As a result of this feedback, GVC decided that further research into this area was needed.

In March 2009 Galway Volunteer Centre applied to The Community Foundation for Ireland for a research grant of €2,000. The aim of the research was to examine the successes and challenges currently involved for asylum seekers volunteering in Galway. The application was approved and research began in the summer.

The Project

The research consisted of three main stages and involved gathering both quantitative and qualitative data. Firstly questionnaires and invitation letters were sent out to all registered volunteers living in direct provision in Galway city. In total 200 questionnaires were sent out to the three city based direct provision centres, including The Eglinton Hotel, The Great Western Hotel, and Lisbrook House.¹

Information evenings were held in each of the three city based direct provision centres. Those who returned questionnaires were later invited to take part in a series of focus groups.

¹ Due to transport issues and low numbers of registered volunteers in Dun Gibbons House based in Clifden, registered volunteers in this hostel did not take part in the research



What Difference Can You Make?

Data from Questionnaires

Sample Breakdown

An equal gender balance was observed amongst respondents, as well as the breakdown of marital status between single and married participants. From the responses in the questionnaires particular trends emerged around the respondents' experiences of finding volunteer work and these trends were divided into three groups. Gender, marital and parental status was also observed in each of these groups.

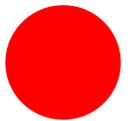
Group 1: Individuals who are volunteering and have not experienced any challenges in finding volunteer work. Married males with children were most likely to appear in this group.



Group 2: Individuals who have experienced challenges in seeking volunteer work and have now overcome these to find a suitable volunteer role. Single females both with and without children were most likely to appear in this group.



Group 3: Individuals who have not overcome challenges faced to date to find a suitable volunteer placement. Females with children were three times as likely to not have overcome challenges faced in finding volunteering work compared to males with children.



Other Findings from Questionnaires:

- Individuals who stated that they have had a positive experience in volunteering in their community have met with a staff member in GVC and received contact details from the centre.
- In some cases information was accessed from other residents in hostels about suitable volunteer opportunities in the community.
- Those who stated they were currently having a positive volunteer experience have defined roles in the organisation they are involved in.
- Those people who have not yet overcome challenges to find suitable volunteer work, did not receive a response back from organisations they had contacted. These people stated that they had given up seeking volunteer work at this point.
- Social support in hostels was identified as a key factor in how participants had overcome certain challenges in seeking volunteer work. Respondents noted that by word of mouth in their hostel they had accessed information on the centre and on particular voluntary organisations in the community where they could potentially find some volunteer work.

The Focus Groups

The aim of the focus groups was to examine in greater detail some of trends and issues that were found in the questionnaires. Five key questions were asked, aimed to follow the entire process of what is involved for an asylum seeker who is interested in volunteer work in Galway using Galway Volunteer Centre's service.

Questions

1. Why Volunteer?

Reasons and motivations for volunteering were plentiful and common to all within the focus groups. All saw the many benefits of volunteering in one's local community. Volunteering was summed-up as a two-way process of give and take between the individual and the volunteer involving organization.

“...to keep in touch with people... you help the ones that are in need, so it's just to contribute and help in society and keep yourself a little bit busy and to forget about a lot of things that you carry in your head.”

2. Why did you register with GVC?

Some participants had heard about the centre through another professional in the community including counselors and language teachers. Others had heard about the service through friends and other residents as well as being referred by another volunteer centre in the country.

Registering with the service was viewed as a way to make new friends, help out in the community as well as a means to aiding the settling in process in Galway. Volunteering was also identified as something which gave an opportunity to try new things without having any relevant qualification or prior skills.

For many, volunteering was seen as a way of breaking the idleness currently experienced living in direct provision. Feeling accepted in the community was also stated as a reason for registering with the centre and the first step towards being recognised in one's local community.

What Difference Can You Make?

“...when you come into this country you are really confused and when you come to the volunteer centre they let you do some volunteer work...it doesn't matter if you are not qualified to do that particular position...when you are really scared and really confused you come to where somebody accepts you and lets you do something... so you start to feel ok, like you are secure here.”

3. What has been your experience of GVC's service?

Participants commented that they found the service both professional and friendly. They found the support offered helpful in finding the right contact person for volunteer roles and were appreciative of the offer of a phone call being made to organisations while in a meeting with a staff member.

