

Sports Volunteer Recruitment, Retention and Succession in Ireland



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Evidence from Surveys of Volunteers and Club Administrators

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“Given the pivotal role that they play in Irish sport, it is important that NGBs and sports clubs have a good understanding of the motivations, needs, capacities, etc. of volunteers. Proper investment in volunteers to ensure that they are properly valued and nurtured in their own right is a strategy which will undoubtedly pay dividends for all sports clubs over the long term.”

[Sports Ireland](#) – The importance of volunteers in sport

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Executive Summary

Based on data from two original surveys of volunteers and club administrators in Irish sports clubs and organisations, this report explores the extent to which Irish sports organisations plan for the recruitment, retention, and succession of volunteers. Academic literature and sports policy reports consistently highlight the importance of volunteers for the management of sports and physical activity. To ensure the sustainability of sports volunteering, particularly as societies emerge from the COVID pandemic, organisations and clubs must develop and implement plans for the recruitment of new volunteers, retention of existing volunteers, and succession or role transition for volunteers.

This research project involves the use of two original surveys. These were administered in May 2022. The first, which achieved 352 responses, is a survey of sports volunteers from 31 different sports across the island of Ireland. This survey explores volunteer motivation, experience of volunteering during the COVID pandemic, and experiences of succession planning with their clubs. The second, with 216 responses, is a survey of club administrators on their experiences of volunteer recruitment and the extent to which their clubs have policies and actions relating to volunteer roles.

The findings show that volunteers are generally satisfied with their clubs' activities to recruit and train volunteers. Volunteers and club administrators however highlight that volunteer succession is the most problematic area in relation to managing volunteer activity. Given that most volunteers cite their previous playing participation, their children's involvement, and contributing to the sport they enjoy as primary motivations for volunteering, there may be time constraints on their ability to remain engaged. Sustainable sports volunteering requires more attention from clubs and organisations on the succession of volunteers and providing scope for volunteers to assume more senior roles.

Method

This research is based on two original electronic surveys of sports volunteers and club administrators across all sports and counties on the island of Ireland. The surveys were designed by academic researchers based in Cork University Business School in collaboration with the Federation of Irish Sport. The surveys were reviewed and granted ethical approval by the University College Cork Social Research Ethics Committee.

The surveys were administered through the sports bodies that are members of the Federation of Irish Sport. Sports bodies were contacted and requested to circulate the survey to their affiliated clubs. A draft email communication for clubs and volunteers were provided with a link to the electronic surveys. All sports were included and where sports are administered on an all-island basis, responses could be provided for all clubs in all 32 counties.

The surveys were administered over three weeks in October 2022.

Surveys were completed anonymously so it is not possible to identify individual respondents or clubs. Results are presented in aggregate format to avoid the potential of identifying participants or clubs of minority sports in specific counties.

The results are not necessarily representative of all sports volunteers or clubs in Ireland. The results are subject to response bias and selection bias. Response bias arises where there is a material difference between respondents and non-respondents and between those who answer a specific question and those that do not answer. Selection bias may arise where the persons selected to comprise the sample may, for example, be younger, richer, or healthier. To overcome the challenges of selection bias, each potential respondent in a population must have an equal likelihood of being included in the sample. The survey did not use a sampling technique and was sent to all volunteers in a sport that is affiliated to the FIS, which is comprehensive. Since the survey was administered through sports bodies, which could not provide directories of members, a random sampling technique to reduce selection bias was not possible.

Given the broad coverage of the sports, organisations, and clubs, bias is not considered to be a significant issue and the results are useful to inform policy and shed light on the experiences of volunteers and their clubs.

The results are presented in the next sections.

Sports Volunteer Survey Results

Summary Respondent Characteristics

There were 352 respondents to the volunteer survey, comprising of 181 (53%) identifying as male, 161 (46%) identifying as female, and 4 (1%) identifying as trans female or preferring not to indicate a gender.

Just under 4% (13) of respondents indicate that they consider themselves to have a disability and 7 (2%) preferred not to answer.

Just over three quarters (77%) of respondents are aged 35 to 54 years of age. The most common age group is 45 to 54 years of age (43%).

The sample comprises overwhelming of respondents identifying themselves as white (99%) and Irish (93%).

Respondents include volunteers from 30 sports, with some stating their sport was not listed or choose the category other. The respondents are concentrated in the highest organized participation sports in Ireland with Gaelic Games, soccer, and rugby union accounting for just under half of the respondents (48%). The following table shows the distribution of volunteers across sports.

Distribution of Sports by Volunteer		
Sport	Frequency	Percent
Gaelic Games (Camogie, Football, Hurling, Handball)	93	27.9%
Soccer	58	17.4%
Basketball	40	12.0%
Athletics	15	4.5%
Canoeing	14	4.2%
Swimming	10	3.0%
Rugby Union	9	2.7%
Tennis	9	2.7%
Hockey (Field, Ice, Inline)	7	2.1%
Tug of War	7	2.1%
Boxing	6	1.8%
Rowing	6	1.8%
Badminton	5	1.5%
Gymnastic	5	1.5%
Table Tennis	5	1.5%
Bowling (Indoor, Outdoor, Road)	4	1.2%
Cricket	4	1.2%
Archery	3	0.9%
Martial Arts (Judo, Taekwondo, Karate)	3	0.9%
Golf	2	0.6%
Sailing	2	0.6%
American Football	1	0.3%
Baton Twirling	1	0.3%
Bowling (Ten Pin)	1	0.3%
Cycling	1	0.3%
Mountaineering	1	0.3%
Softball	1	0.3%
Snow Sports	1	0.3%
Surfing	1	0.3%
Triathlon	1	0.3%
Other (or sport not listed)	17	5.1%
Total	333	

Note: 19 respondents did not answer this question

The next table shows the distribution of volunteers by county. A third of respondents live in Dublin. The most notable element is that Cork is under-represented in the responses relative to the general population.

