

RESEARCH BRIEF

Diaspora Community Engagement and Social Cohesion:

Reframing Engagement for Community Futures in Ireland and
Scotland

Prepared for: Non-governmental organisations; local level practitioners, national and local civil servants and public sector workers.

Briefing Overview: Based on two knowledge exchange events, this research brief provides evidence-based insight into how grassroots diaspora organisations and local level practitioners across Scotland and Ireland contribute to social cohesion. It highlights the structural realities, friction points, and delivery mechanisms that shape community integration. The research brief highlights key findings emerging from the two knowledge exchanges.



CMDCI

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Research Brief: Diaspora Community Engagement and Social Cohesion

Reframing Engagement for Community Futures in Ireland and Scotland

Introduction

Against a backdrop of shifting geopolitical migration dynamics, acute housing shortages, localised funding barriers, and rising far-right populist narratives, building social cohesion across Scotland and Ireland has become a central policy challenge. While diaspora engagement strategies in both nations have traditionally focused outward on extensive overseas populations, recent inward migration has formed vibrant internal diasporas within local communities.

To address the role and contributions of grassroots diaspora organisations, and how these intersect with broader governance frameworks, two multi-stakeholder knowledge exchange workshops were hosted by the Centre for Migration, Diaspora, Citizenship & Identity (CMDCI) at the University of the West of Scotland (UWS) and Maynooth University Social Sciences Institute (MUSSI). The events brought together non-governmental organisations (NGOs), ground-level practitioners such as Integration Joint Boards (IJB) in Scotland and Local Authority Integration Teams (LAITs) in Ireland, civil servants, public sector representatives and academic researchers. Discussions were conducted under Chatham House Rules to enable candid dialogue around structural barriers and operational realities.

The brief is structured in three key sections summarising the core themes and findings from both plenary events, concluding with key findings and actionable recommendations for everyday practice and policy development.

Part 1: Emergent Themes from Plenary One (Belonging & Connectivity)

The first plenary focused on mapping contemporary grassroots practices, evaluating organic community connections, and identifying the conditions required for effective cross-community collaboration. Discussions were structured around the following key questions:

1: What are your current community engagement activities, and what is the purpose of this work?

Throughout the discussion, participants highlighted several primary functions of local diaspora community engagement activities:

- **Wellbeing:** Participants from both Scotland and Ireland emphasised their roles in supporting and enhancing social and economic wellbeing. This included meeting basic needs, providing targeted support for specific groups

such as young people, and addressing structural gaps in the provision of services.

- **Culture:** Participants highlighted support for a wide range of creative and cultural activities, such as language learning, history, festivals, sports, music, arts and crafts, and celebration of culture. An explicit example is using Glasgow's 850th celebration to emphasise the city's historical Irish roots.
- **Autonomy:** This includes targeted activities to support people in becoming active and autonomous participants in their local communities. In Scotland, participants identified an emphasis on skills development and transfer. In Ireland, participants identified the importance of a dual approach, by supporting individuals and also addressing systemic issues, such as improved training for employers.
- **Accessibility and collaboration:** Participants in Scotland highlighted the importance of tailoring general service delivery to "new migrant communities". In Ireland, participants emphasised the need to "engage with each other; work in partnership" in order to provide more easily accessible and integrated service provision.

2: Who are your partners?

Participants identified a wide range of formal and informal partnerships necessary for community engagement:

- **Formal, multi-agency partnerships:** In both Scotland and Ireland, organisations involved in community engagement activities reported working with a wide range of partners, both governmental and non-governmental. These included national governments; local and city governments; embassies/consular offices; faith groups; migrant support groups; youth groups; sports organisations; the arts sector; and media.
- **Informal partnerships:** Official frameworks rely heavily on informal bottom-up networks, such as WhatsApp groups, voluntary groups.

This mix of formal and informal partnerships is crucial in a broader environment where organisations are forced to compete for funding and to respond to funder priorities that are not aligned with on-the-ground needs.

3: How do your current community engagement activities contribute to a sense of belonging?

Key insights emerged regarding the role and contributions of grassroots diaspora organisations to a sense of belonging:

- **Security and safety:** Participants identified the role of organisations in helping people to feel secure and safe. That, in turn, enables people to develop a sense of belonging.
- **Navigating Blended Identities:** Grassroots diaspora organisations offer support and validation in navigating blended identities, "enhancing an already existing sense of belonging" and "creating a new sense of belonging" without having to compromise either.

- **Enabling inclusion:** Participants emphasised the importance of creating opportunities for people to be actively involved in shaping their own environments, through transparent consultation and communication.
- **Place and space:** Organisations contribute to a sense of belonging by enabling regular local place-based activities and interactions, and by creating and sustaining local “safe spaces” where people can access support and services and receive trusted direction.

