



British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly

Tionól Parlaiminteach na Breataine agus na hÉireann

Report from

Committee D (Environment and Social Affairs)

on

The Irish community in Britain: follow-up report

Doc No. 174

Introduction

1. In autumn 2006 Committee D began an inquiry into the Irish community in Britain. During that inquiry the Committee visited and heard from a number of representatives of the Irish community around England, including visiting centres supporting the Irish communities in London, Manchester and Leeds. The Committee's report was presented to the Assembly's plenary session in November 2007 and debated there. The report made a number of recommendations about the Irish community. Three years on from that report Committee D has revisited the issue, to examine what progress has been made on the recommendations and what other issues have come to light.
2. Since Committee D's last report (on returning the unemployed to work) was presented to and debated at the plenary meeting in Cavan in February there has been a general election in the United Kingdom. That naturally led to a pause in the Committee's activity. In order to be able to report in time for the plenary in Douglas the Committee has only been able to carry out a brief re-examination of the matter, and has not been able to hear from as many groups and individuals as would be ideal. Nonetheless the evidence we heard was very useful and we are indebted to those who gave up their time to speak to us and host us on 11 October 2010. Further details of those the Committee spoke to are at the back of this report.

Present position of the Irish community in Britain

3. The 2007 report noted that in answering the 2001 census some 705,000 people identified themselves as Irish born, though the Committee thought that may have been an underestimation (further findings on the census are below). The Irish Government estimated there were over 2 million Irish citizens resident in the UK; with subsequent generations included there could have been between 5 and 6 million people of Irish origin living in Britain. However, it is widely recognised that no completely accurate data exist on this subject.
4. We heard about the diversity and changing nature of the Irish community; the Irish Embassy suggested it would be more accurate to say there are many different Irish communities in Britain. Irish migrants continue to arrive, though not in the numbers that they did in the 1980s. The Office for National Statistics estimates that just over 11,000 people from Ireland registered for a UK National Insurance number in 2009, slightly higher than the previous few years but perhaps not as high as might have been expected given the level of unemployment in Ireland. However, that figure is only a reflection of those that have come seeking work; other evidence we heard suggested many more are expected to come to the UK this year. Whereas previous generations of Irish immigrants came to the UK out of necessity, many of the present-day migrants do so out of choice. That naturally shifts some of the focus of the groups that represent the Irish community in the UK. For example, the London Irish Centre in Camden (which the Committee visited in 2007 and a representative of whom came to speak to us in this inquiry) told us that an increasing number of people seeking advice are young

and without some of the difficulties of previous generations. We heard further examples of how the Irish community has made a significant positive contribution to virtually every aspect of British society. Irish people in Britain continue to make distinctive, creative contributions to business, politics, the arts, entertainment and sport.

5. As those who migrate to the UK are increasingly younger and well educated there is evidence that some assimilate quickly and demonstrate their Irish identity in different ways. Their level of community identification may vary across groups. The vast majority of Irish community and voluntary organisations organise on a non-sectarian, non-political basis and make their services available to all. However, it was suggested that most of the users of such services are from a southern Irish background, and that Northern Irish Protestants, in particular, did not identify themselves as a specific cultural group in the UK so did not make much use of the services provided by Irish organisations.
6. In line with the changing nature of the Irish community the Federation of Irish Societies¹, an umbrella organisation representing Irish clubs and societies in Britain, has sought to enhance the political awareness of the community. The Federation launched a campaign in the House of Commons during this year's general election called "Make Irish Votes Count". Its aim was to ensure that politicians recognised the social and economic contribution of the community and addressed its specific needs and concerns. The launch was followed by a number of regional hustings with cross-party candidates. It is all part of an approach to increase the self-confidence of the community, which had often not wanted to draw attention to itself. Much of that attitude was due to the troubles, and the media's tradition of viewing all Irish matters through the prism of Northern Ireland.
7. In spite of the changes outlined above, the disadvantages experienced by the Irish community that we touched upon in our previous report remain, especially for those who emigrated many years ago. The Irish have an above average number of people who are economically inactive and a high rate of claimants of out of work benefits.² As the Irish population in Britain is generally older than the wider community it follows that rates of mental illnesses, heart disease and diabetes are higher than average. Amongst the elderly Irish the rate of dementia is a particular problem. It is estimated that of those Irish people diagnosed with dementia less than two per cent access mainstream dementia services, compared to one-third of other people with dementia. These socio-economic and health disadvantages have if anything only been exacerbated by the economic situation over the last three years.