Distribution of Volunteers by County in which they live					
County	Frequency	Percent	County	Frequency	Percent
Dublin	115	33.2%	Kilkenny	4	1.2%
Meath	48	13.9%	Longford	4	1.2%
Limerick	47	13.6%	Kerry	3	0.9%
Galway	21	6.1%	Tipperary	3	0.9%
Sligo	21	6.1%	Westmeath	3	0.9%
Wicklow	15	4.3%	Antrim	2	0.6%
Wexford	14	4.0%	Laois	2	0.6%
Cork	8	2.3%	Mayo	2	0.6%
Cavan	7	2.0%	Armagh	1	0.3%
Clare	6	1.7%	Donegal	1	0.3%
Kildare	6	1.7%	Down	1	0.3%
Louth	6	1.7%	Leitrim	1	0.3%
Roscommon	5	1.4%	Total	346	

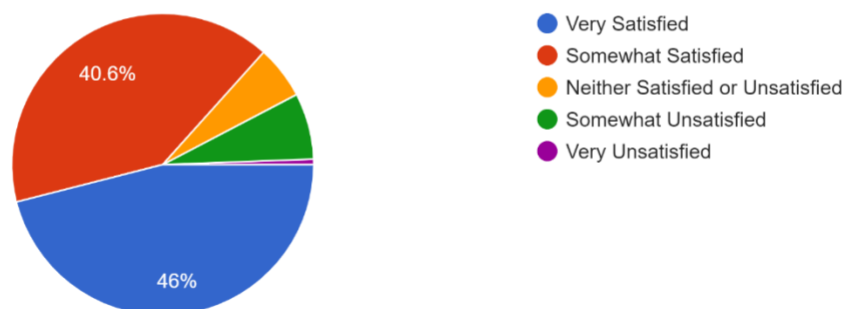
Note: 6 respondents did not answer this question

Volunteers Experience

Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they are satisfied with their volunteering experience with their current organization. 87% indicated that they were satisfied or very satisfied with their volunteering experience with their current organization. This is a very positive result and indicates that, in general, volunteers benefit from efforts.

Overall, how satisfied are you with your volunteering experience with your current organisation?
(Please select the most appropriate answer)

352 responses

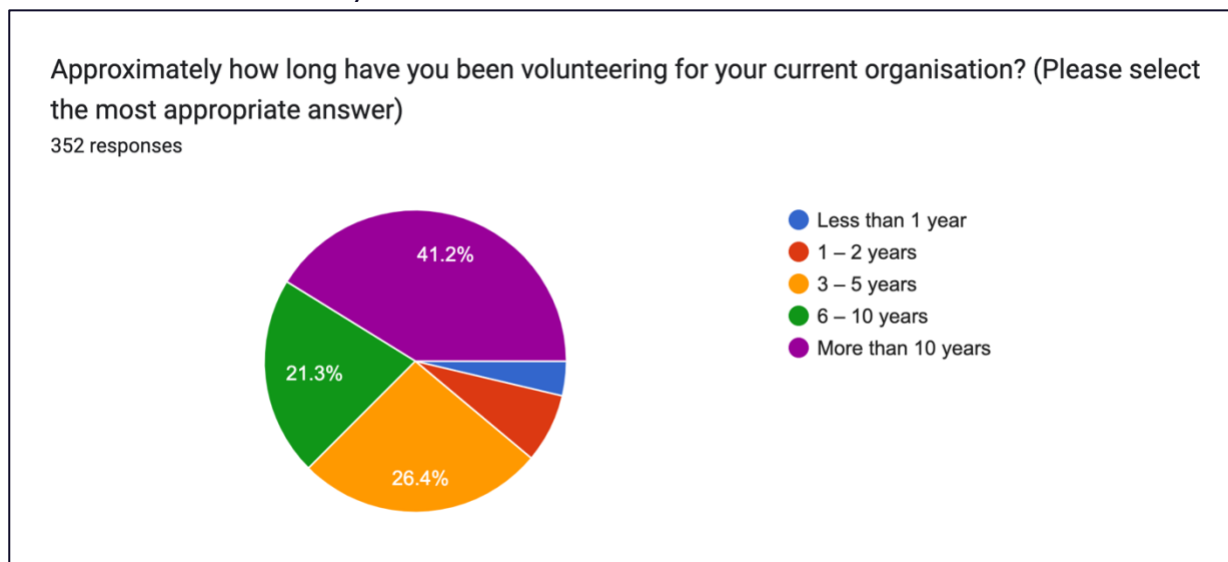


An analysis of these responses by gender finds no statistical difference in reported satisfaction between men and women. However, there are statistical differences in the number of respondents reporting they are very satisfied with the experience by age category. Younger volunteers are statistically more likely

to report they are very satisfied with their experience relative to older respondents. The proportion of respondents reporting they are very satisfied declines with age.

