

**Submission by:** The Claddagh Association Inc, Western Australia  
**Topic:** Irish Government's new diaspora policy 2020  
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## 1. Who we are

The Claddagh Association (hereafter referred to as Claddagh) are a non-profit community group. Since 1997 we have supported members of the Irish Community in Western Australia (WA). Our primary aim is to make sure that any member of the Irish community in difficult circumstances gets the help and support they need. We offer short term crisis support, acting as a safety net to help people when all other avenues have been exhausted.

As well as responding to crisis situations Claddagh runs a long-term Seniors project which supports senior members of the Irish community and those that may be lonely and isolated. In addition to its support services, the Association promotes the well-being and development of the Irish community and seeks opportunities to engage and work with other organisations, to celebrate and preserve Irish heritage.

Claddagh receives financial support from the Irish Government through the Emigrant Support Programme. We also rely on generous donations from corporate sponsors and individual donors. Claddagh is managed by a voluntary committee. The work of the Association is carried out by one paid staff member, the members of the committee and a large group of committed volunteers. Without these supporters and volunteers Claddagh could not continue its important work.

## 2. How we gathered feedback for this submission

Claddagh regularly meets with members of the Irish Community in WA. Recently we used these occasions as an opportunity to gather feedback about the questions raised by Minister Ciaran Cannon for the public consultation process for Ireland's new diaspora policy. We also conducted an online survey of the members of the Irish community in WA about the same questions.

In late June 2019 Claddagh hosted a seminar for Irish community organisations in WA. We shared the presentation and resources we had developed for our Returning to Ireland project with the aim of extending the reach and life of the project. At the conclusion of the seminar we used participatory activities to gather the views of these Irish community representatives about the new diaspora policy.

Also in late June 2019 Claddagh's Seniors Committee organised a collaborative event with the GAA in WA for seniors to share lunch and watch the local GAA football finals. At this event we conducted one-to-one consultations with the seniors present to solicit their feedback on the new diaspora policy. At the final event, the July 2019 Committee meeting of Claddagh, committee members reflected on focus questions to develop their ideas about the new diaspora policy

Concurrent with these events, Claddagh published an online survey which it publicised to its members and supporters through individual emails and the Claddagh Facebook page. The survey consisted of six questions which collected respondents' reflections on their connections to Ireland and to the Irish community in WA.

### **3. Background of the participants**

The vast majority of those that Claddagh interacted with were born in Ireland and left, as adults, to come to Australia. Some had been brought as children to Australia by their Irish parents. A small number of participants were born to first generation Irish migrants and had never lived in Ireland. One respondent felt connected to Ireland through their Irish partner and their participation in Irish cultural experiences.

Due to the recruitment methods the majority of participants were members of Claddagh. However, the survey respondents included 12 people who are not members of the Association.

### **4. Analysis of the results**

In total, combining the numbers of participants at events and the respondents to the online survey, Claddagh collected 56 pieces of feedback from the Irish community in Western Australia. The feedback was analysed and used to inform this submission. Some clear themes emerged from the feedback and the submission is arranged according to these themes. Within each themed section recommendations are also made for actions which could strengthen the connection between Ireland and the Irish Community in WA. These recommendations are a combination of specific proposals made by respondents as well as ideas which Claddagh developed from the analysis of the feedback. These recommendations are presented as one complete list in section five, below.

### **5. List of recommendations**

#### **Recommendation 1**

*Provide financial support for research on the Irish community in WA.*

#### **Recommendation 2**

*Investigate the financial barriers of returning to Ireland to see family. Where feasible mitigate these barriers.*

#### **Recommendation 3**

*Continue the programme to digitise as many Irish historical records as possible to facilitate those living outside Ireland who wish to research their family history.*

#### **Recommendation 4**

*Accord seniors some of the benefits enjoyed by their contemporaries in Ireland such as the Free Travel Scheme and the Free Travel Companion Card.*

#### **Recommendation 5**

*Provide Irish passports to seniors free of charge.*

**Recommendation 6**

*Encourage car hire companies to restrict the aged based loading paid by seniors.*

**Recommendation 7**

*Where possible facilitate lower cost access to accommodation or travel for Irish migrants groups coming back from abroad for national events like the 1916 Celebrations or St Patrick's Day.*

**Recommendation 8**

*Continue the ESP grants system which creates a strong connection between Ireland and the Irish abroad.*

**Recommendation 9**

*Increase ESP grants to allow for more events, more coverage of the vast geographic area in Western Australia and specific initiatives for teenagers.*

**Recommendation 10**

*Make funding available for a communication initiative that connects the Irish community in Western Australia with each other and with Ireland.*

