



**Irish
in Britain**

Irish in Britain

Submission for the new
diaspora policy 2020-2025

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Overview of Irish in Britain and the diaspora

Irish in Britain is a charity and national membership network for over 120 Irish charities, groups and societies throughout Britain. We were originally founded as the Federation of Irish Societies in 1973 and remain the only national membership network in the Irish diaspora. The activities of our membership range from welfare, housing and support services to culture, sports and language. We provide member support services, coordinate health campaigns and have a strategic role in representing issues common to our membership and the wider diaspora. We also work closely with the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Ireland and the Irish in Britain.

We welcome the commitment from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFA) to evolve a new diaspora policy. As the first country to actively fund and support diaspora organisations, Ireland has a progressive history in diaspora engagement. As a representative body with a long history and diverse membership, we believe that Irish in Britain embodies a broad constituency of interests and we are pleased to share our perspective for the policy consultation.

This submission provides an overview of our assessment of the challenges and opportunities ahead for a changing diaspora, with recommendations based on our experience of working with and representing a wide range of Irish community interests. The issues raised are informed by regular consultations and interactions with our members, as well as from a strategic review.

The Irish community in Britain is distinctive in its older profile. The community had the highest median age (53) of all categorised ethnic groups in the 2011 United Kingdom census and well over half of the Irish-born in Britain in 2011 had arrived before 1971. As a result of the Emigrant Support Programme (ESP), Irish in Britain members can offer bespoke support services to those in need, many of whom are represented within this older population, alongside Irish clubs and centres providing cultural and social activities. With the pressures of structural welfare reform in Britain and disinvestment in public services, it is essential that the ESP remains a key diaspora engagement platform, is effectively distributed and, importantly, effectively spent.

Through our two health campaigns – Green Hearts and Cuimhne: the Irish memory loss alliance – Irish in Britain raises awareness about some of the health challenges in the Irish community. At the heart of these campaigns are culturally sensitive care and a focus on community-led and empowering activism. Both campaigns seek to address stigma and taboos about health issues in the Irish diaspora in Britain that are less understood within mainstream healthcare, a historical deficit in commissioned care services that often fails to recognise the distinctiveness of our community.

In recent years it has become apparent that the diaspora is also shifting in its nature and profile. The newer cohort of emigrants to Britain since the 2008 financial crisis has brought many highly educated professionals who often connect and socialise through professional networks, rather than more traditional means. Some of these network groups are associated with Irish in Britain and we continue to expand our connections with them. They are internationalist, European and mobile in their outlook, qualities that foster a different relationship with the host country. This broadening and diversification of views and professions is enriching the profile of the community, which has been perceived as more homogenous in the past.

Our membership is also increasingly reflective of the diaspora's diversity in profile and background. In the last few years we have welcomed groups such as London Irish Abortion Rights Campaign, London Irish LGBT Network and the Association of Mixed Race Irish. We have grown in size as we have attracted new constituencies that may not have considered being part of a wider coalition before.

The last few years have witnessed increased political and civil society activism, in part a result of Brexit uncertainties and negative public discourse on 'otherness', but also due to the referenda on equal marriage and abortion rights in Ireland. Our newer members are now attracted to organise and be part of a progressive network in a way that would not have happened a handful of years ago. This mobilisation of progressive forces is a contemporary characteristic of the current environment and reflects wider societal change in both Ireland and Britain. Our role is to ensure this engagement and activism has traction and sustainability beyond Brexit and is a driver for a new generation of community leadership and civil society agency. The diaspora policy should acknowledge this resource as a partner in progressing

positive cultural identity and as a partnership of stakeholders that add value and capacity beyond the transaction of ESP programme or extending the voting franchise.

As well as expanding our membership to reflect the diaspora, our board has evolved and diversified, bringing in new skills, ideas and governance systems. Irish in Britain is a smaller but leaner organisation than it was ten years ago, and we are now much more resilient, accountable and strategic.