Proportion of Respondents Reporting they are Very Satisfied with Volunteering Experience by Age Category			
	Very Satisfied	Less than very satisfied	Total
Less than 45	66 61%	43 39%	109 100%
45 to 54	85 56%	67 44%	152 100%
55+	39 43%	51 57%	90 100%
	190	161	351

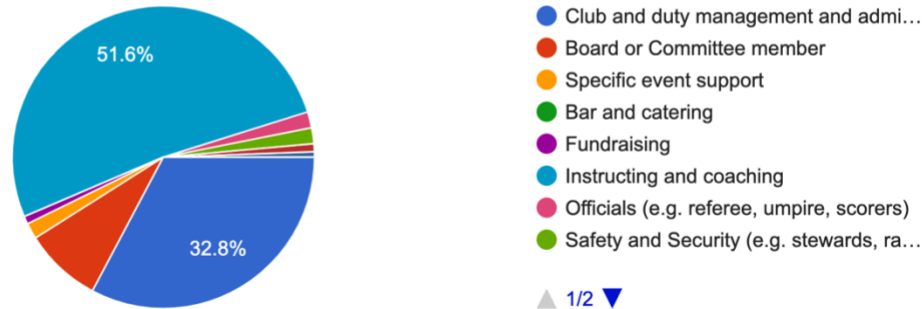
Respondents were asked how long they have volunteered with their clubs. Just over 40% have volunteered with their current club for more than ten years and almost 90% of respondents have volunteered with their clubs for more than 3 years.



Respondents are concentrated in specific roles within their clubs. The most common role, selected by 52% of respondents, was *Instructing and Coaching*. The second most common role was *Club and Duty Management and Administration* (e.g., *treasurer, Secretary*). These two roles plus *Committee Member* account for just under 85% of the respondents' roles.

What do you consider to be your main volunteer role within your current organisation? (Please select the most appropriate answer. If you volunteer...se choose your main role within the organisation.)

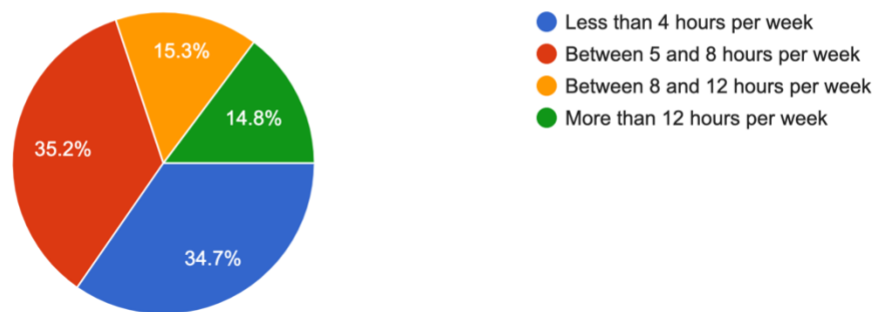
351 responses



Approximately two thirds of respondents spent more than four hours volunteering with their clubs per week. Just over 30% volunteered for more than eight hours, and 14% of respondents volunteered for more than 12 hours each week.

Approximately how many hours per week do you volunteer within your current organisation? (Please select the most appropriate answer)

352 responses



An analysis of these responses by respondent characteristics finds no statistical difference in hours volunteering, excepted for differences in gender. More men reported spending higher amounts of time volunteering compared to women. This is shown in the following table.

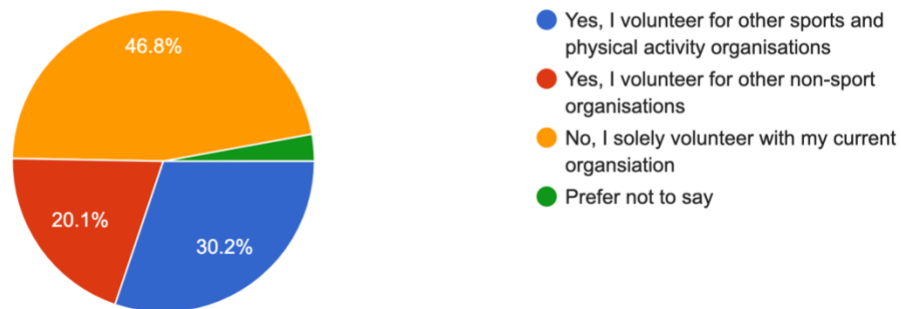
Number of hours per week volunteering by Gender			
	Men	Women	Total
Less than 4 hours	50 27%	71 44%	121 35%
Between 5 and 8 hours	69	55	124

	37%	34%	36%
Between 8 and 12 hours	31 17%	20 12%	51 15%
More than 12 hours	36 19%	15 9%	51 15%
Total	186	161	347

Just less than half (46%) of respondents only volunteer for the club for which they completed the survey. The others divided other volunteer work approximately equally between other sports organisations and non-sports organisations.