¹ The Federation were extremely helpful to the committee in producing its 2007 report and have continued to be so for this inquiry. We are grateful for all their assistance and support their work.

² In a helpful note provided to the committee the Federation of Irish Societies referred to a report by the New Policy Institute in 2009 called *London's Poverty Profile*, which showed men born in the Republic of Ireland had unemployment percentage rates in the high 20s or low 30s. Men from Poland, France, Australia, USA and Germany have rates under 10 per cent.

Funding for the Irish community

8. Since 1984 the Irish Government has given funding to voluntary bodies that help vulnerable Irish people in Britain. Grants are allocated by the Department of Foreign Affairs following recommendations by the Emigrant Services Advisory Committee (formerly known as the *Díon*). The funding was initially limited and distributed mainly in London. Over the last six years, though, £40 million has been provided for projects across the country. The funding, whilst still spent primarily on welfare services for the most vulnerable, has broadened to also supporting cultural and heritage projects, and there has been an increased focus on investing in capital projects. The Irish Embassy told the Committee that the capital funding provided by the Irish Government often allows traditional Irish social centres to provide broader and more appropriate support to their changing communities, particularly to the elderly.

9. Despite the current economic climate Irish Government funding has remained at high levels for such projects. Funding was £7.64 million in 2009, which was distributed to over 135 organisations. The Minister for Foreign Affairs has made it clear that the Irish Government will continue to support the Irish community in Britain and that the needs of the elderly and most vulnerable members of the community will remain a priority. The Irish Embassy has sought to stress to recipients the importance of value for money and broadening funding sources. Funding from other sources is under threat though, particularly that provided by local authorities in the UK (which is mainly provided to larger organisations). Voluntary donations may also be reduced in the present economic climate. However, in spite of the economic circumstances the Irish Government is committed to continue to provide a significant level of support and **the Committee welcomes the ongoing support shown to the Irish community from the Irish Government. We also welcome funding awarded to Irish community and voluntary organisations by local authorities across Britain for services to support vulnerable Irish people. It would be deeply regrettable if all those who fund support for the community viewed it as an easy target for cuts.**

Irish Cultural Centre in Hammersmith

10. The Committee was grateful for the opportunity to visit the Irish Cultural Centre in Hammersmith. The Centre was built in 1995 by Hammersmith and Fulham Council. It provides a range of cultural and education services to the Irish community (though its services are open to all). For example, the Centre hosts regular traditional and contemporary Irish music events, film screenings, theatre productions and art exhibitions. Recently there had been a programme to begin educating on Irish heritage and culture in order to enhance awareness in schools. Programmes are run to increase interest in Irish literature, history, language and culture. The Centre was a good example of the cultural activities provided by Irish centres, as well as the welfare support they provide. Such cultural programmes will be of use to the community regardless of the economic make-up of it.

11. One of the tenants of the centre is the Irish Support and Advice Service. Its main work is supporting Irish people who emigrated in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. Many of those supported by the Service are single and have no family to help them; 18 per cent of Irish households comprise a single pensioner, the highest of any community. They have often lost touch with relatives in Ireland. An increasing number are housebound. Often they are unaware of the support that is available to them, and wary of approaching others for assistance. Much of the work of the Service lies in ensuring the elderly Irish receive the assistance they are entitled to. Being physically located in the Cultural Centre means that visitors can obtain support, advice and company in the same building. Similar themes emerged in the discussion we had with a representative of the London Irish Centre in Camden. The profile of their average customer was a poor, single elderly person with a lack of understanding of the support available. **In our 2007 report we drew attention to the particular needs to the elderly Irish and recommended that they should continue to be given attention and funding in line with their needs. The discussions we had prove that that recommendation is still valid. We further recommend that funding be provided for a comprehensive survey of the needs of elderly Irish, to include recommendations on how best to address their needs effectively.**

