



BRITISH-IRISH INTER-PARLIAMENTARY BODY

**COMHLAUGHT IDIR-PHARLAIMINTEACH NA
BREATAINE AGUS NA hÉIREANN**

REPORT

from

Committee D (Environment and Social)

on

The Irish Community in Britain

Doc No. 131

The Irish Community in Britain

Introduction

1. In 2005 Committee D decided to evaluate the Irish Community in Britain at the start of Twenty-First Century. The inquiry focussed on the Irish Community in England although it acknowledges that there are similar issues for the Irish Community in Wales and Scotland.
2. Any discussion on relations between Britain and Ireland must take into account the significant movement of people between the two islands over the centuries. There has been a significant change in how the Irish Community is viewed in Britain; from waves of mass immigration to cities like Liverpool, Leeds and London throughout the 20th Century: providing much of the workforce for the construction of the infrastructure of modern Britain and the National Health Service in the 40s and 50s; in the 1970s and 80s when the troubles in Northern Ireland spilled over into Britain; and into the 80's and 90's when the most recent wave of Irish immigrants relocated to provide skilled staff for the high-tech sector in Britain.
3. The Committee recognise the input both Governments have made to the Irish Community in Britain. The Irish Government has acknowledged its debt to the Irish in Britain. This has been reflected in a significant increase in financial support in recent years.
4. The support of the Irish Community from the British Government is more complex. Irish Community support in Britain tends to be provided where local community groups are organised through community centres usually in the large cities for example London, Leeds and Manchester. Most Irish Community groups which we learned of were, to a great extent, supported financially by the Irish Government and the communities themselves. At best, there is inconsistency and a lack of coherence in support provided to the Irish Community by the British authorities and in many instances no support is provided at all.
5. **The Committee is aware that, on the British side, there is a lack of consistency in the recognition, support and financial assistance provided to the Irish Community in Britain from British authorities both at national and local levels.**
6. There are a number of aspects to this situation which are explored in this report. The recommendations are focussed on addressing the need for consistency and adequate support for the Irish Community by the British authorities.

Irish Community in Britain

7. The 2001 British census was the first to provide an ethnic breakdown of the population. Some 705,000 people identified themselves as Irish born although the Committee believe that may have been an underestimation. The Irish Community in 2001 was then the largest immigrant community in the UK. The Irish

Government estimates that there are now over 2 million Irish citizens resident in the UK. If second and third generations are included Irish research has indicated that there may be between 5 and 6 million people of Irish origin living in Britain.

8. The Irish Community in Britain is ably represented by the Federation of Irish Societies (FIS). The FIS is an umbrella organisation representing Irish clubs and societies in Britain to promote the interests of Irish people. The Federation has more than 100 affiliates throughout Britain.¹ Irish Government funding for Irish organisations in Britain is mainly organised through the DION Committee— an advisory committee on welfare issues for the Irish in Britain. In 2006 the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dermot Ahern, announced the largest ever allocation to assist the Irish Community in Britain and there was a further increase in the level of funding in 2007. Since 2004 increases in funding from the Irish Government has enabled resources to be provided for some capital projects as well as cultural activities which help to foster Irish Community contact and support.

The future of the Irish community

9. The Committee was struck by the diversity that now exists within the Irish Community. The most recent Irish immigrants of the 1980s and 90s represent a different generation and different experience of immigration from their predecessors. The Committee learned that those who run Irish Community facilities expect that Irish immigration has now passed its high watermark. The Community and its organisations will need to take this into account in terms of their future planning. As the Community moves from first to second and third generations it may be that the individuals who make up the Community will identify less directly with the Irish Community.
10. Some Irish Community groups are concerned about the lack of representation of younger members of the Irish Community as the profile of those who organise and run community groups grows older. There is the possibility that the Irish Community, as it ages, will lose contact with those who are second and third generation Irish. **The Committee recommends that the Irish Community in Britain gives consideration to those who are second and third generation immigrants in order to ensure that the Irish Community remains closely integrated and that Irish cultural heritage is not lost from Britain in the next twenty years.**

Elderly Irish

11. The organised Irish Community (those who choose to make use of the, mainly welfare, services provided to the Irish Community) have an ageing population. They represent the significant number of Irish who moved to Britain in the 1940s and 1950s and who have not returned to Ireland. This group now has an average age of 60-70, they are mainly retired and are often infirm. The Committee were informed that Minister Dermot Ahern has said that Irish Government assistance

¹ FIS is funded by the Irish Government (DION) and the Department of Foreign Affairs, the British Government through the Home Office and Department of Health Section 64 Funding, the Ireland Fund of Great Britain and the Irish Youth Foundation and is sponsored by the Bank of Ireland and the Allied Irish Bank.

