



Fionól na n-Éireannach Birmingham

Birmingham Irish Community Forum

TUAIRISC AN gCATHAOIRLEACH
(Chairperson's Report)

CHUIG AN
(To the)

CRINNIÚ CINN BHLIANA
(Annual General Meeting)

14^ú MÉAN FÓMHAR 1995
(14th Septmeber 1995)

IONAD ÉIREANNACH, DERITEND
(Irish Centre, Deritend)

Community Development Officer – Gobnait Ní Chrualaoí
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INTRODUCTION

To begin I should wish to congratulate and thank Dr. Hickman for her inspiring and most interesting speech. I found, as I am sure you all did, the content of her report, based on the findings of the research which she led, while disturbing, not particularly surprising, in terms of the reality of many Irish people's experiences of living in this country.

While this study has been long awaited and overdue, we are pleased now that such a study has come to completion and that perhaps at long last, the experiences of discrimination and disadvantage experienced by many members of the Irish community in Britain can and will be taken seriously by the Local Authorities, relevant institutions and organisations in Britain.

BACKGROUND

According to the most recently available research from the Race Relations Unit of the City Council, the Irish community of Birmingham, make up 140,000 (14%) of the total population. This information is available as a result of research which was commissioned by the Race Relations Unit to Ms Julie Nugent, current Secretary of the Forum.

The systematic exclusion and invisibility of Irish people for almost 200 years as a distinct ethnic minority community has resulted in great difficulties and stumbling blocks being experienced by us when we try to assess the numbers of people living in the city who would identify themselves as Irish.

Two key issues have, in the view of the Forum, caused the difficulties in assessing the true size of Birmingham's Irish community. Firstly, the lack of consistent monitoring of Irish people over the years within the Council and secondly, the inaccuracies of the data from the 1981 and 1991 Census as they only take account the Irish born head of household.

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Despite having such figures however, we know the great contributions which the Irish community have made both to the city of Birmingham in all areas of employment, including the construction industry, businesses and all the professions, and at a National and European level.

We are grateful for the opportunities Birmingham has given our people in providing employment but at this stage whilst we feel we have repaid that debt many times over, Birmingham City Council have, over the years, neither in word nor in deed, adequately recognised our contribution to the building up and well being of the City. Because we are the oldest and the largest ethnic minority in the city, apart from our other contributions already referred to, we have, over the years contributed more to the finances of the City than others, but sadly to say, we have received little in return.

In my annual report last year I gave you a background to how the Irish Forum came into being, however, it might be useful for those of you who were not present last year to give a very brief summary of the series of events which took place in the lead up to the launch of the Forum on 3rd June 1993.

- In 1986, the Race Relations Unit, commissioned Dr Ita O' Donovan to carry out research into the needs of the Irish community, including the Travelling community;
- As a result of this research the City Council recognised our ethnic minority status;
- In February 1992 discussions began on the findings of O' Donovan's survey.
- In November 1992 - The Irish in Birmingham Conference took place;
- On the 3rd June 1993, the Forum was officially launched;
- In March of 1994, we appointed our Community Development Officer.

A number of recommendations came from the Conference but of course we could not deal with all of these at once and therefore the Forum selected the following as priority areas of work in 1994: Monitoring, Housing, Employment and Training issues. In addition to this we took on the task of helping the Irish Welfare Centre secure it's funding for the future. In 1995 we added to our list of priorities:

Education, Health, Social Services and the re-establishment of a St. Patrick's Day Parade.

FUNDING FOR THE IRISH WELFARE & INFORMATION CENTRE

I wish to take this opportunity this evening, by thanking all those who took part in securing mainstream funding for the Irish Welfare & Information Centre. From 1957 to 1972 the Centre received no funding whatsoever from the City Council. Between 1972 and 1990 a nominal sum of not more than £600.00 per annum was received from the Social Services Dept. of the City Council. Then, in 1991, the Centre obtained a much increased grant of £52,000 through a Central Government initiative called Inner City Partnership funding. This money was used to employ an additional Social Worker, part-time Outreach Worker and pay for increased overhead bills.