**Recommendation 11**

*Contribute financially to the development of an Irish community centre to enhance the capacity of Irish community groups in WA to support connections with Ireland.*

**Recommendation 12**

*Examine the criteria for Irish funding for Irish artists and if necessary amend so that Irish artists abroad can apply for that funding.*

**Recommendation 13**

*Use the criteria for grant funding for cultural groups in Ireland and Australia to encourage collaboration, travel, communication and home stays between the Irish community in WA and their counterparts in Ireland.*

**Recommendation 14**

*Educate the Irish population in Ireland about the benefits of allowing the Irish diaspora to vote so that they understand the significance of their referendum vote.*

**Recommendation 15**

*Mitigate the requirement for Irish born children to pay full foreign fees for college on their return from time abroad with their families. Develop third level scholarship opportunities for Irish born children and reciprocal agreements between Australian and Irish universities.*

**Recommendation 16**

*Continue to focus on removing barriers for return migrants. Consult returning migrants so that the government can obtain a realistic picture of the most intractable barriers. Develop a single co-ordinated strategy across government departments to respond to the needs of returning Irish.*

### **Recommendation 17**

*Amend tax law to allow Irish migrants who have been contributing to regulated pension funds in their country of migration to continue to do so on their return to Ireland and receive the normal tax reliefs.*

### **Recommendation 18**

*Develop reciprocal agreements with the relevant Australian and Irish agencies so that migrants moving back and forth between both countries can avail of equivalent services.*

## **6. Themes**

### **6.1. Nature of the Irish community in WA**

Respondents gave varying, vague and sometimes contradictory answers about the demographics of the Irish community in WA saying things like ‘the people are well educated’, ‘very mixed aged groups’, ‘lots of FIFO workers’, ‘older generation is biggest’ ‘mainly families’, ‘more newly arrived’. There appears to be very little research on the nature of the contemporary Irish community in WA. Information generally available from the Australian Bureau of Statistics’ censuses on Housing and Population gives some overall insights about the Irish population in Australia but little detail about the specific demographics of the Irish community in WA. The committee of Claddagh noted that more detailed information about the Irish community here is needed to enable Claddagh to better meet community needs and to develop appropriate activities to strengthen community connection with Ireland.

### **Recommendation 1**

*Provide financial support for research on the Irish community in WA.*

Participants’ responses gave a much clearer view of the nature of their connection with Ireland. Their answers showed a group of people who are engaged with Ireland on many levels. They feel their Irish identity keenly and make a great effort to keep up with Irish culture, sport and current affairs and to engage with Irish social media accounts. Many listen to Irish radio programmes (including ‘Songs For Ireland’ on the local station ‘Radio Fremantle’), subscribe to Irish newspapers, attend touring Irish cultural performances, read Irish literature and watch Irish sporting teams on a regular basis. Even participants over 70 years of age described making use of Facebook to ‘keep an eye on what’s happening in Ireland’ and to ‘see what all my nieces and nephew in Ireland are doing’. At the same time respondents emphasised that the Irish community is also ‘integrated into [the] general community’ and ‘connected to WA and to Ireland’.

Members of the Irish community of WA are also practical, hardworking and generous with their time and money. The Irish community was described by respondents as active, and volunteer driven. One woman who had been living in WA for many years reflected on the history of the Irish community in WA saying,

We made it [the Irish community] ourselves, dancing, GAA. It used to be very different and lonely. Letters took 21 days to arrive. You couldn’t talk to anyone at home but with a three minute call through an operator. You couldn’t go back for funerals. We used to want to go back because we were lonely. But part of Ireland is here now and alive and that’s because we made it. That’s a

double-edged sword, [the community] makes us more connected to Ireland, makes people want to go back.

Participants at separate events echoed this description of a hardworking volunteer driven community saying, 'we don't expect the Irish government to do it all. We've volunteered for 40 years', 'Irish businesses here give back to the community' and 'members of most Irish community organisations are reliable, dependable and supportive'. Survey respondents also described the community as '

- ...passionate
- ...vibrant
- ...very active
- ...great to organise events and activities
- ...lots of groups to get involved with depending on your interests

Surprisingly, some said that they felt more Irish when they participate in the Irish community in WA than they ever had at home. This seems to be a reflection of the inclusive, non-partisan and welcoming nature of the Irish community here. Survey respondents described the community as

- ...a very cohesive group, caring and culture conscious
- ...approachable and friendly
- ...close knit, welcoming, supportive
- ...big community, very friendly.