“If I didn't register here I wouldn't have the opportunity to receive all the information about volunteer work.”

The fortnightly bulletin was seen as a good source of information for participants and the regular updates were welcomed by all.

“For me you have been really helpful because you are making us aware of where these places are.”

Some participants commented that they found the centre difficult to locate as they could not access a map. Despite landmarks given over the phone they still struggled to find the exact location.

A lack of awareness existed for some participants around the ongoing support available at Galway Volunteer Centre. This was particularly relevant for those registered for over two years who were not currently aware that they could contact the centre at any time to seek further advice and support.

Participants also expressed that they needed extra support in finding out whether out of pocket travel expenses would be covered by an organization while in a meeting with GVC staff.

What Difference Can You Make?

“...as a volunteer you may not be able to express yourself when you get to the organization and you need support... when you get there for example, there are times I don’t have money in my pocket because as an asylum seeker I am not working. You as an organization are in the best position to say that a lot of people are not working or they do not have their own car...”

4. What has been your experience of contacting Volunteer Involving Organisations in Galway?

Most of the challenges faced by participants existed in making initial contact with Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs). Repeated negative experiences resulted in individuals losing motivation to seek further volunteer work and lose hope in finding a suitable role for themselves.

Challenges faced in this area included experiences of organisations being unfriendly and unwelcoming on initial contact, which demotivated individuals on pursuing the role further. When asked about these experiences, participants commented that they felt they were not listened to and had little or no information given to them.

One participant told how she had been cut off twice on the phone by a particular organization when enquiring about a role which was advertised on GVC’s website. Another participant told of her experience of leaving numerous messages with an organization and later being turned away at the door when she called directly to the organisation’s premises after walking for some distance to get there.

Others reported that after leaving messages with VIOs, they received no response back and they soon lost any hope of finding volunteer work for themselves.

“Most of these organisations when you call, tell you they will get back to you...at least they should be doing something like sending you an email...by just keeping quiet it makes me feel like losing hope, so I think that they should do something like say yes or no, just keeping quiet is not helpful”

What Difference Can You Make?

Due to these negative experiences participants reported that they were largely discouraged from making further enquiries with other VIOs.

“I got all the information and I contacted the same person twice...I did everything they asked and it took over a year to do it... they never contacted me back ...finally I felt discouraged and I stopped.”

5. What has been your experience of volunteering in Galway?

This question looked at participants' experiences to date and asked what has contributed to both positive and negative volunteer experiences for them. It looked at what they felt could be done differently or improved upon in relation to their volunteer work and whether they felt they had enough support available to them in current or previous roles.

Extra support issues such as language difficulties, transport and out of pocket expenses were expressed as important factors that were considered before taking up a role. In some cases they acted as a potential barrier to someone volunteering in the first place. Participants added that oftentimes they did not feel they could ask the VIO directly for this information or support.

“some organisations just think when you are volunteering it's totally free, your money, your effort, everything... some places you have to take the bus to go there, then the bus to come back and I get there and they don't even offer me a cup of tea...but I don't know is it possible for a volunteer to ask for those kinds of things”

For those that reported successful volunteer experiences factors such as receiving practical help on the phone, such as directions on how to find the office or location of the volunteer work, as well as offering to email a map with directions were mentioned.

Another positive factor was an appointment being made with the volunteer to meet in person to discuss the role further. Participants reported that on encountering staff that were both friendly and approachable either on the phone

What Difference Can You Make?

or in person, greater motivation and commitment was given to the role on their part.

“When I contacted them they made an appointment for me...the information they gave me was good, they received me well and I felt welcome. I started off with them and they were teaching me there.”

Clear information around Garda Vetting and other screening procedures was stated as being very important to participants when meeting with organisations. Getting feedback on an application was a big motivating factor in finding volunteer work. One participant spoke of how he had applied for a role and despite being unsuccessful in his application, receiving a phone call from the organization, thanking him for his application, and giving honest feedback, encouraged him to apply for other roles. When asked how he felt after hearing from the organization, he commented:

“I felt very good because they told me the truth and said that I could always apply again in the future and that was really helpful for me”

Having an identifiable staff member whom the volunteer was responsible to, as well as a clear role description, aided successful volunteering for participants. The importance of having the opportunity to discuss why they wanted to volunteer with the particular organisation was noted. Feeling included in the organisation as well as appreciated and supported while there all aided successful volunteering experiences for participants.