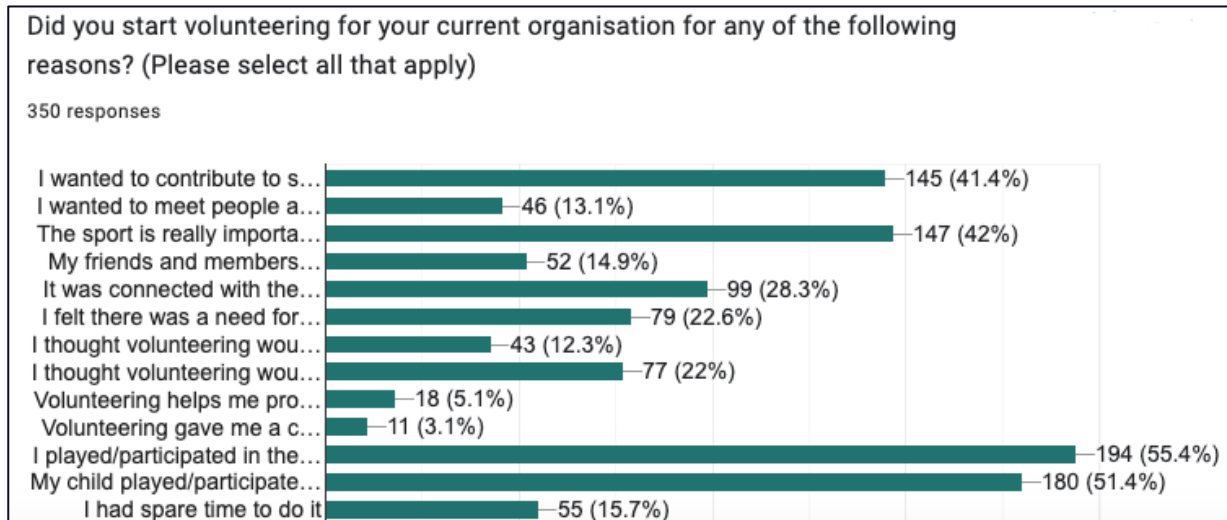
Do you volunteer for any other organisations in addition to the organisation for which you are filling out the survey? (Please select the most appropriate answer)

348 responses



Volunteers' Motivation

The most common reason cited for volunteering with a sports organisation was that the respondent played/participated in the sport (55.4% of respondents). This was followed by the participation of the respondents' children in the sport (51.4%). Other common motivations included the respondents' wish to contribute to society and help people and the importance of the sport to the respondent.



Regarding gender differences in the reported reason for starting to volunteer, there is no statistical difference for most reasons between men and women, meaning both genders are just as likely to report this as a reason to volunteer. The only statistical differences arise in relation to the desire to contribute to society and help people which was more likely to be reported by men (48%) than women (36%) and where friends and family members also volunteer, which was more likely to be reported by women (21%) than men (13%). Women (31%) are statistically more likely than men (23%) to report they started volunteering because it was connected to the needs of family and friends.

Induction, Training, and Support

Three quarters of respondents reported that they received induction or training, either initial or continuous, during their time volunteering with their current organisation. Of those that received induction or training, the most common type reported was induction or pre-volunteering training (46%), followed by ongoing 'on-the-job' training (43%), and mentoring or 'buddy schemes' (19%).

Respondents were asked to indicate on a scale from never to very often the extent to which they feel that they need advice or support to fulfil their role within the current organization. Almost 72% indicated they needed advice or support often or very often. The most common aspects of their roles on which they require advice or support is *Goals, Plans, and Expectations* (45%), *Organisational Policy* (34%), *Insurance and Legal Matters* (28%), and *Screening* (e.g., security checks, suitability to work with children) (26%).

In relation to role transition for volunteers, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree with the following statements for their organisations on a scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Approximately three quarters of respondents indicated there are plenty of opportunities to transition to other roles, though about a third agreed they would be interested in transitioning to a higher role. Just over 60% agreed that there are adequate protocols in their organization to facilitate role transition and succession.

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
There are plenty of opportunities to transition to different roles within my current organisation.	36%	38%	17%	5%	3%
I feel that there are adequate protocols in place in order to facilitate role transition and succession within my current organisation.	20%	41%	22%	10%	6%
If a position became open, I would be interested in transitioning to a higher role within my current organisation.	15%	22%	33%	16%	15%

A large proportion of Respondents agreed that their organization had a difficulty recruiting sufficient volunteers (85%), particularly those with the necessary skills and experience (88%). Only 3% indicated that their organisation has more volunteers applying than it can involve.

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
My organisation has difficulty in recruiting enough volunteers.	44%	41%	8%	5%	2%
My organisation has difficulty recruiting enough volunteers with the skills and experience needed.	50%	38%	8%	3%	1%
My organisation has more volunteers apply than it can involve.	1%	2%	19%	20%	59%

Respondents indicate general satisfaction with their organisation's activities to support volunteers' role clarity, recruitment, orientation and training, and attention to performance. The aspect to which a minority respondents expressed satisfaction was their organisation's plan to find someone to replace them when they are ready to leave their role. This is despite the previous result showing that 61% of respondents agreed that there are adequate protocols in place to facilitate role transition and succession within their current organisation.