One mother said that her children had more opportunity to participate in Irish sports and cultural activities in WA than she had growing up in her village where "it seemed like an Irish royalty ruled participation in events". Another participant said he felt "I can be more Irish than in my village where I have to be careful what I say or sing". And another said "I appreciate it more and make more of an effort to participate now that I'm away from home".

## 6.2. Intrinsic connection to Ireland

Participants identified strongly with Ireland regardless of the length of time they had lived in Australia. Both recent immigrants and those who had been here since the mid twentieth century emphasised their core identity as Irish. Many respondents emphasised that they would not have chosen to leave Ireland if life had not been so difficult there. A sample of comments include,

- ...half of me never left Ireland
- ...I've been here 50 years and I feel very Irish
- ...Being Irish is just in you
- ...Ireland will always be home
- ...In my mind I never really left Ireland
- ...I feel Irish every minute of every day

## 6.3. Family connects us to Ireland

The relationship to family of origin is a powerful connection to Ireland. In face to face discussions participants mentioned family members in Ireland repeatedly. One participant stated emphatically 'connection is family' and went on to comment 'my kids were born here. I took them back every two years so they'd know my family. Now they go back on their own'. Others made big efforts to

get back to Ireland periodically to see family. One woman said 'I even visited my grand nieces and nephews. You don't have any from here so when you go home the extended family means so much to you'. Many also spoke of the connection to Ireland they feel when their Irish family members visit them in Perth.

Participants observed that maintaining family ties through communication technologies is ultimately unsatisfying. They wished to spend more face to face time with family. Almost without fail participants elaborated on these observations by noting how expensive it is to travel to maintain connection to family in Ireland. Many jokingly said something similar to one respondent who wryly said 'tell the Irish government they can pay for my trip home to see mammy if they want me to be connected'. In all seriousness though, others noted that anything the government could do to make it easier for families to travel to see each other would strengthen their connection to Ireland.

### **Recommendation 2**

*Investigate the financial barriers of returning to Ireland to see family. Where feasible mitigate these barriers.*

Many of the respondents highlighted the fact that a sense of Irish identity is transmitted from parent to child and that the parent's feeling of connection influenced their children. These children had often lived only for a very short time or for no time at all in Ireland. One woman explained "my sons feel connected because I do". See the section 'Participation in the WA Irish Community' for more detail about the significance of this.

Some participants mentioned the importance of DNA testing and family history research. One man said,

The search made me feel more Irish because I realized I was much more Irish than I thought. Found out those from England had emigrated from Ireland so I'm 75% Irish. I can prove it.

Others had used the Irish National Archives Census records to trace family and feel more connected to their origins

### **Recommendation 3**

*Continue the programme to digitise as many Irish historical records as possible to facilitate those living outside Ireland who wish to research their family history.*

## **6.4. Connection to Ireland increased by time at home**

Movement back and forth between Ireland and Australia was a feature of most of the participant's experiences. Time spent in Ireland was mentioned by 68% of the survey respondents as a strong influence on the feeling of connection to Ireland. Participants at Claddagh events reminisced about many trips home telling stories about their travels. One man said, 'We take all our holidays in Ireland and visit relatives. Oh, it's good times in Ireland'. Another woman explained that she feels most connection with Ireland when she's going through passport control in Dublin 'and the lovely man in the booth knows how to pronounce my name'. Many had made the effort to get back to Ireland for special events such as the 1916 celebrations and St Patrick's Day. Sharing in these national events with their compatriots made them feel more connected to Ireland.

Many pointed out the factors which make it difficult to return as often as they would like in order to maintain connection with Ireland. One woman said,

It's a long, long journey and not the most comfortable of journeys. It's very expensive so I can't go very often. And when I'm there I have to make my way to see all the family. I had to get lifts and trains and buses to visit my brother in Galway.

As mentioned previously, the cost of travel in Ireland was mentioned many times as a barrier to spending time in Ireland. The participants at the Seniors event highlighted, 'we now have the time to travel but not the money'. They spoke about the extra costs that add to the initial expense of the flight and said that this often put trips home out of their reach.

#### **Recommendation 4**

*Accord seniors some of the benefits enjoyed by their contemporaries in Ireland such as the Free Travel Scheme and the Free Travel Companion Card.*

#### **Recommendation 5**

*Provide Irish passports to seniors free of charge.*

#### **Recommendation 6**

*Encourage car hire companies to restrict the aged based loading paid by seniors.*

#### **Recommendation 7**

*Where possible facilitate lower cost access to accommodation or travel for Irish migrants groups coming back from abroad for national events like the 1916 Celebrations or St Patrick's Day.*

### **6.5. Participation in the WA Irish community connects us to Ireland**

All of the respondents were active in the Irish community in WA and the majority participated in more than one Irish community group in WA. Eighty percent of the survey respondents said they felt most Irish when meeting up with other Irish people in WA.