will remain focussed on welfare issues and in particular on the elderly. **The Committee recommends that the needs of the elderly Irish, a vulnerable section of the Irish community, should continue to be given attention and funding in line with their needs.**

Health issues

12. Research has shown that, like other ethnic groups in Britain, the Irish Community have particular health problems. Health concerns which are over represented amongst the Irish Community are mental health issues including emotional distress, drug and alcohol misuse, and heart disease. It is also widely considered to be the case that the life expectancy for Irish Community is lower than the indigenous population and that in Britain suicide rates are highest amongst the Irish Community. These issues were brought to the attention of the Committee by local evidence provided from Irish community groups and collated information on mental health provided by the FIS. The Committee is aware that some research is ongoing on the healthcare needs of the Irish Community in Britain but this is minimal and there is little statutory funding available for such research. **The Committee recommends that the relevant authorities consider allocating a proportion of their funding to provide independent and objective evidence of these health inequalities which may be used by the Irish Community to call the British and Irish authorities' attention to the needs of the Irish Community. Health care organisations should be encouraged to include the Irish in their ethnic minority statistics and monitoring in order to ensure that appropriate health strategies and services are provided.**

13. In looking at the Health issue the Committee learned that the treatment of the Irish Community in Britain is uneven and varied. For example, when Committee D approached a London Primary Care Trust to ask them what they were doing for the Irish Community they were told that the Irish were not considered to be a separate community which required individual assistance. The FIS tell us that this is often the default position from British authorities. The Committee heard of other examples where the local administrations provide support and services specifically targeted at the Irish Community. On further investigation the Committee established that some government departments and agencies at the national level identify and acknowledge the Irish community based on the census category in 2001 in their data and research (for example Department of School, Children and families and the Department of Health) whereas others (for example the Arts Council of England) do not. As far as the Committee was able to establish, under the Race Relations Act 2000 and the advice to all statutory agencies from the Office of National Statistics, all levels of the British Government: national; devolved; and local, should keep and monitor statistics on all identified ethnic communities, including the Irish. **The Committee recommends that that the UK Department of Communities and Local Government and the ONS should make the obligation to keep and monitor statistics on all identified ethnic minorities including the Irish clear to all Government Departments and agencies and monitor future compliance.**

Culture and education

14. There is limited access to Irish-specific culture and education in Britain. Indeed even in London where there is a significant Irish population RTE television is not

available. The Committee understands that the Irish Government and RTE are working on a solution to this. Some British-published Irish papers, for example the Irish Post and Irish World, help to make up for the lack of attention to Irish issues by the British media but easier and cheaper access to Irish newspapers should be arranged. The Committee was disappointed that there is a lack of focus on Irish issues by the British media despite the size of the Irish population in Britain. The move to digital television over the next few years may help because more television channels will be available. **The Committee recommend that the media in Britain, in particular the BBC as part of its public broadcasting remit, evaluates how best to represent the Irish Community in Britain.**

15. Irish sports are one of the few methods of encouraging the younger Irish population, and the second and third generation Irish to participate in Irish Community events. Again, funding for these particular activities is low and rarely supported by either British local authorities or central Government. **The Committee welcomes the interest of the Irish Community in Irish sport and recommends that funding is provided, both from Britain and Ireland, to encourage these important health-sustaining and community-building activities.**

16. The Committee found that there was good evidence that Irish cultural education facilities (which are mainly sponsored through the Dion Committee) are being used by other community groups. The London Irish Centre is also used by the following community groups: London Irish Outreach Service, Irish Episcopal Commission for Emigrants, Irish Commission for Prisoners Overseas, Camden Elderly Irish Network and Immigrant Counselling and Psychotherapy. Indeed just a few days before our visit to the London Irish Centre they held an event with the Polish Community. The Committee visited the London Irish Centre which provides advice, support and training to promote Irish culture and assist the Irish in London to access mainstream provision. Most of the 18 staff of the London Irish Centre are involved in welfare work for up to 2,000 clients a year. The services provided include addiction recovery, a missing persons bureau, elders outreach and emergency welfare. As is typical of such community centres the centre is funded by yearly grants from a variety of sources. **Some local authorities also support Irish centres on the understanding that they also provide facilities for other community groups. This approach characterises best practice and we hope that it will expand in the future.**