12. The Committee was impressed with the support provided in the Irish Cultural Centre. However, we were sorry to hear that its future is in jeopardy. The Centre leases its building from Hammersmith and Fulham Council. It has recently been informed that the lease may not be renewed beyond 2012 as the Council may want to dispose of a number of buildings as part of its attempts to address its financial situation. The Council and Centre are currently considering options for its future. One is for the Centre to purchase the building, which is estimated to cost around £2 million. Needless to say raising that amount of money will be very hard to achieve. **We recognise that Irish centres across the country play a leading role in meeting the cultural and social care needs of local communities. Given the importance of the Hammersmith Irish Cultural Centre to the Irish community, and the symbolism that closing a successful community centre would represent, we recommend that all concerned (the Irish Government, Hammersmith and Fulham Council, the Centre itself and the Irish community) strive as much as possible to find a viable solution to keep the Centre running at its present premises.**

Information about the Irish community

13. A recurring theme of the evidence we heard was the lack of reliable information about the Irish community. We have covered above the uncertainty around the numbers in the UK. Similar difficulties exist in obtaining data on their health problems. Our 2007 report found that the community is over-represented in statistics on mental health issues such as distress and drug and alcohol misuse, and that it has a lower life expectancy. However, those statistics were collated locally by community groups. In 2007 we recommended that the relevant authorities consider allocating a proportion of their funding to provide independent and objective evidence of the health inequalities faced by the

community. Healthcare organisations were encouraged to include the Irish in their ethnic minority statistics and monitoring.

14. Regrettably, the situation does not seem to have changed. The Irish centres we heard from all suffered from the lack of reliable information about those they seek to represent. With a couple of notable exceptions, universities do not show much interest in conducting research on the Irish community, in spite of the success of previous academic research. Lack of funding for research is a perennial problem.
15. In 2007 we also recommended that the UK Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and the Office for National Statistics should ensure that the duty on public authorities to keep and monitor statistics on all identified ethnic minorities includes the Irish community. The Federation of Irish Societies told us that DCLG's quarterly citizenship surveys would be invaluable if they included data on the Irish. Instead, such data are merged into the broader "white" category. The Federation suggests that the Equality and Human Rights Commission similarly excludes the Irish in its research, and approaches ethnicity questions based on a black/white binary. Other organisations—governmental and non-governmental—also do not compile separate information of the Irish as a group. The lack of information did not help in getting the community official recognition; the Federation reported that often people felt they had to "jump up and down" to be acknowledged.
16. **The problems facing the Irish community cannot be properly addressed unless they are assessed on the basis of full, reliable data. We therefore reiterate our recommendation that public authorities make it standard practice to keep and monitor data on the Irish as an ethnic community in Britain and that they use those data to inform policy.**

2011 census

17. The most high-profile exercise in obtaining data about the population in the United Kingdom is the decennial census. The 2001 census was the first to provide an ethnic breakdown of the population, and it is noted above that in our previous report we thought the number of people who identified themselves as Irish born (705,000) may have been an underestimation. It was thought that many Irish living in Britain may have chosen to tick the "British" box. This may have been in large part due to the ingrained culture of the community not wanting to draw attention to itself, and perhaps due to nervousness in engaging with government authorities. **In 2007 we recommended that the Office for National Statistics should continue to include "Irish" in the ethnic minority section of the next census in 2011, and we are pleased that they have done so.**
18. However, having the option to identify as Irish on the census form is not enough. It is important that the Irish community is encouraged to participate fully in the 2011 census. As the Irish Embassy put it, "This is vital because the census is not merely a historical record of the population but because it is used by all sections of the British state in planning future services and allocating resources. The

census statistics are the only source of data from which the NHS, local authorities and everyone in between receives their allocation of funding from central government for another ten years.” **We were encouraged to hear that the Embassy is supporting the Federation of Irish Societies’ campaign to encourage Irish of all ages to participate fully in next year’s census, and hope that others do likewise.**

Irish traveller community

19. In 2007 we noted the major challenges facing the Irish traveller community and hoped that efforts to assist them were enhanced. In our recent discussions the Federation of Irish Societies told us that Irish travellers are amongst the most socially excluded people in the country, and fare badly in terms of health and education. The Irish Traveller Movement in Britain³ suggested that their life expectancy is 10–12 years lower than the average in Britain, and the infant mortality rate is three times higher. Only 38 per cent of Irish traveller children continue education until the statutory leaving age. The lack of authorised gypsy and traveller sites means many are classified as homeless. Their situation is not improved by negative media coverage. The Movement said that the negative perception of travellers often results in decisions being taken by government which aim to placate the wider settled community, rather than addressing the needs of travellers.