Those we spoke to face to face pointed to the value of this connection for a variety of reasons. One woman reflected that when her father (in Ireland) passed away, her connection to Ireland lessened but that it was revived again due to the Irish community here in Perth. She said,

Now my connection is the Irish pub, the Irish community organisations, the Irish events, my siblings here in Perth, volunteering with an Irish community group. You have to put yourself out there.

Some highlighted the fact that participation in the Irish community alleviated homesickness and allowed for a successful migration experience saying things like,

...I had no family, no connections here, now my network is the Irish community. You can laugh about the immersion and the hot press. You could never have that chat with an Australian

...You join the GAA and it feels like home. You get yourself down there to football. And you'll have 25 mates and they'll get you a job.

...It sometimes feels like we never left with the music, the dancing, the Irish football here.

Others were very pleased that the Irish community allowed their children to develop a connection to Irish culture and a sense of belonging to the Irish community. One woman said 'the influences on

us when we are young are very deep'. Many parents listed the Irish playgroups, dancing and Irish language classes and GAA membership that filled their children's leisure time. One mother said, there's a support network among the Irish that the other communities don't have. The English girls all want to bring their kids to our playgroups.

This reference to the singularity of the Irish community was highlighted by a number of respondents who feel that the Irish community here is unique amongst migrant communities in WA. As discussed further above (under the heading 'Nature of the Irish Community in WA') many participants value the friendly, supportive, active nature of the Irish community.

A number of participants pointed to that fact that community activities and the further development of the community itself is facilitated by generous grants from the Irish government's ESP fund and respondents expressed gratitude for this. One participant said 'the ESP is doing a good job' and noted that this made them feel a connection to Ireland.

The ESP was also identified as a crucial source of funding by the Claddagh committee because of their experience in attempting to source community grants from within WA. Claddagh provides services to the Irish community which is classified as a culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) community in Australia. However, funding for projects for CaLD communities is often limited to those groups with non-English speaking migrant or refugee backgrounds. For example, the policy of the Office of Multicultural Interests in WA says that community grants cannot be given to those whose ancestry is 'Anglo Celtic'. The opportunity to apply for ESP grants is seen by Claddagh as a force which strongly connects the community to Ireland.

### **Recommendation 8**

*Continue the ESP grants system which creates a strong connection between Ireland and the Irish abroad.*

Survey respondents gave more feedback on the barriers to participating in the Irish community than those we spoke to face to face. They highlighted the fact that WA covers a very large geographic area and that the Irish community are 'scattered', 'sometimes disconnected from each other' and 'lacking in events south of the river'. One respondent asked that the Irish government 'give more money for more Irish activities to take places in suburbs further away from the city'. Other respondents also said that they would like more events generally. This was echoed by those we met face to face who spoke about how they loved the St Patrick's Day festival – 'but it is only one day and we need more'. Others highlighted the need for events for teenagers saying that the community doesn't provide much for this age group.

### **Recommendation 9**

*Increase ESP grants to allow for more events, more coverage of the vast geographic area in Western Australia and specific initiatives for teenagers.*

Some participants noted that communication could be better between the various Irish community groups to increase the sense of connection to Ireland. However, they acknowledged the difficulty of improving communication when groups are run almost entirely voluntarily. One participant asked, Could Claddagh be funded as a clearing house that puts out a regular newsletter, summarises what's going on in WA and in Ireland? It could be something like Activelink.

### **Recommendation 10**

*Make funding available for a communication initiative that connects the Irish community in Western Australia with each other and with Ireland.*

A number of participants said that a building in a central location for all the Irish community groups in WA to use as a base would increase people's connection to Ireland. One survey respondent described it in this way,

A location where Irish community groups and associations could have a base to work together and share resources in a shared space with proper office facilities, meeting rooms, with support forums, adequate parking, accessibility for those with mobility issues, revenue raising activities such as a bar, an events space for hosting Irish artists to Perth and an Irish goods shop, and sporting pitches for people to congregate and play games and hang around the venue for socialising afterwards. A true Irish centre like this in WA would really help people connect more with each other and with Ireland.

### **Recommendation 11**

*Contribute financially to the development of an Irish community centre to enhance the capacity of Irish community groups in WA to support connections with Ireland.*

## **6.6. Music and cultural activities strengthen connection**

Well over half the respondents mentioned that they felt more Irish when they were listening to, or playing Irish music. The powerful connection to Ireland created by Irish music was common to the participants regardless of the age of participant or the genre of Irish music.