4: How do your current community engagement activities build links and connections between different communities?

Building and sustaining connections is particularly important in the current moment, where community cohesion is threatened by destructive pressures such as hostile international frameworks (e.g. EU Migration Pact) and the role of the far-right in dividing local communities. Participants identified the following activities as significant:

- **Creating shared spaces and experiences:** Organisations help to build links and connections through everyday interactions that lead to shared experiences. Scottish participants mentioned the importance of neutral interventions. This could include communal meals where people from different backgrounds eat together. Irish participants mentioned the importance of routine activities in a genuinely shared space, and cautioned against restricting activities to “special times and in special places”.
- **Creative and embodied activities:** Participants highlighted the role of creative and embodied activities to diminish “the fear of the unknown”.
- **Celebrating and supporting diversity:** Through advocacy, organisations emphasise the strengths and value that diverse groups bring to everyone. They seek to develop and sustain meaningful connections that allow diversity to be acknowledged and thrive.

5: What specific conditions allow different groups to work together most effectively?

Different groups are enabled to work together most effectively through a mix of formal and informal mechanisms:

- **Skill-Centered, Non-Stigmatising Spaces:** Collaboration thrives when participants are “not being seen as a person of colour or some of the migrant organisations”, but come together to identify and develop commonalities.
- **Developing solidarity:** Diaspora groups can build solidarity when they identify shared historical and contemporary experiences and work to strengthen and expand these relationships. They should be “reminded of [their own] history in order to better support new communities”.
- **Institutional Certainty:** Effective collaboration requires clear national integration strategies to mitigate a funding landscape described by delegates as “chaotic on purpose”.

- **Multi-scale coordination:** Collaboration requires co-ordination from the ground up, and local structures have to be equipped to deal with changing international- and national-level policies (for example, the EU Migration Pact).
- **Valuing Lived Experience & Mitigating Burnout:** It is important to “value people's time [and] experience”, and to build organisational capacity through paid staff rather than over-exploited volunteers.

6: Is there anything that you would like to see the researchers doing, following this discussion?

- **Researchers as mediators:** Participants suggested that researchers could play “a mediated role between the community and the government”, with researchers as potential “bridges” or “translators”. A participant in Ireland suggested that “sometimes the external voices are heard better”.
- **Evidence-based interventions:** Participants suggested that researchers could provide evidence, based on what is happening “on the ground”, to “help evidence and impact” the work of organisations.
- **Interdisciplinarity:** Participants emphasised the importance of interdisciplinarity in relation to data, evidence and discussion. This includes having interdisciplinary spaces “where we can say [the] things that need to be said, in a respectful way, in an open way, in a reflective way”.
- **Fast Feedback & Storytelling:** Participants implored academics to “keep it real”, demanding fast qualitative feedback over decade-long publication cycles. Scottish delegates urged researchers to speak of migration “not as numbers, not as statistics, but as stories”.

Part 2: Emergent Themes from Plenary Two (Policy & Practice)

The second plenary examined existing legislative frameworks, statutory mechanisms, and the systemic gaps between ground-level practice and policy design and implementation.

1: Which existing policies effectively support your work?

Participants identified key legislative mechanisms providing structural support. This included policies directly related to migration as well as policies that affect migration and migrants:

- **Integration & Statutory Frameworks:** Scotland highlighted the Racial Equality Act, the Youth Act, the Community Empowerment Act, and the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy. Ireland highlighted the establishment of Local Authority Integration Teams (LAITs) and the Diaspora Strategy (2026–2030) as key operational anchors.
- **Trauma & Criminal Law:** Scotland noted the utility of trauma-informed workplace policies and UN Sustainable Development Goals. Ireland highlighted the Criminal Justice (Female Genital Mutilation) Act 2012, despite implementation hurdles regarding burden of proof.

- **Policies with indirect effects:** Non-immigration policies provide vital funding avenues; for example, the formal recognition of Gaelic sports in Scotland as this allows cultural groups to access standard athletic grants rather than specialised migrant funds. In Ireland, the Shared Island fund was noted as providing space for dialogue.

2: Which existing policies make your work difficult?