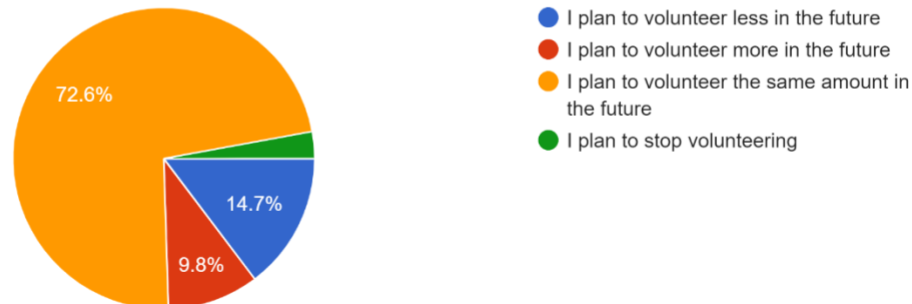
	Very Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Neither	Somewhat Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied
The extent to which the club makes my volunteer role clear to me	39%	37%	17%	6%	1%
The orientation and training the club makes available to me in my volunteer role	28%	38%	23%	9%	3%
The recognition of the volunteer work I do for the club	33%	33%	19%	11%	4%
The extent to which the club cares about my performance as a volunteer	30%	33%	21%	14%	2%
The way in which the club recruited me into my volunteer role	28%	30%	31%	10%	2%
The support and development opportunities the club makes available for me in my volunteer role	25%	30%	29%	11%	5%
The extent to which the club has a plan to find someone to replace me when I am ready to leave this role	8%	19%	34%	16%	23%

Volunteering in COVID

Less than 18% of sports volunteers indicated that they intend to volunteer less or stop volunteering since the onset of the COVID pandemic. Just under three quarters of respondents indicated that they plan to volunteer to the same extent.

Which of the following statements best describes your attitude towards volunteering since the onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic? (Please select the most appropriate answer)

347 responses

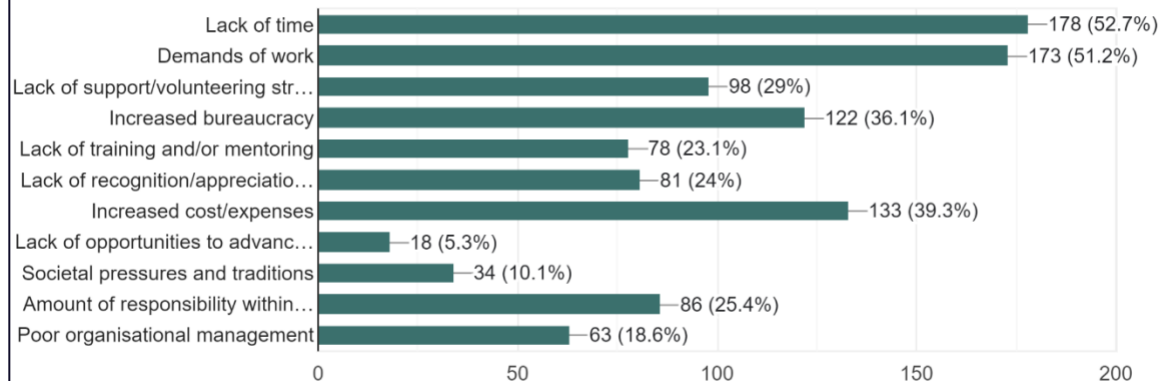


Of those that indicated they would volunteer less or stop volunteering, the most common reason provided was that they were feeling generally fatigued or 'burnt out' (42%), they were no longer feeling appreciated or valued (23%), and other responsibilities have increased e.g., looking after children/elderly, work or study commitments etc. (22%).

Respondents were asked to indicate, in the context of the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions and the subsequent economic and social environment, what they perceive as the main barriers for sports volunteers. The two most common identified were lack of time (53%) and the demands of work (51%). Just under 40% indicated that increased costs and expense is a barrier and 36% cited increased bureaucracy. 29% of respondents identified a lack of volunteering support structure and a quarter cited the amount of responsibility within the organization. A similar proportion (24%) referred to the lack of appreciation, recognition, or rewards.

Overall, given the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions and the subsequent economic and social environment, what are the main barriers that sport v... (Please select up to 3 of the options listed below)

338 responses



Club Survey Results

Club/Organisation Characteristics

Almost all respondents to the administrators' survey indicated that they were answering the survey for a club (199 clubs or 92% of respondents). The other types of organisations included national governing bodies (4), associations (2), groups (2), and charities/not for profits (2).

The table below shows the distribution of clubs by number of volunteers. 194 clubs answered this question, and the response indicates that the survey includes a broad range of club sizes.

Frequency and proportion of clubs by number of volunteers

	Frequency	Percent
<10	40	21%
11-20	59	30%
21-40	42	22%
41-60	25	13%
60+	28	14%
Total	194	

One third of the organizations for which an administrator responded is in Dublin and the profile is like the composition of respondents to the volunteer survey. Some counties are under-represented relative to the general population, including Cork and Kilkenny and there are no responses for Waterford, Westmeath, Mayo, Fermanagh, Down, Derry, and Tyrone.

In which county is your organisation located?

County	Frequency	Percent	County	Frequency	Percent
Dublin	72	33.3	Carlow	2	0.9
Meath	31	14.4	Cork	2	0.9
Limerick	17	7.9	Kilkenny	2	0.9
Galway	14	6.5	Tipperary	2	0.9
Wicklow	12	5.6	Antrim	1	0.5
Kildare	10	4.6	Armagh	1	0.5
Sligo	10	4.6	Donegal	1	0.5
Wexford	9	4.2	Kerry	1	0.5
Louth	6	2.8	Laois	1	0.5
Cavan	5	2.3	Leitrim	1	0.5
Clare	5	2.3	Monaghan	1	0.5
Roscommon	5	2.3	Offaly	1	0.5
Longford	4	1.9	Total	216	100

There were responses from 31 different sports categories. Like the volunteer survey this was concentrated in the majority participation sports, with just under 40% stating their club is involved in Gaelic games, soccer, and rugby union.