Irish in Britain's plurality and profile posits us as leading a progressive alliance of Irish organisations in Britain. We will continue to seek and build cross-sector cooperation to mitigate divisions and challenge voices that seek to isolate communities as the Brexit process continues. We recognise that the long-standing history of the Irish community gives us entitlements and protections that more recent groups do not enjoy, however, our experiences of marginalisation and hostility in the past inform our sense of solidarity with others and this is a civic leadership responsibility of our community. The community is ready to meet that challenge and has the necessary leadership within the sector. To best utilise those skills and leadership, we believe that the new diaspora policy should be a shared commitment for action. Our shared responsibility with the DFA and diaspora organisations is not just to forge and maintain a dynamic relationship with the future strategy, but also to be ambitious in our accountabilities. The diaspora is ready to be a live and active partner in this conversation – we recommend using the leadership of our organisations, networks and activist groups to support the global community concept.

Challenges and opportunities facing the Irish in Britain

There are a number of challenges facing the Irish diaspora in Britain, many of which were recognised in the *Global Irish* policy in 2015, but in the subsequent four years social changes and the UK's vote to leave the European Union have generated new social and political challenges that require a coordinated response in the new diaspora policy.

Social care in Britain

The last decade has seen significant disinvestment in social care infrastructure in Britain, which has particularly affected statutory responses to age-related illnesses in the Irish community and issues such as social exclusion are chronic and acute. Effectively implementing the ESP, in the context of such demands, provides community-led resources, local people delivery, local bespoke responses and delivering support to disadvantaged Irish citizens in need of care.

Population demographics

Within the British context, demographics are a crucial factor in the care of the diaspora. For example, care providers and volunteers are often older citizens. This offers a challenge to the long-term sustainability of organisations and projects. The new policy must address ways in which younger members of the diaspora can be engaged and brought into organisations as trustees, staff and volunteers.

Future of Irish clubs and centres

There are thriving Irish clubs and centres in many major British cities, but several, particularly in smaller towns with aging Irish populations, are threatened by closure. These organisations are important sources of social and cultural activities for thousands of Irish people. Their closure would damage the ability of older members of the community to access services and the health benefits of social interaction. A wider social change is occurring with young people moving from rural to urban areas and changes in traditional family networks. The key challenge here is succession planning and facilitating more inter-generational collaboration and opportunities.

Coordination and collaboration

While the Irish diaspora in Britain is characterised by a mature network of civil society organisations in comparison with other countries, there is still sometimes a lack of coordination and collaboration between groups – even in the same cities. The DFA can play a key role in championing good practice models, organising information workshops and other ways to bring groups together in partnership with Irish in Britain. Minister Cannon’s diaspora consultations in London, Leeds and Manchester were a hugely successful expression of connectedness and, logistics notwithstanding, a good model for interaction within the wider engagement toolkit.

Diversity of the diaspora

It is essential that the Irish government continues to embrace the diversity of the Irish diaspora, as well as the changing profile of the population at home. The policy must contain a strategy for recognising and fortifying the diversity of our communities and groups.

New Irish passport holders

With over 100,000 people in Britain having applied for their first Irish passport since the 2016 Brexit referendum, the Brexit process has opened up questions about how to define an expanding diaspora. More and more second- and third-generation Irish are now reconnecting with their heritage and this could mark a long-term trend. The new passport holders are a diverse group and this is an opportunity to extend the global diaspora invitation on new and positive terms. We have the networks and organisation to embrace this challenge and some clarity within the new policy would acknowledge this opportunity.

Issues surrounding Brexit

Some concerns have been raised about a lack of legislation in the area of deportations and the criminal justice system by organisations that work with the Traveller community, particularly in the context of Brexit. While Irish in Britain welcomes the recent Memorandum of Understanding between the Irish and British governments, there are indeed some areas of concern that could be responded to with further clarification. Specific issues include family reunification, voter registration and digital exclusion, which has an impact on post-Brexit documentation.

