

HOUSING AND THE IRISH COMMUNITYIntroduction

This report outlines the background and history of the Irish community in Brent and refers to their particular housing needs. It draws attention to the housing needs of single migrant workers and the difficulties facing tenants, especially pensioners and disabled, who wish to move to Ireland.

Background and History

The Irish comprise approximately a tenth of the population of Brent, where there are over 25,000 people who were born in Ireland, while over 15% of all births in Brent are to Irish parents.

Irish people have long been present in the Borough, having first come into the Kilburn area in the mid-19th century when starvation in Ireland and the demand for Irish navvies brought many thousands of Irish people to London. Irish migration into Brent continued throughout the 1950's up to the mid-1960's, with a doubling in numbers between 1951 and 1966.

The most recent census figures show the Irish established throughout the Borough, with the largest numbers in Cricklewood, Willesden, Harlesden, and particularly Kilburn.

The Irish in Brent tend to live in the poorer parts of the Borough, in the inner city areas of worst housing conditions. For example, Kilburn, which contains the highest proportion of Irish people, also has the highest level of multi-occupied housing and the second highest level of overcrowding in the Borough.

Homelessness

According to the annual reports of all Irish welfare agencies in London, homelessness is the most common social problem for Irish people. In Brent there is currently a high proportion of the Irish community which is homeless or in housing stress.

For various social and cultural reasons, many homeless or badly housed Irish people are unaware of their housing and other rights, are often not registered on the housing waiting list, are not availing of new housing schemes, and are not receiving housing benefits to which they may be entitled.

There is also a lack of suitable housing for single homeless people. At present they are accommodated in centres such as the D.H.S.S. Reception Centre in Pound Lane, Willesden, where over half of the male residents are Irish; the Men's Night Shelter in Kingsgate Road, Kilburn, and the Women's Night Shelter in Salusbury Road, Kilburn.

Migrant Workers

There seems to be an acute shortage of suitable accommodation for Irish migrant workers, and some of the privately rented accommodation used by Irish workers is inadequate, substandard, overcrowded, and in contravention of housing, planning and environmental health legislation.

In the past, single workers could find lodgings, bedsitters and flats to rent from private landlords. However, the amount of low cost housing available for rent in the private sector, especially for workers on low incomes, has dwindled drastically.

The decreasing amount of low cost private sector housing, coupled with local unemployment and redundancies has resulted in a growing number of homeless people whose housing choice is limited to the cheapest and often the worst accommodation in the private sector.

(Continued overleaf)

Often single people are forced to live in overcrowded and substandard accommodation in lodging houses, hostels and bed and breakfast guest houses, often with a lack of privacy, inadequate fire precautions, no security of tenure, loss of personal dignity and social stigma.

The position of the older single migrant worker, homeless or living in very poor housing conditions, and predominantly male, is particularly bad. Many of these people came over between 1945 and 1960 when unemployment in Ireland and the demand for labour in the rebuilding of post-war Britain brought many thousands of Irish to live and work in Brent.

Nowadays it is estimated that each year about 1,000 single migrant workers come from Ireland to live and work in Brent. As many find it difficult to find somewhere to live, there is a growing number of homeless Irish people, mainly younger men and women, working in local manufacturing, service and construction industries.

Returning to Ireland

Many Irish-born pensioners and disabled tenants who wish to return to live in Ireland cannot easily do so as they cannot afford to purchase a home there, and some Irish councils require that applicants for local authority housing should have lived in their area for a minimum period which may range from six months to four years.

It is the policy of Brent Council that any Brent tenant who wishes to move to the Republic of Ireland is free to pursue a mutual exchange with a tenant of a local authority in the Republic of Ireland. However, it is up to the individual to find a suitable tenant with whom they may wish to exchange and such an exchange could only take place if it was agreed by both Brent and the local authority in the Republic of Ireland of which the person with which they wish to exchange is a tenant.

The individual tenant has to arrange his/her own exchange and there is no medium other than that of local newspapers etc. in which they can register their interest in such an exchange, although a notice could be placed on the notice board of the district offices in Brent in the hope that a tenant in the Republic of Ireland might see it or hear of it if they were pursuing a similar exchange.

Whilst the mutual exchange is an avenue open to those Brent tenants who wish to move to the Republic of Ireland, it is not possible for such a tenant to be transferred directly to the Republic of Ireland. This is because there are no schemes that exist either within Brent or nationally that enable tenants to be nominated and thus be transferred from a local authority such as Brent to a local authority in the Republic of Ireland.

The National Mobility Scheme which enables tenants to move from one local authority to another within Great Britain is now being extended to cover Northern Ireland but there does not seem to be any move to extend this or to establish a similar scheme to cover the Republic of Ireland. The possibility of an inter-European (E.E.C.) or even an international mobility scheme might be discussed by relevant bodies such as the E.E.C.

The Commission of the European Communities in Brussels is prepared to consider applications for financial support for housing schemes for the handicapped and migrants. It may be possible to obtain E.E.C. financial support for housing in Brent for incoming migrants from Ireland, and in Ireland for returning migrants from Brent.

Recommendation

That in view of the evidence of housing needs among a high proportion of Irish people in Brent, the appointment of a specialist Irish Community Housing Worker should be considered.

Job Description

A Job Description for this post is attached herewith.

DMC 2/83