“The spirit of team work in there is great...you know your role, you know what you are meant to do...it helped me to integrate into society as well...they were interested in me...”

What Difference Can You Make?

“You feel that they are always thinking about you, they want to make you happy...They would ask how is your application going, how can we be of help, they were a great organisation to start with and to continue working with.”

Speaking about a more negative volunteering experience highlighting a lack of support, one participant went on to say:

“...they did not consider the fact that you need extra support, even if my daughter was ill...it was like you must come, and I found that a bit discouraging, it felt like they didn't care about me, or they only cared about the time I was giving...”

Other factors that aided successful volunteering included the ability to develop a volunteer role and move to a new area within an organization. This was also highlighted as encouraging ongoing commitment to the role.

The provision of snacks or tea and coffee while volunteering also added to a positive volunteer experience for individuals particularly when working outside in cold weather, such as volunteering in outdoor fundraising roles.

Finally, the groups were asked what still motivates them to continue to seek further volunteer work and remain in volunteer placements when they had encountered negative experiences. Participants stated that determination, commitment to the role and their passion for volunteering, were all personal motivating factors and reasons to continue to look for volunteer work.



What Difference Can You Make?

What support does Galway Volunteer Centre offer?

Galway Volunteer Centre offers ongoing support to all registered volunteers. The availability of ongoing support can be vital for those with extra support needs in finding a suitable volunteer placement.

- All registered volunteers are contacted by phone or email and offered an appointment with a member of staff.
- Support can take the form of arranging a confidential appointment with a member of staff during office hours. Staff are available to make a phone call on behalf of a volunteer to an organisation, to enquire about a role, as well as following up with an organisation on a volunteers' application, if the volunteer has not had a response back.
- During confidential face to face meetings with a staff member, issues around extra support needs can be discussed between the volunteer and staff member. This can include any health issues, gaining extra information around out of pocket expenses, language difficulties or any other issues or concerns the volunteer may have around the role.
- Staff will also ensure that the volunteer is made aware that they can contact the centre at any point to make another appointment or alternatively have a staff member call them at a suitable time.
- Follow up calls are made to volunteers after 6-8 weeks from initial registration. During these calls volunteers are asked if they have experienced any difficulties in contacting a VIO or in taking up a volunteer role. At this point extra support is offered to the volunteer if required.



What Difference Can You Make?

How can GVC further support asylum seekers interested in volunteering?

Outreach Events

Information on the service has been made available through outreach events held in direct provision centres. Following from the research, information sessions will be run at regular intervals throughout the year in each of the four centres. During these events people can find out about GVC's service, ask questions around volunteering in Galway and fill out a registration form while there.

Promotional Material

GVC's new promotional campaign 'I Do It', launched in February 2010, aims to raise the profile of volunteering in the city and county by encouraging all to volunteer in their local community and highlighting the many benefits of volunteering. The new promotional material will consist of easy to read fliers with a map of where to find the centre. Free city maps are also available in the centre to pick up.

Information Booklet

Galway Volunteer Centre will publish a new information booklet this year to provide correct and up to date information around entitlements for asylum seekers in their local community. The booklet will promote the benefits of volunteering and will aim to encourage and support participation amongst asylum seekers.

Lists of all local agencies that work with asylum seekers will be included as well as the local Citizens Information Centre, local churches and details of free legal aid service. The booklets will be distributed to local agencies that engage with asylum seekers and will be made available in all four direct provision centres in Galway.

It will be distributed nationally and made available to the Reception and Integration Agency, the Government agency responsible for the general welfare of asylum seekers. The booklet will be published in three different languages including English, French and Arabic.



What Difference Can You Make?

Linking with Management of Direct Provision Centres in Galway

Following from the research GVC aims to make links with management in all four of the Direct Provision Centres in Galway. Recommendations will be made to management around how they can best support residents to find suitable volunteer work in Galway. Managers in centres will be encouraged to act as a referee for an asylum seeker who is looking to take up a volunteer role that requires a reference.

GVC will keep up-to-date mailing lists of registered volunteers in direct provision centres, through regular contact with management, as individuals can move on over time.