Diaspora voting rights

Irish in Britain does not advocate a stance on the upcoming referendum on diaspora voting rights and there is not uniform consensus amongst our membership or indeed the wider diaspora here. However, we do represent members such as Votes for Irish Citizens Abroad and facilitate discussion on the issue. The recent referenda in Ireland, with the accompanying social changes, alongside the controversies surrounding Brexit have sparked a new wave of civic activism and political engagement. If passed in favour of diaspora voting rights, the referendum in October will facilitate greater engagement between Ireland and its diaspora and the policy should acknowledge the new relationship afforded by this constitutional change.

Recommendations

Emigrant Support Programme

The ESP represents a tangible and practical expression of the diaspora policy and we view it as progressive and impactful. We are pleased to be one of the first ESP recipients to secure three years of multiannual funding. We continue to support the expansion of multiannual funding, which would secure financial backing for groups that spend valuable time each year reapplying. This would facilitate long-term planning, enable staff retention and increased stability for many organisations.

We believe that the ESP has facilitated very positive growth within community leadership in Britain and further afield. It is more than just a grant scheme: it connects Irish communities and helps them work in partnership with the Irish government. However, an under-developed aspect is promoting the beneficial works that it supports – both in Ireland and abroad. This includes profiling the impact of particular organisations and charities funded by the ESP and creating a joined-up narrative highlighting the success of the programme across media platforms. While good news stories are promoted by media such as the Irish Times Abroad, this can be subscriber only and aimed primarily at the diaspora. We would like to see the impact of the ESP more visible in other Irish media and the Irish public.

Recommendations:

- Expand the delivery of multiannual ESP grants
- Develop a strategy to narrate the positive social impact of the programme within and beyond Ireland

A healthy and connected diaspora

As a national representative organisation, Irish in Britain has a long history of advocating for better health outcomes for the diaspora through development of targeted health campaigns, working with our membership and our work with the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Ireland and the Irish in Britain. A focus on collaboration, sustainability and global positioning underpins our recommendations for cultivating a healthy and connected diaspora. One of Irish in Britain's current health campaigns, [Green Hearts](#), demonstrates the positive impact,

transferability and sustainability of a community-led approach that engages a wide cross-section of the diaspora, promotes inter-generational work and volunteering, and carries a pro-active and empowering message. Since its launch, the campaign has cultivated strong working relationships with multiple Irish organisations and networks including Britain GAA, businesses, community groups and Haemochromatosis UK. These collaborative relationships have formed the basis for the continued development and evolution of the Green Hearts message. Social media has also been at the heart of promoting Green Hearts with the online #KnowYourScore campaign.

Recommendations:

- Facilitate communication and cooperation between key organisations and community networks
- Recognise partnership and collaborations in funding strategy, such as the better use of resources and a consistent message
- Establish the Emigrant Support Programme as a global champion in diaspora health strategy by spreading best practice and transferable health models across diaspora communities

Culturally sensitive care

As a demographically older group than all other ethnic groups in Britain, the Irish have the highest estimated prevalence of dementia in the 2011 UK census. It is estimated that 10,000 Irish people in England may be living with dementia. Words like ‘dementia’ are often stigmatised and many people, of all ages, know little about it or have misconceptions around causality, characteristics and impact. A central aspect of our [Cuimhne](#) campaign, which raises awareness and educates about memory loss, is a culturally sensitive approach tailored to the Irish community. As a result, Cuimhne has generated increased provision for people living with dementia. Organisations have undertaken Cuimhne training and most now offer culturally sensitive services for isolated Irish people with or at risk of dementia. This approach also allows us greater access to ‘harder-to-reach’ parts of the community.

