

Coronavirus COVID-19



Coronavirus
COVID-19
Public Health
Advice

Government Action Plan To Support The Community Response

Department of Rural and Community Development



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland



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Introduction

Communities in Ireland have a tremendous ability to rally round and help each other in times of crisis. We have seen it time and again over the years – whether with storms and floods, or economic disasters, our communities are always there for each other.

Now, more than ever, we need to tap into that vibrant community spirit we have here in Ireland and work together to overcome the enormous challenge facing our country.

In particular, people need to look out for their elderly or vulnerable neighbours, while being mindful at all times of the HSE guidelines on social distancing. It is very important that social contact is maintained with people who are isolated in their homes at this time, even if it's only by way of a friendly phone call.

Already in the past week we have seen a spontaneous groundswell of community activity, with various local groups from sporting clubs to residents associations - and also concerned individuals – leading local initiatives to support vulnerable and socially isolated people in their locality. This is a heartening and very welcome development.

However, there is also a need for Government to provide a central framework within which the community response can be delivered, so that it is **sustainable over the longer term** and to ensure that **as many vulnerable people as possible** receive the support they need at this very challenging time.

The National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) is leading our public health response to COVID-19 and as part of the Government's co-ordinated response, a National Action Plan was published on 16th March, setting out a whole-of-society response and the mobilisation of resources across Government and society to fight the spread of this virus.

Within this context and the framework of the NPHE Sub-group on Vulnerable People, the Department of Rural and Community Development is leading the whole of Government effort to encourage and facilitate a community response to COVID-19 that will help us to protect our older and vulnerable neighbours and keep them safe, well and supported during the coming weeks.

This **Action Plan**, which has been put together in partnership with the Department of Health, other Government Departments, State Agencies, Local Authorities, Local Development Companies and our extensive network of community and voluntary organisations, sets out **three key actions for initial focus** in supporting a community response to COVID-19.

Along with this Action Plan, a **Communications Pack** for members of the public will be widely distributed, including through our networks, to every community and voluntary organisation in the country.



This pack will contain advice and guidance on:

- How can I volunteer?
- Sensible volunteering – Dos and Don'ts
- Advice for local community groups – how can we get volunteers?
- Advice for vulnerable people who need supports
- How to guard against fraud and generate trust
- Information leaflet for distribution to communities –
“**You, Your Community and Covid-19**” – encouraging people to look out
for vulnerable neighbours.

Three Key Actions

The Department of Rural and Community Development has identified three key actions for immediate priority. We will put the required funding and resources in place immediately and will be working with our partners to implement the measures on the ground as quickly as possible. Work in this regard has already commenced.

- 1 Encourage and facilitate volunteering** – in partnership with Volunteer Ireland, 22 Volunteer Centres and 7 Volunteer Information Services, supported by Local Development Companies
- 2 Provide community supports for older people** – in partnership with ALONE
- 3 Establish a helpdesk facility for local community groups** – in partnership with the 31 Public Participation Networks nationwide

Further details in relation to each of the three key actions are set out on the following pages. Further initiatives are in development and will be rolled out in the coming weeks.



Action 1 Encourage and facilitate volunteering

We will provide a simple and easy means for those who wish to volunteer to register their interest and we will match them with the service providers in their community that need additional help.

Volunteer Ireland and the network of 22 Volunteer Centres together manage the national volunteering database (I-VOL). With a presence in 19 counties in Ireland, they are uniquely placed to mobilise local volunteers and organisations to reach the most vulnerable members of our society during this time of crisis. At the end of February 2020, there were almost 100,000 volunteers and 9,000 organisations on the I-VOL database – these numbers have increased by over 2,000 in the past week, as volunteers sign up to help with COVID-19 efforts nationwide.

The Department of Rural and Community Development will provide additional resources to Volunteer Ireland and the Volunteer Centres to enable them to significantly increase their levels of activity over the coming weeks in response to Covid-19. Resources will also be provided to the Volunteer Information Services supported by Local Development Companies in areas not currently served by Volunteer Centres. The core focus will be on volunteer recruitment – communications aimed at raising awareness of the need for volunteers through social media and recruiting and screening volunteers for local organisations and statutory services who are supporting vulnerable people in the community.

The Department of Rural and Community Development is also working with the Garda Vetting Bureau to ensure that volunteer roles that are specifically linked with the COVID-19 plan can be quickly reviewed and, where vetting is deemed necessary, fast-tracked through the process.

Volunteer Ireland will also support organisations who are experiencing an increased demand for their services and need to recruit volunteers quickly. They will prioritise support for organisations dealing directly with the crisis including ALONE, Civil Defence and the Red Cross.

Each Volunteer Centre is an independent organisation and each has varying levels of resources. While not all Volunteer Centres will be in a position to manage large scale informal volunteering operations, all can play a part in communicating on agreed and helpful messaging and promoting the most vital volunteer roles. Larger Volunteer Centres, such as those in Dublin and other urban areas, will be able to mobilise significant numbers through promotion, recruitment and screening. This will take some of the most time intensive tasks - such as writing job descriptions and selecting volunteers - away from organisations who are busy on the front line.