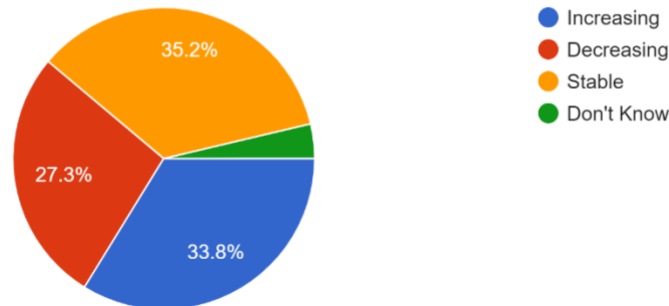
With what sport is your organisation associated?

	Frequency	Percent
Gaelic Games (Camogie, Football, Hurling, Handball)	47	21.8
Soccer	30	13.9
Basketball	24	11.1
Athletics	13	6.0
Canoeing	11	5.1
Tennis	10	4.6
Hockey (Field, Ice, Inline)	8	3.7
Rugby Union	8	3.7
Swimming	6	2.8
Boxing	4	1.9
Golf	4	1.9
Badminton	3	1.4
Rowing	3	1.4
Sailing	3	1.4
Bowling (Ten Pin)	2	0.9
Cricket	2	0.9
Gymnastic	2	0.9
Horse Sports (Racing, P2P, Show Jump, Dressage)	2	0.9
Table Tennis	2	0.9
Tug of War	2	0.9
Volleyball	2	0.9
American Football	1	0.5
Archery	1	0.5
Bowling (Indoor, Outdoor, Road)	1	0.5
Cheer Leading	1	0.5
Cycling	1	0.5
Fencing	1	0.5
Motor Sports	1	0.5
Pitch and Put	1	0.5
Triathlon	1	0.5
Other (or sport not listed)	19	8.8
Total	216	100

Just over one third of respondents indicated that over the past five years, a period that spanned the COVID pandemic, their organisation had a consistent level of volunteers. One third indicated that the number of volunteers increased over the period, while 27% reported a decline in volunteer numbers.

What is the trend in the number of volunteers involved in the organisation over the past 5 years?
(Please select the most appropriate answer)

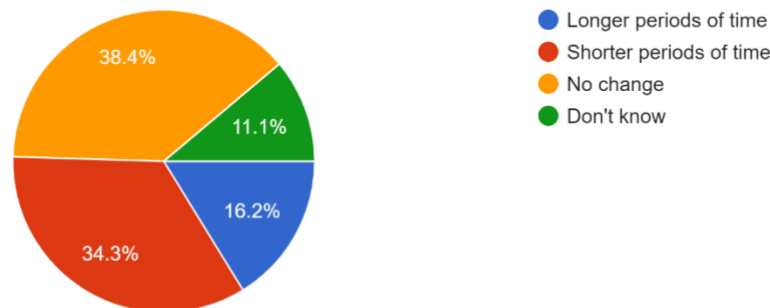
216 responses



Over the same period, respondents indicate that 38% of volunteers stayed with their organization for the same period, while a slightly lower proportion (34%) report that volunteers stayed for a shorter period. Approximately half of that proportion (16%) stayed with the organisation longer.

Has there been a change in the length of time volunteers stay with your organisation over the past 5 years? (Please select the most appropriate answer)

216 responses

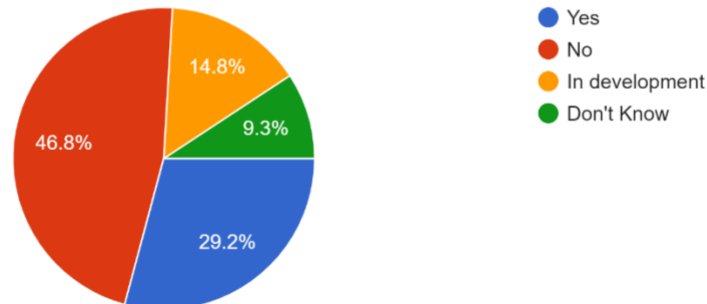


Measures for recruiting and retention of volunteers

Just under half (47%) of respondents report that they do not have specific measures in place for recruiting volunteers. 44% state that specific measures are either in place (29%) or in development (15%).

Does your organisation have specific measures in place covering the recruitment of volunteers?
(Please select the most appropriate answer)

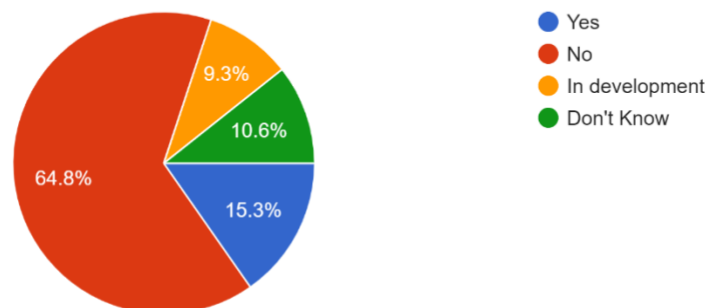
216 responses



Approximately two thirds of respondents (65%) indicate that their organization does not have specific measures in place for retaining volunteers. One quarter state that specific measures are either in place (9%) or in development (15%).