Returning Emigrants

17. The Irish Government support the 'Safe Home Scheme' through an annual grant (€175,000 in 2007) and the provision of accommodation for returning emigrants under the Capital Assistance Scheme. This is to assist Irish citizens living in Britain who want to move back to Ireland to fulfil their dream of returning home often after retirement. The Committee is aware that the scheme, set up in January 2000, has proved less popular than first envisaged. Perhaps this is because those who have settled in Britain would be leaving friends and family in Britain if they moved back to Ireland. It is true that the Ireland which they left decades before has not stayed the same. There are also problems with lengthy waiting lists for public housing, an inability to afford private housing and difficulties with reciprocal benefits, particularly on housing and disability, as some benefits

available in the UK are not automatically transferred when emigrants return to Ireland. The application process in Ireland can take some time and the means test differs from that in the UK. The Committee are concerned that this scheme might not be sufficiently well known by the Irish Community in Britain. **The Committee recommends that schemes such as ‘safe home’ are better publicised amongst the Irish Community in Britain and that the Irish Government further consider the problems facing those who have or want to return to live in Ireland.**

Homelessness and the traveller community

18. The traveller community in Britain, a large proportion of whom are Irish, have been identified as a needy community grouping and as a result have had more attention from the British Government than the rest of the Irish Community. This is appropriate given their particular welfare needs. The travelling community is also the subject of regular negative reporting in the media which increases the marginalisation of the community. The Irish Community has also been overrepresented amongst the homeless living in Britain. The Committee were pleased to learn that the number of Irish people in Britain who are homeless is falling. This must be, at least in part, due to the work of the Irish Community groups who are funded by the Irish Government through the Dion Committee. Welfare organisations working with the travelling community stress the need for service providers in both the statutory and voluntary sectors to deliver services to the community and the need for more partnership working between statutory services, community and voluntary sector groups. **The Irish travelling and homeless community in Britain still faces major challenges and the Committee recommends that those who are responsible for service delivery to the travelling community redouble their efforts.**

Community recognition: the importance of the census

19. The Committee found that racial discrimination against the Irish Community is no longer considered to be a political issue. However, as we found when looking at the health issue, the uneven and varied approach by UK authorities in dealing with the Irish Community needs to be addressed. The FIS described the Irish as a community hidden from statutory service providers. They are white and speak English as their first language and yet they have specific needs above those of the indigenous population.
20. The FIS suggested that the Committee consider the problem of the British Census as many Irish living in England choose to tick the ‘British’ box on the census rather than the ‘Irish’ box even when they are first generation Irish. The Committee Chairman facilitated a discussion between FIS, Greater London Authority and those responsible for the British Census—the Office for National Statistics (ONS)—to discuss this issue. The ONS agreed not to delete the Irish as a category in the ethnic minority section of the questionnaire of the test census which was trialled in 5 regions across England and Wales in May 2007. The FIS provided an educational campaign amongst the Irish Community in the test areas but they acknowledge that the next challenge is to ensure that the data received is used effectively. **The Committee would like to encourage the ONS to continue to include ‘Irish’ in the ethnic minority section of the next census in 2011 in**

order to ensure that there are accurate statistics on the Irish Community living in Britain.

21. Of late in Britain there has been an emphasis, especially from the current Government, on encouraging 'Britishness' in order to improve community relations. The Committee do not wish to comment on this policy in general. However it is important that if individuals retain their citizenship this will not prejudice their right to entitlements and benefits. **The Committee notes the importance of the Irish Community and all the ethnic communities in contributing to modern Britain and encourages the voices of the Irish to be heard in British political and cultural life.**

Conclusion and recommendations -

1. **The Committee is aware that, on the British side, there is a lack of consistency in the recognition, support and financial assistance provided to the Irish Community in Britain from British authorities both at national and local levels. (para 5)**
2. **The Committee recommends that the Irish Community in Britain gives consideration to those who are second and third generation immigrants in order to ensure that the Irish Community remains closely integrated and that Irish cultural heritage is not lost from Britain in the next twenty years. (para 10)**
3. **The Committee recommends that the needs of the elderly Irish, a vulnerable section of the Irish community, should continue to be given attention and funding in line with their needs. (para 11)**
4. **The Committee recommends that the relevant authorities consider allocating a proportion of their funding to provide independent and objective evidence of these health inequalities which may be used by the Irish Community to call the British and Irish authorities' attention to the needs of the Irish Community. Health care organisations should be encouraged to include the Irish in their ethnic minority statistics and monitoring in order to ensure that appropriate health strategies and services are provided. (para 12)**
5. **The Committee recommends that that the UK Department of Communities and Local Government and the ONS should make the obligation to keep and monitor statistics on all identified ethnic minorities including the Irish clear to all Government Departments and agencies and monitor future compliance. (para 13)**
6. **The Committee recommend that the media in Britain, in particular the BBC as part of its public broadcasting remit, evaluates how best to represent the Irish Community in Britain. (para 14)**