20. We also heard about the continuing problems faced by the traveller community as regards housing. Local authority provision for travellers has been low, and the planning system often results in a significant number of objections to proposals for sites for travellers; the Irish Traveller Movement in Britain suggested that proposals for localising planning decisions would only increase opposition to planning proposals relating to travellers. The Housing and Communities Agency’s budget for gypsy and traveller accommodation has been cut significantly, and other measures such as the proposed discontinuation of regional spatial strategies risk threatening the welfare of that group. **We reiterate our call for services to continue to be delivered to the Irish traveller community in line with their needs, and to focus particularly on the educational, health and accommodation needs of the community. Government at all levels should ensure there is ongoing dialogue and consultation with traveller community groups on issues that affect them.**

³ The Irish Traveller Movement in Britain is a charity which represents the Irish traveller community and works to increase their social inclusion. We are grateful for the note the Movement provided for this inquiry.

Summary of conclusions and recommendations

- A. The Committee welcomes the ongoing support shown to the Irish community from the Irish Government. We also welcome funding awarded to Irish community and voluntary organisations by local authorities across Britain for services to support vulnerable Irish people. It would be deeply regrettable if all those who fund support for the community viewed it as an easy target for cuts.**
- B. In our 2007 report we drew attention to the particular needs to the elderly Irish and recommended that they should continue to be given attention and funding in line with their needs. The discussions we had prove that that recommendation is still valid. We further recommend that funding be provided for a comprehensive survey of the needs of elderly Irish, to include recommendations on how best to address their needs effectively.**
- C. We recognise that Irish centres across the country play a leading role in meeting the cultural and social care needs of local communities. Given the importance of the Hammersmith Irish Cultural Centre to the Irish community, and the symbolism that closing a successful community centre would represent, we recommend that all concerned strive as much as possible to find a viable solution to keep the Centre running at its present premises.**
- D. The problems facing the Irish community cannot be properly addressed unless they are assessed on the basis of full, reliable data. We therefore reiterate our recommendation that public authorities make it standard practice to keep and monitor data on the Irish as an ethnic community in Britain and that they use those data to inform policy.**
- E. In 2007 we recommended that the Office for National Statistics should continue to include “Irish” in the ethnic minority section of the next census in 2011, and we are pleased that they have done so.**
- F. We were encouraged to hear that the Embassy is supporting the Federation of Irish Societies’ campaign to encourage Irish of all ages to participate fully in next year’s census, and hope that others do likewise.**
- G. We reiterate our call for services to continue to be delivered to the Irish traveller community in line with their needs, and to focus particularly on the educational, health and accommodation needs of the community. Government at all levels should ensure there is ongoing dialogue and consultation with traveller community groups on issues that affect them.**

Committee meeting

London: 11 October 2010

Lord Dubs (Chair), Johnny Brady TD (Co-Chair), Senator Dan Boyle, Senator John Ellis, Chris Ruane MP and Jim Wells MLA.

The Committee is indebted to the witnesses listed below who gave up their time to meet the Committee on their fact-finding visits in London.

Jennie McShannon, Chief Executive, Federation of Irish Societies

Martin Collins, Federation of Irish Societies

Barbara Jones, Counsellor (Anglo Irish and Political Affairs), Irish Embassy in London

Gerry Kelly, First Secretary (Irish Community), Irish Embassy in London, and Chair of Emigrants Services Advisory Committee

Michael Keaveney, Third Secretary (Irish Community), Irish Embassy in London

Catherina Casey, General Manager, Irish Cultural Centre

Dermot Murphy, Chair, Irish Support and Advice Service