This work has already commenced – for example, local volunteers recruited by the South Dublin Volunteer Centres are already assisting the HSE at the new community testing centre in Tallaght.

Clear concise information will be provided to the public on where and how to register their interest in volunteering.



Action 2 Provide community supports for older people

We will enhance information, advisory and other supports for older people at home, including through telephone helpline support for those who do not access online information.

ALONE is a voluntary organisation that works in partnership with Government and State agencies to support and empower older people to age at home. They help individuals and their families work with other organisations to improve the lives of older people. They work with all older people, including those who are lonely, isolated, frail or ill, homeless, living in poverty, or are facing other difficulties. ALONE supports them through these challenges.

ALONE's Visitation Support & Befriending Service provides regular visits to an older person from a volunteer who provides one-to-one companionship and practical support. Volunteers can support with practical tasks and provide information on local activities and relevant initiatives. All volunteers are trained, Garda vetted and receive support from ALONE staff.

In response to the COVID-19 crisis, a telephone support line with expanded hours (8am-8pm) has been launched for all older people and their families to contact if they would like any advice, reassurance or additional support. From these calls, ALONE is offering reassurance and guidance as instructed by the HSE and offering follow up support including a daily support telephone call, support with practical tasks such as grocery and medication distribution, ensuring they have fuel and are not feeling socially isolated during this time. All older people who call this support line can be linked in with ALONE support staff who can address any additional needs through telephone or in-person assessment.

With funding from Government, ALONE is deploying additional staff and volunteers to coordinate and deliver on the anticipated increased demand for its service. It aims to recruit an additional 1,500 volunteers over the next few weeks and is working with Volunteer Ireland to achieve this. Additional staff will be recruited by ALONE across Ireland to manage the new volunteer cohort.

With these enhanced supports in place, ALONE will be in a position offer additional practical supports for those affected by Covid-19 to all community and health sector services, many of which already refer clients to ALONE e.g. hospital discharge teams, Public Health Nurses, Social Workers, Frailty intervention therapy teams, Integrated care pathways for older people, Meals on wheels services, medication and grocery distribution etc.



Action 3 Establish a helpdesk facility for local community groups

We will ensure that local community groups have direct access to the information they need in managing through the challenges ahead.

The Department of Rural and Community Development provides support to the overall community and voluntary sector through its funding programmes and grants and through its support for the Public Participation Networks in each Local Authority area. PPNs are networks of local community and voluntary groups and their purpose is to provide a mechanism for community engagement at local level. Over 16,000 local organisations are members of their PPN, representing a very valuable and extensive network for reaching into communities.

In recent weeks it has become evident that community and voluntary groups who are preparing for the effects of the COVID-19 outbreak are concerned about a number of issues, including an increased demand for their services, an anticipated reduction in the number of volunteers (due to the volunteers being themselves at risk, ill or self-isolating) and continued access to their usual supply chains. Many smaller locally based groups, who are entirely volunteer-led, will find this particularly challenging.

The Department is putting in place a dedicated email Helpdesk to assist smaller community groups with their queries and refer them on to appropriate sources of support, including other similar organisations within the wider network. The service will provide email access to dedicated trained staff who will endeavour to address issues as they arise. As the queries come in, FAQ information will be developed and posted on the Government website.

The dedicated email address c&vsupports@dracd.gov.ie will go live on 20 March 2020.



Conclusion

Supporting our Community and Voluntary Sector

In delivering for our communities, the Government works closely with organisations throughout the community and voluntary sector. It is recognised that the sector will itself be challenged as it seeks to contribute to the national effort at this time. The unprecedented circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 crisis will require the re-prioritisation and re-direction of activities, new contingency arrangements to maintain and support critical services, and new flexibilities in the use, re-prioritisation and reassignment of resources in the sector. Government is committed to working closely with the sector in managing through these challenges over the coming period. These new pressures and requirements will need to be factored into future review and evaluation of programme delivery targets and performance delivery agreements already in place for 2020.

Our communities are our greatest resource. The Government is committed to facilitating and supporting the volunteer spirit that is alive in our communities during this period of unprecedented challenge for our country. The mobilisation of community and voluntary groups and the engagement of volunteers will play a crucial part in ensuring that the most vulnerable among us are supported and that people living in the community can continue to have their needs met in the event that their usual sources of support become unavailable.

This Action Plan is part of the broader Government response to COVID-19. While a whole of Government coordinated approach is the backbone to planning for and managing the effects of any emergency, solutions are ultimately implemented at a community level. Through the measures in this Action Plan, the Department of Rural and Community Development will continue to play its role in fostering the links that bring communities together. Strengthening our community links will help to improve our preparedness and responsiveness in this time of national emergency. When we act together as a community, we can overcome even the most daunting of challenges.