Does your organisation have specific measures in place covering the retention of volunteers?
(Please select the most appropriate answer)

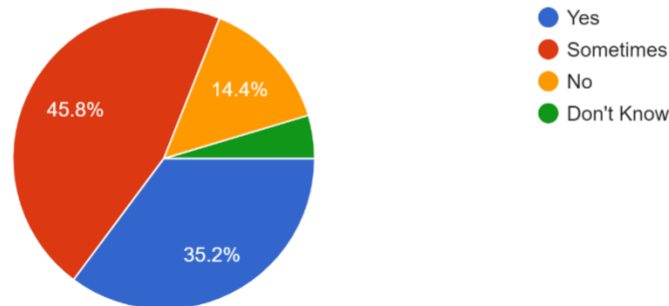
216 responses



Respondents indicate that a significant proportion of volunteers seek advice on their role or position; they state that 81% of volunteers seek such advice at least sometimes.

Do volunteers often seek advice on their role or position within your organisation? (Please select the most appropriate answer)

216 responses



Respondents were asked about the types of issues on which volunteers seek advice. Close to 70% indicate that volunteers seek advice on their role and 'job description'. The second most common (51%) issue on which advice is sought is goals, plans, and expectations. This is followed by organization policy (48%), screening (e.g., security checks, vetting) (46%), and insurance and other legal issues (36%).

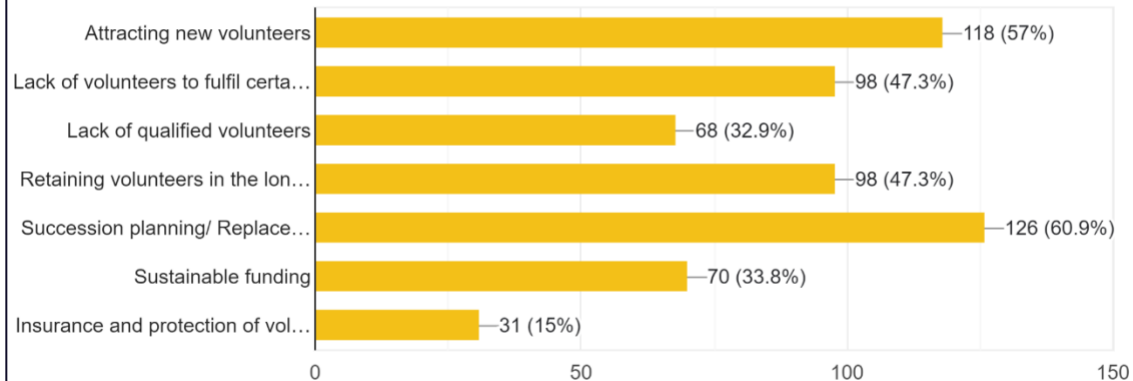
This may be affected by the extent and types of training provided to volunteers by organisations. Respondents were asked to indicate the kinds of training provided to volunteers in their organisations. By some distance the most common type of training (50%) is *Ongoing On-the-job training*. The next most common type is *Induction or Pre-Volunteering* (31%), followed by *Mentoring or 'Buddy' Schemes* (29%). 21% of respondents report that no training is currently provided.

Critical Issues for Volunteering Post-COVID

While respondents identified indicate several important issues facing their organization following the COVID pandemic, there is a consensus that the most significant are succession planning or replacing managers/club leaders (61%) and attracting new volunteers (57%).

Following the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions, what are the key issues currently facing your organisation in relation to volunteering? (Please select up to 3 of the options listed below)

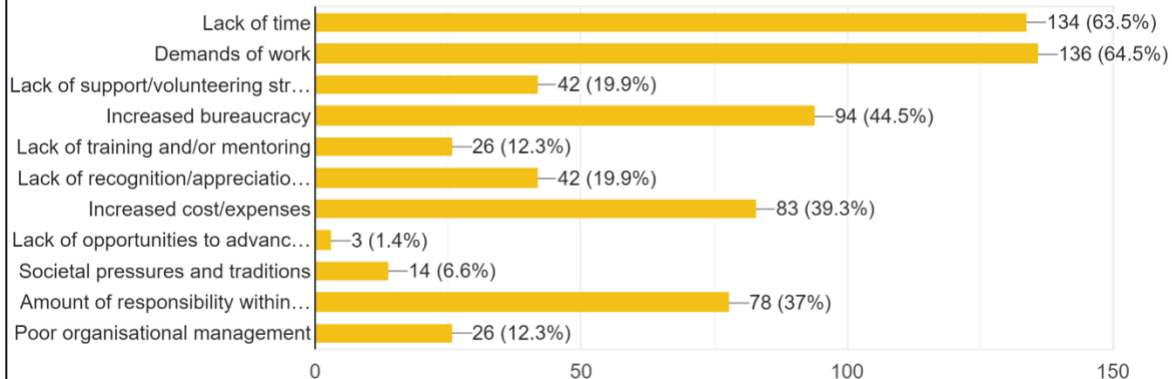
207 responses



Like the volunteers' survey, the most common perceived barriers faced by volunteers are lack of time (65%) and the demands of work (64%).