- 7. The Committee welcomes the interest of the Irish Community in Irish sport and recommends that funding is provided, both from Britain and Ireland, to encourage these important health-sustaining and community-building activities. (para 15)**
- 8. Some local authorities also support Irish centres on the understanding that they also provide facilities for other community groups. This approach characterises best practice and we hope that it will expand in the future. (para 16)**
- 9. The Committee recommends that schemes such as ‘safe home’ are better publicised amongst the Irish Community in Britain and that the Irish Government further consider the problems facing those who have or want to return to live in Ireland. (para 17)**
- 10. The Irish travelling and homeless community in Britain still faces major challenges and the Committee recommends that those who are responsible for service delivery to the travelling community redouble their efforts. (para 18)**
- 11. The Committee would like to encourage the ONS to continue to include ‘Irish’ in the ethnic minority section of the next census in 2011 in order to ensure that there are accurate statistics on the Irish Community living in Britain. (para 20)**
- 12. The Committee notes the importance of the Irish Community and all the ethnic communities in contributing to modern Britain and encourages the voices of the Irish to be heard in British political and cultural life. (para 21)**

BIIPB Committee D

Terms of Reference: Irish Communities Enquiry

Committee D of the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body (Environment and Social) wish to consider the current circumstances of the Irish community in Britain, to explore the particular challenges that community faces, especially as those Irish citizens who emigrated from Ireland in the immediate post war period are now elderly, and to gain a greater understanding of the range of support services, statutory and otherwise, which are provided by both Governments to the Irish community.

The Committee intends to consult widely with stakeholders and their representatives to assess the particular needs of the Irish community in England and to examine how best those particular needs are being met by the British Government at central, devolved, local and Health Authority level and by the Irish Government at central and local level.

Work Programme

The Committee intends to hold meetings with relevant Government Departments in both countries, as well as with the Irish Embassy in London, The Federation of Irish Societies, the Díon Committee and organisations and groups working with the community throughout Britain. In particular the Committee will focus on a number of key issues

1. The Elderly Irish
2. Health
3. Culture/Educational
4. Census 2011
5. Returning Emigrants

Members attending the meeting at the Belfast plenary on 23 October 2006:
Lord Dubs (Chair), John Austin MP, Johnny Brady TD, Senator Paul Bradford, Senator Paul Coughlan, Jeff Ennis MP, Lord Glentoran, Lord Gordon of Strathblane, Dr Dai Lloyd AM, Eddie McGrady MP, Arthur Morgan TD, Iain Smith MSP and Chris Ruane MP.

Members visiting London on 20-21 November 2006:
Lord Dubs (Chair), Senator Mary O'Rourke (Co-Chair), John Austin MP, Tony Baldry MP, Senator Paul Coughlan, Jeff Ennis MP, Senator Terry Leyden, Arthur Morgan TD, and Chris Ruane MP. Senator Paschal Mooney was co-opted onto the Committee for the Irish Communities inquiry and attended the meeting in London.

North England 15/16 January 2007:
Lord Dubs (Chair), John Austin MP, Jeff Ennis MP, Mr Jim Glennon TD and Chris Ruane MP. Senator Paschal Mooney was co-opted onto the Committee for the Irish Communities inquiry and attended the meeting.

Members attending the meeting at the Dublin Plenary 5 March 2007:
Lord Dubs (Chair), Senator Mary O'Rourke (Co-Chair), John Austin MP, Tony Baldry MP, Senator Paul Coughlan, Jeff Ennis MP, Mr Jim Glennon TD, Lord Glentoran, Dr Dai Lloyd AM, Chris Ruane MP Mr Joe Sherlock TD and Iain Smith MSP. Senator Paschal Mooney was co-opted onto the Committee for the Irish Communities inquiry and attended the meeting.

Members attending the meeting at the Cotswold Plenary 26 November 2007 and approved the report:
Lord Dubs (Chair), Johnny Brady TD (Co-Chair), John Austin MP, Senator John Ellis, Jeff Ennis MP, Lord Glentoran, Dr Dai Lloyd AM, Joe McHugh TD, Senator Francis O'Brien, Michael Ring TD, Chris Ruane MP and Iain Smith MSP.

The Committee is indebted to the staff of Embassy of Ireland in London, the Federation of Irish Societies, in particular Eithne Rynne, and those representatives of the Irish Community who gave up their time to meet with the Committee on their fact-finding visits to:

- London Irish Centre
- Leeds Irish Centre
- Manchester Irish Centre
- Manchester Town Hall
- Irish Community Care Manchester
- Camden Irish Centre
- Camden Elderly Irish Network
- Immigrant Counselling and Psychotherapy
- Leeds Irish Health and Homes

- Department for Communities and Local Government
- Department of Health