

Information Sheet



BIAS
ELECTRIC HOUSE
296 Willesden Lane
London NW2 5HW
Tel: 01- 459 6286

BIAS - THE IRISH ADVISORY SERVICE IN BRENT

INTRODUCTION

Established in January 1978, Brent Irish Advisory Service (BIAS) is an anti-racist community development and welfare organisation, which is non-party in politics and religion, and provides a practical essential service to all Irish people in the Brent area of north-west London.

The large and diverse Irish community in Brent forms a substantial proportion of the resident population in Brent, and is the borough's largest national group which originates from any single overseas country in the world.

The most recent census shows that there are now more than 50,000 people of Irish origin in the Brent area, forming a significant part of the multi-ethnic communities of Kilburn, Cricklewood, Harlesden, Willesden and other districts.

With an ancient cultural heritage, combined with a modern life style, Irish people can be seen as a distinct ethnic minority community with its own language, traditions, history, and national aspirations.

For more than a century, Brent has been home to Irish people who emigrated from their own country to find employment and make a new life. Even today, thousands of young migrants still come over to Brent each year to seek work and accommodation.

As foreigners in a strange land, many Irish people, especially those from rural and Irish-speaking backgrounds, may experience culture shock, alienation and racism. Some of them may have problems with housing, jobs, social security and welfare.

Within the Irish community there is a disproportionate number of Irish elderly, mentally ill, handicapped, and single homeless people. And there are groups of Irish people who have particular needs, including women, youth, pensioners, travelling people, and the black Irish.

This is where BIAS comes in. Unlike other agencies, it was set up, and is run by, ordinary Irish women and men who have experienced the same kinds of problems as its users. "They who feel it, know it".

Our main areas of community work include: INFORMATION, advice, and research; HOUSING for migrant workers, single homeless and youth; WELFARE of pensioners, disabled persons and children in need; and EMPLOYMENT for unemployed, redundant and handicapped workers.

EMPLOYMENT WORK

Jobs, like housing and other services, are one of the priority needs of the Irish community. For economic recession and high unemployment in the construction, manufacturing and service industries - the traditional areas of employment for Irish workers in Brent - has hit thousands of Irish people and families particularly hard.

Many of the estimated 5,000 unemployed Irish people in Brent have good education, training and skills but cannot find a suitable job. Others may need a second chance in further education, or training for a new occupation. And a recent report showed a very high level of unemployment among the youth arriving daily from Ireland.

In addition to information, advice, assistance and support, we provide placements for social and community work students, and for MSC Community Programme trainees. We also ran a drop-in careers advice session on a pilot basis with Brent Careers Service, and we plan to start a series of workshops for Irish migrant workers in the near future. In our own small way we have shown new employment and training opportunities to an increasing number of job seekers.

WELFARE WORK

Our planned programme of community welfare is designed to benefit the most deprived, isolated and inarticulate members of the Irish community in the Brent area. Our research shows that in proportion to their numbers in the population as a whole, Irish people tend to be over-represented among the homeless; unemployed; elderly; mentally ill; young offenders; illiterate and educationally disadvantaged, etc.

We provide practical assistance and welfare support to Irish people in need or at risk. In addition to specialised information and advice about welfare rights and benefits, we offer a regular visiting service by volunteers to housebound and isolated people, especially elderly, disabled, and mentally ill people. The proceeds of our fund-raising social events and dances, which bring the community together, enable us to provide additional activities like parties for pensioners.

INFORMATION WORK

Our base in BIAS Information Centre in Willesden, which offers up-to-date information and confidential advice on peoples' rights in Britain, Ireland and Europe, including Housing, Employment, Education, Legal, Social Security, Pensions, Health and Welfare; and on Irish cultural activities and classes, including An Ghaeilge, Irish Dance, Traditional Music, Gaelic Games, and Irish Studies.

We do various kinds of community work, including: helping people with something in common to start new groups and activities; carrying out research on issues affecting the Irish community; liaising between community agencies and Irish people in their homes, in hospital, in prison etc.; co-operating with other organisations on matters of mutual concern; advising people coming from or going to Ireland.

We publish the Irish in Britain Directory and assist in setting up new community groups and projects. We endeavour to provide a culturally-sensitive bi-lingual service using both Irish and English languages. Weekly advice sessions are held on Wednesdays 3 to 7pm and Mondays 2 to 5pm by appointment. Emergencies dealt with at all times.

Our information and advice work enables us to research, identify and respond to the unmet needs of the Irish community. We produce evidence to highlight the unmet needs of the Irish Community and we seek positive action and adequate resources to meet those needs.

We have published the first-ever Irish in Britain Directory; received the Irish Post Community Award; initiated Brent's Irish Cultural Centre project; appointed an Irish Community Housing Worker; formed the Innisfree Housing Association Ltd.; helped set up the Brent Irish Mental Health Group; produced reports on Irish Homeless Families in London and the Irish in Ealing; appointed an Irish Community Social; and much more.

HOUSING WORK

Irish people are particularly deprived as regards housing. This is particularly the case as regards older single people and childless couples. The lodgings, hostels, and bed and breakfast guest houses which provide accommodation for many Irish people in Brent often involve a lack of privacy, inadequate fire precautions, no security of tenure and loss of personal dignity.

In addition to information and advice about housing rights and opportunities, we help homeless and badly housed couples and single people to find suitable accommodation, and assist homeless persons in priority need who are entitled to council housing. We advise on housing options.

ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE

BIAS is operated and controlled as a community organisation by its voluntary members who elect a Management Committee which is responsible for the operation of the service and appointment of staff, who are all members of the Transport & General Workers Union, Kilburn.

We have an enthusiastic team of committed voluntary workers of all ages and backgrounds, who have a wide range of experience, skills and interests. We have a short training course for prospective voluntary workers and we provide opportunities to attend other relevant courses.

Membership is open to all who agree with the aims and objects of the organisation, are proposed and seconded by two existing members, and are approved by the Management Committee, who meet monthly and more often if necessary, as set out in its Constitution.

We receive annual grant-aid from Brent Council to employ our staff and for the first time in 1987 from Ealing Council and the London Boroughs Grants Scheme. We also receive some financial assistance from the Irish government toward social work services. Additional funds are raised by sales/services, benefit dances, social events and donations.

Despite its limited resources, BIAS has endeavoured to make the best use of the Irish community's own abilities, talents and skills, and to provide a publicly-accountable and value-for-money specialist advisory service which is second to none.

In working for the elimination of all forms of personal and institutional racism, BIAS seeks positive action and a fairer share of community resources in housing, social services, education, leisure and other fields to achieve full equality for Irish people.

SOME BIAS MILESTONES

- 1978 started BIAS Information Centre with volunteers;
- 1979 awarded Urban Programme grant by Brent for Community Organiser;
- 1980 set up 'short-life' housing project for single homeless;
- 1981 published the Irish in Britain Directory;
- 1982 received the Irish Post Community Award;
- 1983 organised Brent Irish community centre steering group;
- 1984 appointed Irish Community Housing Worker;
- 1985 formed the Innisfree Housing Association Limited;
- 1986 helped to develop the Brent Irish Mental Health Group;
- 1987 published a report on Mental Handicap and the Irish Community.
- 1989 The Irish in Britain Directory.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION PLEASE CONTACT:

Co-Ordinator	Stan Quirey	Ext. 12
Secretary/Receptionist	Nora O'Donnell	Ext. 10
Information Worker	Geraldine Vesey	Ext. 11
Housing Worker	Jim Glackin	Ext. 13
Social Worker	Patricia Gormley	Ext. 14
		Ext. 15
		b:info7