Given the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions and the subsequent economic and social environment, what are the main barriers that sport volunteers face? (Please select up to 3 of the options listed below)

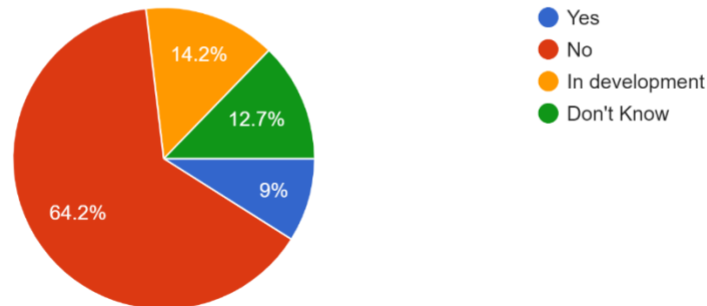
211 responses



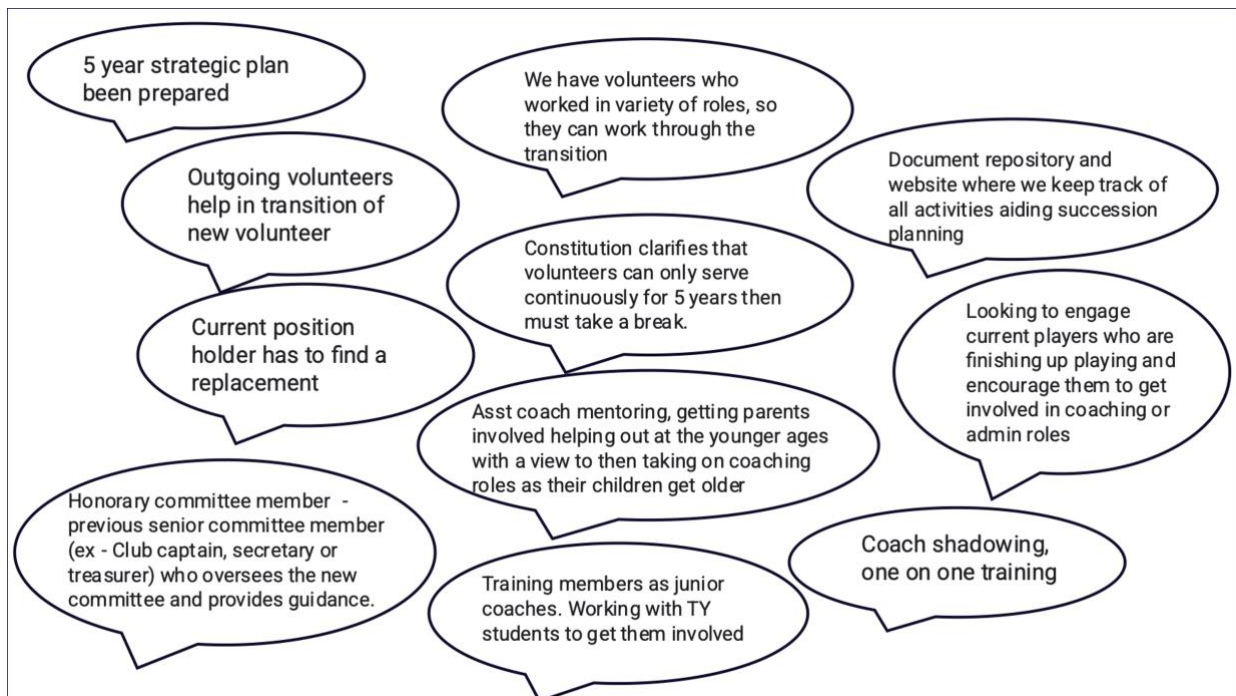
Approximately two thirds of respondents (65%) indicate that their organization does not have specific measures in place for the transition or succession of volunteers. 23% report that measures are in place (9%) or in development (14%).

Does your organisation have specific measures in place covering the transition or succession of volunteers?

212 responses



Respondents that indicate they have measures for transition and succession of volunteers were asked to indicate the types of measures they have in place. A sample of their answers are shown below.



Club Perspectives on COVID Effects

Respondents were asked to indicate the types of scenarios relating to volunteering that were encountered during the COVID pandemic. Almost 60% report that they experienced volunteer engagement (58%), recruitment (57%), and retention (55%) challenges. A similar proportion (58%) report that they relied more on volunteers. Close to three quarters report that they continued the same roles for volunteers (74%) and/or created COVID-19 related roles (72%) which can only be achieved by increasing the burden on volunteers.

Proportion of Respondents Indicating the Following Scenarios Experienced during COVID

	Proportion
Continued the same roles and opportunities for volunteers	74%
Created COVID-19 related roles and opportunities for volunteers	72%
Experienced volunteer engagement challenges	58%
Relied more on volunteers	58%
Experienced volunteer recruitment challenges	57%
Experienced volunteer retention challenges	55%
Redesigned new roles and opportunities for volunteers	42%
Created new virtual roles and opportunities for volunteers	38%
Reoriented/Retrained volunteers	34%
Relied less on volunteers	23%
Suspended relationships with volunteers	10%
Ended relationships with volunteers	9%