

Greenwich proving to be new Irish hot-spot



BY ELAINE SHERIDAN

IRISH strongholds in London have traditionally been in areas such as Kilburn or Cricklewood.

But the borough of Greenwich, home to one of the biggest Irish communities in Britain, looks set to rock that tradition.

The Irish are now the largest ethnic minority in the borough of Greenwich. And to cater for their needs is the Irish in Greenwich organisation.

Launched in 1984 the organisation was established to enable the Irish community to play its full part in Greenwich and, in particular, to promote independent living for Irish elders.

Initially it engaged in promoting Irish cultural activities and raising awareness of issues of concern for the local Irish community but in recent years has shifted its focus to serving the marginalised sections of that community.

Centre Manager Ellen Halley said: "Thanks to the Dion funding we are able to make a difference to the Irish in Greenwich.

"This year we got a significant increase in money and we'll certainly put that money to good use.

"The staff and volunteers here pull out all the stops to assist in whatever way possible."

Recently emphasis has been placed on its Elders Outreach and Advocacy services as well as the Supporting People



■ **REACHING OUT:** Elders outreach worker Anne Ryan, centre manager Ellen Halley, outreach worker Eileen Taylor and support worker Veronica Murphy provide a valuable service along with lunch club manager Angela Kearins, inset.



programme and the all-important lunch clubs that have exceeded all expectations since the first one in September 2000.

Due to popular demand three weekly Irish lunch clubs currently run with a fourth starting at the end of October.

Up to 60 pensioners attend the various lunch clubs where a hearty Irish meal is cooked by an army of kind volunteers who cook, serve and clean up afterwards.

One pensioner said: "It's a

great sense of occasion for us and after lunch there is music played along with a game of bingo and a raffle with spot prizes. It certainly keeps us alive and well."

And the lady responsible is Angela Kearins.

The Irishwoman said: "I love what I do. I just love it. Seeing these elders get dressed up and meet each other every week is great. It gives them a chance to get out of the house and gives them a sense of purpose.

"It's a great social event for

them where they catch up with all the news from home. Some of them go to all three lunch clubs in the different areas which fills the day for them.

"Without these clubs the days would be long and empty for a lot of the pensioners. And the volunteers are brilliant — without them we couldn't succeed."

The lunch clubs are held at Glydon Centre in Plumstead, Progress Hall in Eltham and Trinity Hospital in Highbridge, Greenwich.

Q&A...

With Ellen Halley, manager of Irish in Greenwich

Where are you from?
Fenagh, near Ballinamore in Co. Leitrim

How long have you worked here?
11 months

What's your role in the organisation?
Like most managers I have a plethora of roles. These include fundraising, all aspects of day-to-day management, recruitment, supervision and support of all the staff, ensuring consistent high-quality services are provided by Irish in Greenwich.

How have you found working with the Irish in Greenwich?

I have found it a very enjoyable and rewarding experience. Although I have come from a large Irish family I was surprised to discover that some of the Irish community, despite living and working here for many years, are reluctant to apply for benefits and mainstream services that are due to them.

This has become a large part of our ongoing work. I have been amazed by the enthusiastic response of the volunteers and their range of skills and commitment.

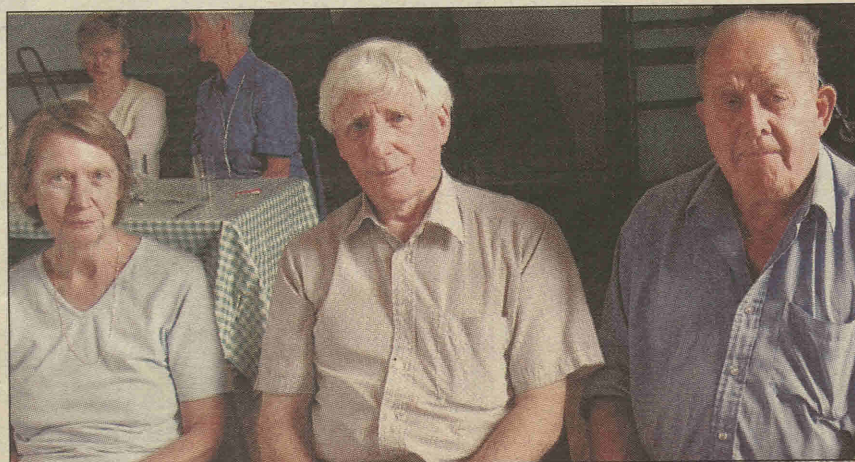
It was a great help to find a council of management in place that has a wide range of practical and academic knowledge. I am very proud to be the manager.

What's the next big project for the organisation?

We are looking into the feasibility of opening more Irish Event lunch clubs in Erith, Sidcup and surrounding areas. We are also looking into the possibility of new premises, which are much needed.

Factfile

- Irish in Greenwich was set up in February 1984
- It was started by a working group who wanted to challenge racism and harassment towards the Irish community. Greenwich has always had a large Irish population but the situation was aggravated because Woolwich is an army town and during that period there was a great deal of anti-Irish feeling.
- It gained charity status in February 2001
- It has six full-time staff and one part-time member
- It has a total of 49 volunteers
- The organisation received a Dion grant of £128,240 this year
- It's first lunch club started in September 2000



■ **FOOD FOR THOUGHT:** Lunch club regulars Mary and Noel Coughlan, who hail from Cork, and Patrick Owens from Co. Mayo.