Recommendation:

- Support culturally sensitive health campaigns that work closely with community groups

Mobilising the community and inter-generational engagement

We see mobilising the community to face the challenges ahead for the diaspora in Britain as a critical milestone in promoting inter-generational engagement. It is vital that Irish organisations engage with younger generations – by creating a credible and transactional platform for volunteerism and by providing meaningful opportunities to effect positive change. This will help the long-term sustainability of our organisations. To help model this, Irish in Britain are designing a young leaders programme to develop future trustees and future community leadership.

Recommendations:

- Support and promote successful initiatives such as Irish in Britain’s volunteer hub and annual volunteer awards
- Invest in research and workshops into inter-generational work in community organisations
- Promote sustainability within the context of asset-based community development that promotes community relationships and localism within the ESP model

British-based survivors’ strategy

Britain is home to significant numbers of survivors: 37 percent of those who gave evidence to the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse lived in Britain compared to 58 percent of presentations from Ireland.¹ With the impending closure of Caranua, it is now even more difficult for these people to have their voices heard and to claim support. Many suffer from social isolation. It is imperative that the new policy is sensitive to the needs of older Irish people and adult survivors of Ireland’s legacy of institutionalisation. This will remain a priority

¹ Mary Higgins, *Delivering a profile of survivors of abuse in Irish religious institutions* (2010). Accessed at <https://www.ssgt.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Developing-a-profile-of-survivors-of-abuse-in-Irish-religious-institutions-2010.pdf>

area of our work and that of many of our members, as we campaign for equivalence for British-based survivors in terms of consultation and representation.

Recommendations:

- Recognise and integrate survivor networks based in Britain into a wider body
- We request equivalence for survivors based in Britain in any proposed provision or consideration arising from priorities stated with new diaspora policy

Progressive leadership of the diaspora

The Irish diaspora is a dynamic and evolving body. This has become ever more apparent in the last decade as new organisations have emerged to reflect a more diverse diaspora, alongside a largely positive endorsement from the Irish in Britain for social changes in Ireland ratified in recent referenda. These changes must continue to be recognised and represented within civil society and the Irish government. It was significant that during the recent Irish referenda campaigns, the Irish Ambassador in London met with campaigning groups from different sides of the argument. Irish in Britain has sought to give a platform to a wide range of voices and experiences from the diaspora. For instance, we held a conference on LGBT equality and the Irish community in November 2018 and a wide range of guests shared their views at our symposium about the challenges of Brexit in July 2019.

As we are beginning to see more visible commemorations of the Northern Ireland conflict and the peace process, it is also vital that the Irish in Britain experience continues to be recognised by the Irish and British governments. A successful example was the memorial project for those that died in the Birmingham bombings, completed in 2018, which had a strong message of collaboration and community cohesion. Such messages are particularly important in the context of increasingly divisive British politics.

Recommendations:

- Develop awareness and support organisations that reflect the diversity of the diaspora, including all ethnic groups and under-represented groups
- Continue to support constructive memorials and commemoration of the Irish in Britain's historical experiences and legacy

- Acknowledge community leadership and its future role in restorative activity that promotes cohesive communities
- Harness skills and leadership within the diaspora and be ambitious in articulating shared responsibilities to deliver the new strategy

Research into the diaspora

Irish in Britain champions research into the diaspora in Britain, much of which we showcase through our online bibliography. A vibrant and contemporary research landscape facilitates increased cultural awareness, increased knowledge for commissioning bodies and a better understanding of community cohesion. With the profile of the diaspora in Britain in flux, up to date academic research to build a credible evidence base is vitally important to inform commissioners, planners, lawmakers, and local government. There is still two years until the 2021 UK census and an analysis time lag before the necessary data is made available. Irish in Britain, academics and the DFA collaborated very effectively after the 2011 census to produce illuminating studies of the community. Since then, the Irish diaspora research community in Britain has been affected by the closure of the Irish studies centre at St Mary's University. The symbolism of President Higgins and Prince Charles as joint patrons of the Institute of Irish Studies at the University of Liverpool was very welcome and significant, but additional Irish government support for research funding is still essential. Research will inform the new collaborative strategies that are needed to tackle the challenges facing our community.