As you all know by now, that pot of money was time limited and the Irish Welfare Centre was faced with the prospect of having to close or at least make major cut backs. The Executive Committee of the Forum therefore decided this time last year that securing alternative funding for the Centre had to be made a top priority.

We agreed therefore that a campaign should be launched which should include:

- meetings with relevant Officers and Councillors of the City Council to demonstrate the need for the Centre to exist and that funding for it should be part of it's Main Programme budget;
- motivate as many Irish people to lobby their local Councillors, and
- get a petition signed by as many people as possible.

The petition was very successful and in a little over 2 week-ends, 10,000 signatures were collected. Finally on St. Patrick's Day this year, the Deputy Lord Mayor, Coucillor Paul Tilesley announced at our Mass here at the Irish Centre that Main Programme funding had been secured.

This campaign proved to me a number of issues:

1. the strength of the voice of the Irish community in Birmingham when it was most needed;
2. the active community spirit and mutual support which exists within our community;
3. that the Irish community, as a community, were no longer going to stay silent with regard to issues which were directly affecting us, and
4. the importance and power in numbers when campaigning.

I trust that we have all learned from this experience and that in any future campaigns which we may need to launch, and no doubt we will, that you will once again provide your support and co-operation.

I should now like to turn to the other areas of work the Forum has been involved in since this time last year and in particular to focus on the achievements we have made, the stumbling blocks which we have come up against and to offer ideas about how you can continue to support the projects which we are trying to get off the ground.

MONITORING

As you may recall from last year, I spoke about the major difficulties and, dare I say, opposition we were experiencing in terms of having the Irish community successfully and consistently monitored right throughout all the City Council Departments, both in the Personnel Department and in the various Service Departments. Our guest speaker last year, Mr. Seán Hutton spoke in some detail about the importance of monitoring.

Ethnic Monitoring, in my view, is the primary vehicle which we can use to gauge and identify the degree to which Irish people are or are not accessing current services and the levels at which Irish people are employed within the City Council. Of course, monitoring, for monitoring's sake is a waste of time and energy. On the other hand however, if and when we can gain access to the results of monitoring processes, then

clearly we are in a position to identify gaps and suggest ways to the City Council about how those gaps might be filled.

We understand from the most important Departments, for example, Social Services, Education, Housing and Economic Development that an Irish category is now included in their monitoring forms and therefore we feel this has been a great achievement. The Personnel Department and the Health Authority are still refusing to include an Irish category and this is something we will need to continue campaigning for.

I ask, what are they afraid of? If the Irish community are not disadvantaged or discriminated against in any way, then surely they have nothing to hide. Or, will the results of monitoring reflect adversely on the various Departments and authorities who are reluctant to do so?

As Director of the Irish Welfare & Information Centre, I have decided to set up a computer database information system which will link in with a national information system the Federation of Irish Societies has developed. Once this is 'up and running' there will be much easier access to the nature and range of issues we at Irish Welfare deal with. Such information will be very useful for the Forum in terms of our negotiations with the City Council about the current needs and issues facing the Birmingham Irish Community.

On behalf of the Forum I would ask you to:

1. continue to lobby your local Councillors to ensure that all Departments include an Irish category in their monitoring forms;
2. ensure that you always query why Irish is not included if you find this to be the case in any particular form, and
3. always ensure to tick the 'Irish' box when asked to describe your ethnicity.

HOUSING

Since the early 1800's, Irish people have been coming to work in Birmingham. Very many of them worked in the construction industry and therefore provided housing for thousands of people and helped build the current roads and motorway systems. Sadly to say, due to the nature of this type of employment, the long term effects of emigration and the prejudice which was experienced, many Irish people, especially men never got themselves into a position where they could provide housing for themselves and make plans for their later years.

Last year I spoke about the increasing concern, we, at the Irish Welfare Centre were feeling about the disproportionate numbers of single men, now an ageing section of our community, who are living in substandard accommodation.

The Forum agreed and we therefore set as our aim that we should try and ensure the provision of good quality housing, a culturally sensitive environment and affordable rents for those people within our community who are marginalised.