Overcoming Language Barriers

Individuals registering with the service who are experiencing language difficulties will be encouraged to be accompanied by a friend or relative who has fluent English and can translate for them on their behalf. Information on where to access free English classes will also be made available in the centre. An information booklet will be published in three different languages including English, Arabic and French to assist those facing language barriers.

Garda Vetting

Galway Volunteer Centre can work to provide potential volunteers with information on Garda Vetting and the potential implications that vetting may have on their ability to volunteer in particular roles. GVC can also work with smaller organisations in enabling them to access the Garda Vetting Service by acting as an Authorised Signatory for vetting purposes. GVC can also support organisations to develop new roles in the area of working with vulnerable groups that do not require Garda vetting e.g. administration, fundraising, promotion.



What Difference Can You Make?

What can Volunteer Involving Organisations do to overcome challenges?

- Ensure staff taking enquiries on volunteer roles are friendly and welcoming.
- Offer practical assistance on the phone to potential volunteers by giving clear directions or emailing a map if possible.
- Contact people back by phone or email if they have enquired about a volunteer role with your organization.
- Make an appointment with a volunteer if they are enquiring around a role and would like to meet face to face.
- Be clear on what your application procedures are and how long you expect the application process will take.
- If Garda Vetting is part of your screening procedure explain exactly what this entails.
- Maintain contact with volunteers if recruitment and application is taking longer than expected. This can be done through a group email sent to all applicants thanking them for waiting.
- Give clear and honest feedback on applications to anyone who has applied for a volunteer role in your organisation.

What aids successful volunteering experiences?

- Have clear role descriptions for volunteer roles outlining their exact duties and responsibilities.
- Having an identifiable staff person responsible for volunteers ensures that volunteers know who they are responsible to in their role and where they can go if any issues arise for them.
- Have clear information and policy on out of pocket expenses for volunteers.
- Offer support, gratitude and appreciation to volunteers involved in your organisation. Letting a volunteer know that you are available to offer extra support if needed, and that you appreciate all that they do, will ultimately encourage them to stay in their role with you.
- Where possible offer development of volunteer roles, allow volunteers to develop their skills and learn new things in your organisation.
- Offer a reference letter to a volunteer if requested.
- If waiting for Garda Vetting is lengthy, look into whether the volunteer can be paired with another vetted volunteer or supervised in their role, while vetting is being processed.
- Where possible, offer hot beverages and snacks to volunteers particularly if they are carrying out outdoor work for you such as fundraising in cold weather.

What Difference Can You Make?

“There are new issues in Ireland now... it’s just to create that awareness and make them understand the needs of new volunteers in Ireland... I’m sure when that awareness is created it will be really useful.”

Summary and Conclusion

Since opening in 2006 over 3,500 people have registered with Galway Volunteer Centre. Last year the centre observed a 300% increase in the rate of registrations with the service. 10% of these registrations come from the asylum seeking community.

Volunteering is now undertaken by people from a huge variety of backgrounds and for many different reasons. The ‘I Do It’ campaign launched by GVC this year aimed to highlight this, as well as encourage those who have not had the opportunity to volunteer to do so. Volunteering offers those new to the country the opportunity to integrate, learn new skills and feel accepted in one’s local community. As more and more people are turning towards volunteering, it is vital that both the individual and volunteer involving organisation have positive and fulfilling experiences.

The research project focused on the volunteering experiences of asylum seekers currently registered with GVC. It aimed to examine and gain greater understanding into the challenges faced in finding volunteer work, and the factors aiding successful volunteering. Data from questionnaires and focus groups offered insight into this.

Greater awareness on the ongoing support available at the centre needs to be generated. Greater links with management in direct provision centres will need to be fostered, as well as continued outreach events. An information booklet for asylum seekers will be published by the centre this year to provide correct and up to date information on rights and entitlements.

Making and maintaining contact with organisations, as well as accessing support while in a volunteer role has the potential to aid successful volunteering or act as a challenge for asylum seekers in finding suitable volunteer work. Recommendations on how to aid successful volunteering and avoid challenges have been outlined in this report.

In conclusion, GVC has gained greater insight into how it can best support asylum seekers registered with the service. Our hope is that organisations using our service can also learn from the findings and implement greater support structures for asylum seekers wishing to volunteer with them. When these support structures are in place, it ultimately ensures that both volunteers and organisations will have positive and worthwhile volunteer experiences and the benefits of volunteering can be enjoyed by both.