Recommendation:

- Invest in research projects and university/community collaborations in Britain into topics such as inter-generational engagement and mapping the future profile of the community

Delivering a dynamic diaspora policy

Ireland is unique in offering ESP grants to diaspora organisations. One of the objectives of the ESP was to be a tangible expression of the diaspora engagement ambitions. Diaspora communities have historically sent remittances and support back to Ireland. This is now a good opportunity to reframe this relationship beyond the transactional. The new policy can be a dialogue in which civil society and government should see themselves working in

partnership. Irish in Britain would like to see the cultivation of a dynamic policy that facilitates engagement from diaspora communities and is bold in articulating the responsibilities of us all in that dialogue.

Recommendation:

- Develop a dynamic strategy that has characteristics of a compact² between the Irish government and diaspora organisations, and is explicit in terms of expectations, co-production and co-delivery. For instance, community groups could be more involved in reviewing the policy after its implementation.

² The compact is an agreement between the UK government and the voluntary and community sector. It sets out key principles and establishes a way of working that improves their relationship for mutual advantage. It considers areas such as involvement in policy design and consultation, funding arrangements, promoting equality, ensuring better involvement in delivering services and strengthening independence. The Compact agreement plays a key role in cross-sector working and ensuring that organisations are better able to influence and deliver services and policies which will have the most positive impact within their community. For further details see: <http://www.compactvoice.org.uk/about-compact>.

Summary

The diaspora policy should lay out a compelling vision to liaise with a diaspora challenged, but motivated, by universal events in a rapidly changing world. Much of this is linked to the pace of new technology, which raises challenges for our community in terms of connectedness, employment and fragmentation. Moreover, many organisations are worried about their long-term sustainability, Brexit has revived divisive rhetoric, and it is vital that the sector must be open and promote itself as a progressive alliance that represents all the diaspora. The ESP remains the essential tool with which to support the diaspora, though not the only one in the ambitious engagement strategy that we would like to see in a dynamic diaspora policy as described in our recommendations.

Irish in Britain's recommendations	
Emigrant Support Programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand the delivery of multiannual ESP grants • Develop a strategy to narrate the positive social impact of the programme within and beyond Ireland
A healthy and connected diaspora	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate communication and cooperation between key organisations and community networks • Recognise partnership and collaborations in funding strategy, such as the better use of resources and a consistent message • Establish the Emigrant Support Programme as a global champion in diaspora health strategy by spreading best practice and transferable health models across diaspora communities
Culturally sensitive care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support culturally sensitive health campaigns that work closely with community groups
Mobilising the community and inter-generational engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support and promote successful initiatives such as Irish in Britain's volunteer hub and annual volunteer awards • Invest in research and workshops into inter-generational work in community organisations • Promote sustainability within context of asset-based community development that promotes community relationships and localism within the ESP model
British-based survivors' strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognise and integrate survivor networks based in Britain into a wider body • We request equivalence for survivors based in Britain in any proposed provision or consideration arising from priorities stated with new diaspora policy
Progressive leadership of the diaspora	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop awareness and support organisations that reflect the diversity of the diaspora, including all ethnic groups and under-represented groups • Continue to support constructive memorials and commemoration of the Irish in Britain's historical experiences and legacy • Acknowledge community leadership and its future role in restorative activity that promotes cohesive communities • Harness skills and leadership within the diaspora and be ambitious in articulating shared responsibilities to deliver the new strategy
Research into the diaspora	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invest in research projects and university/community collaborations in Britain into topics such as inter-generational engagement and mapping the future profile of the community
Delivering a dynamic diaspora policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a dynamic strategy that has characteristics of a compact between the Irish government and diaspora organisations, and is explicit in terms of expectations, co-production and co-delivery. For instance, community groups could be more involved in reviewing the policy after its implementation.