In fulfilling this aim we have now developed a partnership with CARA Irish Housing Association in London and Family Housing Association here in Birmingham. This partnership will ensure the building of self contained flats for older Irish people, men and women, and for Irish people with mental health problems living in the inner city areas of Birmingham.

Currently there is funding secured from the Corporation to build 23 flats. We are facing enormous problems in trying to find a suitable site which would be acceptable to both the Planning, Environmental Services and Housing Departments of the City Council as there appears to be a lack of any clear policies and communication between City Council Departments about how Digbeth should be developed.

We had hoped to have the foundation stone laying ceremony in January of 1996, but, due to recent complications, it seems highly unlikely that building will begin in

January. We will continue to fight for our housing project which we consider to be of paramount importance for our Irish community.

We believe that such a housing project would eventually be owned by and managed by our Irish community. We feel that this aim is certainly being fulfilled and, despite the current difficulties, we trust that by next years AGM we will be well on our way in seeing at least 23 flats near completion.

Another bid is being submitted to the Housing Corporation for a further 20 flats, but we will not know until January 1996 whether or not the funding for this scheme will be available.

Once again I urge you to lobby your local Councillors and MP's to raise their awareness about the need for such housing projects to exist within the city for some members of our community.

EMPLOYMENT & TRAINING NEEDS OF IRISH PEOPLE

The 1991 Census highlighted the disproportionate numbers of Irish people unemployed and in low paid employment. The average unemployment rate for Birmingham is 14.3%. However, 24.1% of men born in Ireland are unemployed, almost double that for the general population. For women born in Ireland, 9.8% are unemployed, and, 41.2% of women born in Ireland, who are economically active, are in part-time employment. This is the highest rate for any community in Birmingham.

In addition, we know that 90% of the users of the Welfare Centre in Birmingham are unemployed. Other Irish Welfare Agencies in Britain also point to the disproportionately high levels of Irish people who are unemployed or who are concentrated in the lower paid jobs, often not reflecting their level of educational qualifications and skills.

In recognition of these facts, the Forum has negotiated with the Economic Development Department the need to carry our research into the level and type of economic activity that exists within the Irish community and make recommendations about how the current situation could be improved. This research has been commissioned to Birmingham University and should be completed by January / February 1996.

Alongside of this we have successfully negotiated the establishment of an Irish Employment Resource Centre. This Centre should hopefully come into existence around this time next year once the necessary funding has been secured. Once established, the Centre will use the information and recommendations made from the research study to identify it's work programme and begin to target those sections of the Irish community who need training, education or the development of new skills..

ST. PATRICK'S DAY

I spoke last year about the celebration of our national day and in particular that I hoped in future years the Reception which we had organised in 1994 would be organised by the City Council, in conjunction with the Forum in 1995. I am pleased to say that this was the case in 1995. In their absence, I would wish to convey our thanks and appreciation, to the ex Lord Mayor, Sir Richard Knowles and Cllr Paul Tilseley, the ex Lord Mayor and Deputy Lord Mayor who not only participated in this reception, but who were extremely supportive to us whenever we approached them during their terms in office.

One of other hopes last year was that recognition of our national day would be given to us by flying our national flag over the Council House. Unfortunately however, this did not happen, and therefore we will continue to argue for this issue to be resolved.

A Parade Committee has been established and we will endeavour to re-establish our first St. Patrick's Day Parade after a 22 year lapse.

Once again, I would urge you to offer your support to this Committee as I feel it is essential that we can publicly express one of our most important cultural festivals on the streets of Birmingham on the 17th March 1996, alongside our fellow country people living and working around the world.

ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT

The most exciting news for us to-night is that we are in a position to announce that we have got agreement in principle from Family Housing Association that they will fund the post of an Administrative Officer for the Forum for 18 months, subject to review. The Forum feel strongly that should this decision be ratified, there will be great benefits for the development of the Irish Forum as a strong and independent community organisation.