One person who makes a living playing Irish music pointed out the difficulty of musicians in his position who create a sense of connection with Ireland but find it hard to access funding and support so that they can make a living from their work. He said,

We're in a strange position because we can't ask for funding from the Australia Council for the Arts to tour because we're not promoting Australian culture but we can't get funding from Ireland because we're based in Australia.

### **Recommendation 12**

*Examine the criteria for Irish funding for Irish artists and if necessary amend so that Irish artists abroad can apply for that funding.*

Many respondents were enthusiastic about the capacity of Irish cultural performances of many kinds to enhance individual's connections to Ireland, increase their pride in their home country and enable them to share their culture with Australian family and friends. Participants thought connection with Ireland could be enhanced by 'speaking tours', 'touring drama groups', 'touring music /language ambassadors'. Many also wished to see greater communications about cultural connection initiatives suggesting,

...official engagement between the head offices of cultural groups in Ireland and the Irish community in WA.

...funding for representatives and delegates from Arts groups in WA and in Ireland to go and meet each other.

...educating WA children on Irish culture through liaisons with the Department of Education.

...the Irish abroad could host the Irish community on exchange programmes.  
...let people at home know what we're doing here to feel connected to Ireland and its culture.

### **Recommendation 13**

*Use the criteria for grant funding for cultural groups in Ireland and Australia to encourage collaboration, travel, communication and home stays between the Irish community in WA and their counterparts in Ireland.*

## **6.7. Participation in politics as a method of connection**

The issue of voting rights came up in both the survey and face to face meetings. Some felt they would be more connected to Ireland if they could vote in Irish elections. One respondent said, 'Presidential voting for the diaspora would be hugely symbolic and much appreciated'. Another asked for more voting rights.

### **Recommendation 14**

*Educate the Irish population in Ireland about the benefits of allowing the Irish diaspora to vote so that they understand the significance of their referendum vote.*

## **6.8. Barriers to returning decrease connection with Ireland**

One young teenager attended a Claddagh event and spoke about her connection to Ireland. She said, I never wanted to come here. I've only been here a year and I told Mam and Dad I'm going back to Ireland as soon as I finish school. I always used to plan to go to college with my friends at National School but I've just found out I'll have to pay for college so I can't. I was forced to come here and now Ireland don't want me back.

Other adult participants also mentioned the issue. One said 'university fees for Irish born Australian raised kids needs to be sorted'.

### **Recommendation 15**

*Mitigate the requirement for Irish born children to pay full foreign fees for college on their return from time abroad with their families. Develop third level scholarship opportunities for Irish born children and reciprocal agreements between Australian and Irish universities.*

Many participants spoke of the difficult decision of trying to decide whether to stay in Australia or return to Ireland. Although they were aware that the Irish government has been working on reducing barriers to return they still listed many remaining barriers which prevent them from returning. These barriers led to participants feeling that they weren't valued or wanted in Ireland which, in turn, lessened their sense of connection with Ireland. They named factors such as,

- ...We need help with the cost of car insurances of returning migrants.
- ...I couldn't think of going back because it's too hard with children and you wouldn't get a school place.
- ...I worked 18 years in Ireland but I can't get my teeth cleaned if I go back.
- ... I don't have enough information. I'm on the Australian old age pension. I don't know if I can get that if I go back to Ireland.
- ...I can't pay into PRSI from abroad but I want to retire back to Ireland

**Recommendation 16**

*Continue to focus on removing barriers for return migrants. Consult returning migrants so that the government can obtain a realistic picture of the most intractable barriers. Develop a single co-ordinated strategy across government departments to respond to the needs of returning Irish.*

The Claddagh committee have also noticed an increase in queries about the portability of superannuation (Australian private pension fund contributions) when moving back to Ireland. While pension contributions paid to Irish or EU pension funds qualify for tax relief, migrants returning from Australia do not enjoy this benefit. They must lose the advantage of long term pension contributions when they return to Ireland.

**Recommendation 17**

*Amend tax law to allow Irish migrants who have been contributing to regulated pension funds in their country of migration to continue to do so on their return to Ireland and receive the normal tax reliefs.*

One woman also spoke about the particular difficulty of possibly needing to return to Ireland when her elderly mother becomes unable to care for herself. She wants to be her mother's primary carer for the time that her mother needs her and then return to Australia. However, she knows that this will be difficult because, for instance, she will not be covered by her Australian health insurance and will be in a limbo between two countries unable to establish residence in either one and so ineligible for carer's allowance in both.

**Recommendation 18**

*Develop reciprocal agreements with the relevant Australian agencies so that migrants moving back and forth between both countries can avail of equivalent services.*

END