

Report to the British-Irish Inter-parliamentary Body on the Irish Community in Britain

Department of Foreign Affairs Response

The Department welcomes the report to the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body and commends Chairman, Lord Alf Dubs and the other members of Committee D for focusing on the Irish Community in Britain.

While most of the recommendations made in the report are addressed to the British Government, the Irish Government has, of course, viewed the report with great interest. The report's conclusion that some among the elderly Irish Community in Britain remain vulnerable and more susceptible to a number of problems, including drug and alcohol abuse, heart disease, isolation, mental health issues and even suicide, emphasizes the enduring importance of the Government's Emigrant Support Programme. The Committee's findings support the view that the British government has a duty of care to the Irish community, and reflects the almost unanimous agreement by the British members of the Committee that the Irish community in Britain should be given more support by the British government and local authorities.

Reaching out to and strengthening links with the Irish community in Britain and with those of Irish ancestry has been, and continues to be, a cornerstone of Government policy. The establishment and operation of the Irish Abroad Unit in the Department of Foreign Affairs has greatly enhanced our capacity to develop and implement our policies in this regard.

Britain is home to the largest and most significant population of Irish born people outside of our own island. They remain the recipients of the vast majority of the funding which the Government provides to assist our communities overseas. In 2007, a total of €11.485 million was granted to organisations in Britain engaged in the delivery of services to Irish emigrants. This represents an increase of more than €1 million over the funds made available in 2006. Approximately €50 million has been provided since the Government commenced funding Irish community organisations in 1984.

The primary emphasis of Government funding in Britain continues to be directed at supporting frontline welfare services. The Department is pleased, however, that the additional funding available in recent years has made it possible to broaden the range of projects and extend the reach of our activities in Britain. The support for front line agencies in their social outreach programmes helps them to assist our most vulnerable fellow countrymen and women, including the elderly members of the community susceptible to health and social problems. In this regard, the report states that “the Committee were pleased to learn that the number of Irish people in Britain who are homeless is falling” and stated that “this must be, at least in part, due to the work of the Irish Community groups who are funded by the Irish Government”. This also reflects the findings of the Simon Community, who attributed the decrease in Irish homelessness in London to Government funding. They said "the number of Irish people on central London streets is at a record low....we do an independent head-count twice a year and in 1999 over 600 Irish were on the streets of central London now there are only about 100, and most of them are young".

The British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body also recommends that attention be paid to maintaining and encouraging closer links with second and third generation members of the Irish Community in Britain. The expansion in 2007 of the Government’s funding of Irish heritage, through the provision of grants to the British Provincial Council of the GAA and to Comhaltas Ceoltoiri Eireann, is aimed at addressing that very point. The Minister hopes that this funding will assist future generations of Irish in Britain, the children and grandchildren of emigrants, to maintain strong links with their Irish identity through our culture, heritage, music and sport.