As some of you may know, the origins of Family Housing Association are deeply rooted in the Irish community. This decision therefore, if ratified, will be viewed by us as Family Housing Association's opportunity to be able to give something back to the community who was instrumental in establishing its organisation. On behalf of the Forum therefore, and I'm sure the wider Irish community, I wish to convey our sincere thank you for considering our request and we look forward to receiving confirmation of this decision once the Management Committee of Family Housing Association meet on the 21st September.

LIAISON WITH AFFILIATED ORGANISATIONS

The Executive and I have talked for a long time about the need to establish a newsletter, hold regular public / consultation meetings with Irish community groups and organisations and to offer advice and support to you in terms of making funding applications and promoting the work and activity of your organisation within the city, should you need or wish our help in that way.

Should an Administrative Officer be appointed I expect that we will be in a much better position to give some of our time to working more closely with you, the affiliated organisations. To date, the only organisation which has received the time and support of the Forum, for the reasons given earlier, has been the Irish Welfare & Information Centre and for this, with my Director of Irish Welfare hat on, I wish to thank the Forum for that support.

CONCLUSION

In concluding this report it might be useful to reflect back on my closing words of last years report. I suggested that we take as our clarion call the motto of our city 'Forward' and in our own language 'Ar aghaidh'. Therefore, how forward have we gone in twelve months?

Clearly, one of the primary tasks of the Forum over the past twelve months has been to raise the profile of the needs of the older Irish community and in particular older Irish men. This has been done by having numerous meetings with the relevant Departments of Birmingham City Council, including Social Services, the Housing Department and Family Housing Association. Whilst the housing project is not as advanced as we had hoped it would be, I feel confident that by this time next year we will be able to give a very positive report back to you.

We have worked towards meeting the needs of Irish people with mental health problems by ensuring that some of the self contained flats which will be built can be allocated appropriately. Furthermore, we have secured in principle an Irish Employment Resource Centre and research into the economic activity of the community has already begun. Irish people are now being monitored as a distinct category within key Departments of the City Council and therefore results of such monitoring should be available to us within the next 12 - 24 months.

For the year ahead, we trust that our programme of work will:

1. continue working on existing projects to ensure that the aims and objectives of such projects become a reality;

2. ensure the employment and training needs of Irish women, via the Employment Resource Centre and the current research project will be given priority;
3. commission research into the health and social care needs of older Irish men;
4. obtain the Education Department's support to investigate the links between levels of educational achievement and Irish cultural identity amongst 2nd generation Irish people;
5. negotiate with the Health Authority the need for a specific Irish category in it's monitoring programme;
6. work closely with the Strategic Planning Section of Social Services to ensure that their mainstream services can become more culturally sensitive to the needs of all sections of the Irish community;
7. work more closely with relevant agencies in terms of addressing the accommodation needs of Irish Travelling People;
8. produce a Quarterly Newsletter;
9. distribute an Information Leaflet about the work of the Forum;
10. organise consultation meetings with you the wider Irish community on specific issues, as they affect you;
11. offer specific support and training to all our affiliated organisations.

In conclusion, the Irish Forum is here to try and represent the very wide and diverse needs of the Irish Community in Birmingham as best we can, to the local authority and other relevant institutions. In order to do this successfully, we need your continued support for what often proves to be a very difficult task.

In our work as a Forum do not wish to beg or even be seen to be doing that, we do not ask or demand preferential treatment, however, what we do emphasise is that the Irish community have the right, under Section 71 of the Race Relations Act 1976, to have **equal recognition and access** to all the City's services. This is all we ask-our rights.

As chair of the Forum I wish to express my appreciation and sincere thanks to my fellow Officers and members of the Executive and all co-opted members, for their devotion to the aims and objectives of the Forum over the past 27 months. I admire their loyalty, commitment and sense of vision and the way in which they have succeeded in raising the profile of the needs of Irish people in the city.

I should also add that a good relationship has now been established with some Councillors and City Officers and we hope that this will continue to flourish to the mutual benefit of both.

This concludes my report for the year. I trust you found it informative and encouraging.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh go léir. Rath Dé ar ár n-obair.