

11 July 2012, official opening by the Mayor, Councillor Belinda Donovan, of the Avonmore Library and Neighbourhood Centre W14

I'd like to say a little about our history and why an agency like ours exists, and what we do.

### **What's the story behind London Irish Care?**

The service was set up in 1970 in the basement of St Augustine's Priory. In its first year it saw 456 Irish clients, plus another 55 from all over the world. Two thirds of these clients were living in Hammersmith & Fulham. A year later the social worker wrote, "we are seen by the community at large as a caring agency regardless of race, creed, class or colour. This is how we would like it to be." This is the ethos we want to continue, and which we share with our neighbours, the CAB. In 1972 Hammersmith & Fulham Council gave a grant of £300 towards construction of new offices in a prefabricated building in St Augustine's car park. Ever since then the Council has been a key supporter of our activity.

### **Why was an Irish agency needed?**

Whatever their origins, most immigrants adapt and settle, and contribute to the society they have joined.

However, for some immigrants the dislocation and culture shock of coming to a large, impersonal city is too much. From the beginning our annual reports cite high incidences of loneliness, mental illness and mental breakdown among the people coming to it. These are some of the problems found in immigrant communities all over the world.

Men and women who never fully become part of the local community end up living alone and isolated, while the men are twice as likely to remain single as their brothers and friends who stay at home. Fit and strong when young, they become lonely and vulnerable when older, unable to cope when they develop bad health. Many never go back on visits home, and lose touch with their family in Ireland.

Fine, you may be thinking, but there are services to deal with all these social and health problems, aren't there? What possible value is there to society at large in having a service

which deals with a minority ethnic group? Consider two things: access and planning.

Isolated, lonely people are slow to come to the services; by the time they do arrive, they present with problems more serious than if they had come earlier. Their culture says, "I don't want to put anyone to any trouble", so for a long time they decline the services they need; others don't know how to access services, or find they are refused when in fact they qualify. A culturally sensitive service can ensure that people are aware of their entitlement, can get them there sooner, and can speak for them when they do not know how to approach a service.

The London Irish are an ageing population, where, for example, levels of dementia are higher, and entry to care homes happens sooner than in the general population. Minority ethnic groups have higher than general incidences of particular illnesses and it is important that health and welfare services can plan for and deal with these.

Given this situation, we aim to contribute to the efficiency and effectiveness of access to and planning for social services in general.

### **What does London Irish Care do?**

Our mission statement is "supporting vulnerable people, solving problems, bringing people together".

The service provides a place of emotional, social and psychological support in people's lives. In practical terms this means providing advocacy, advice and support on a whole range of matters. We run pensioner groups which meet weekly, where members can join in dances and games, chat to friends, and hear about ways to keep healthy.

As our clients' stories make clear, the service continues to help overcome isolation, vulnerability and need. We aim to contribute to people's well-being, helping them to lead active lives where they contribute to the community.

We have to develop our service so it meets changing needs; for example, we now do more outreach work as a higher proportion of clients has become housebound.

Very rightly, the bodies which fund our work expect us to monitor and evaluate what we do. We come out well both in terms of client satisfaction and of achieving our goals.

I want to conclude by offering sincere thanks to the Council, we are very grateful for its recognition of our role in the community and for its long-standing support of our activity. We aim to be good tenants who will provide and develop a valuable service to the community.

As a footnote, the Avonmore is the name of a river in County Wicklow, south of Dublin. It means "big river", and I hope that a big river of community life will flow through these premises.

Dermot Murphy  
Chair, Irish Charitable Trust  
trading as London Irish Care