Participants outlined major structural barriers and policy disconnects:

- **Hostile Regimes & Legislative Friction:** Scottish delegates cited Home Office gridlock, noting that while migration and asylum are reserved to Westminster, integration is devolved to Scotland, causing friction where “migration has become a dirty word”. Irish delegates flagged the EU Migration Pact (in force June 2026) and the ongoing legacy of the 2004 Irish Citizenship Referendum, which leaves 21-year-olds born in Ireland “stateless, undocumented... stranded in a country where they were born”.
- **Policy fragmentation:** Policy initiatives in one area may negatively impact experiences and opportunities in other areas. For example, participants in Ireland noted a deliberate policy shift within the EU Directive on Reception Conditions away from housing rights toward employment rights, degrading living standards for International Protection applicants. The broader policy framework distinguishes between different groups with different rights and entitlements.
- **Policy vacuums:** The lack of an updated national integration strategy in Ireland, and policy failures in relation to media regulation in Scotland have created policy vacuums where far-right narratives operate unchecked. Similarly, participants noted the disconnect between policy and practice, commenting that the implementation of policies can cause problems even if the motivation for the policy is sound.
- **Funding:** Participants highlighted difficulties with funding models and practices. The temporary nature of funding makes it difficult to develop or retain expertise. In Scotland, “funding cuts” and rigid “financial regulations” create a “barrier of bureaucracy”. In Ireland, participants commented that funding models meant they had to change the work that they do to “fit the policy”, thus limiting their capacity to do the work they believed necessary.

3: What is the relationship between existing government policy and community engagement practices?

- **Strategy vs. Delivery Disconnect:** A gap exists between high-level policy intent and frontline reality, described as a “difference between strategy and delivery in policies”. In Scotland, repetitive consultation without visible outcomes has caused severe “consultation fatigue”. In general, consultation processes are seen as too slow, and participants in Ireland also noted a lack of intra-department coordination and awareness and unnecessary duplication.
- **Hierarchies of Support:** Policy frameworks create inequitable support tiers, for example, contrasting the robust resources given to Ukrainian refugees against the neglect experienced by refugees or those seeking asylum from other places.

- **Communication Gaps:** Ground-level workers in Ireland routinely learn about policy shifts through political leaks or media reporting rather than direct, structured communication from government departments.

4: Are there ways of making better connections between policy and practice?

- **Co-Production & Accountability:** Communities must be empowered to “take on the terms under which policies are made” and define success indicators themselves. Scottish participants argued for a shift “from dialogue and consultation to actual involvement in policy making” and pointed to the Robertson Trust as a successful example of collaboration. In Ireland, participants called for “meaningful conversations with serious analysis”, and for “genuine listening from the top”.
- **Shared Understanding:** Participants called for policy makers and researchers to use clearer and more accessible language to “demystify entitlements” for ordinary citizens and frontline operators, and to create a basis for shared understanding.
- **Developing holistic policies:** Participants in Ireland suggested that the lack of an overall national policy on integration had led to duplication of effort and uncertainty, and argued for a more holistic and integrated approach to policy making.
- **Neighbourhood Assemblies:** Scotland recommended using local council neighbourhood centres and adapting Ireland's Citizens' Assembly model for bottom-up policy feedback.

5: What are the primary lessons to support cross-community collaboration?

- **Acknowledge shared commitment:** Participants commented on the importance of acknowledging “that people genuinely do care about making a difference and supporting people and helping people to integrate into society” as a starting point for developing solidarity.
- **Solidarity:** Participants emphasised the need to build “an environment of trust” and to prioritise “sharing resources fairly”. They commented that the event gave them “the energy to try again” because it showed they were “not alone in the things that [they] are facing”.
- **Structured partnerships:** Participants concluded that structured partnerships were important to allow for open and frank discussions about similarities, differences, priorities and challenges, and to provide an informed basis for influencing policy and practice.
- **Fostering dialogue:** Participants commented on the need to continue dialogue and to acknowledge complexity, while seeking shared understanding: “positive discussions on the nuances of migration and diaspora narratives...must, must continue”.

Part 3: Practical takeaways and shared recommendations

Based on the synthesis of both events, the following key findings and actionable recommendations are directed toward non-governmental organisations, local level practitioners and policymakers:

Support non-governmental organisations and local level practitioners to build capacity and collaborative relationships

- **Finding:** Non-governmental organisations and local level practitioners are ideally placed to identify needs and support community cohesion, but are limited in their capacity to do so by funding mechanisms that are top-down, short-term, narrowly focused and competitive.
- **Recommendation:** Advocate for and transition towards multi-year, collaborative funding models that support capacity building rather than short-term, competitive projects.

Ensure that policy-making in relation to community cohesion is directly informed by local and grassroots organisations

- **Finding:** local and grassroots organisations in Ireland and Scotland are doing fundamental work on the ground to foster integration and social cohesion: working with other organisations and government at multiple levels simultaneously; providing for the basic needs of migrants; and creating and sustaining local “safe spaces” where people can interact on a daily basis, access support and services and receive trusted direction.
- **Recommendation:** Ensure ground-level insights directly shape strategic decisions through ongoing co-production and transparent feedback loops, rather than one-off consultations.

Enable communication and exchange between internal and external diaspora organisations and with other sectors such as research organisations.

- **Finding:** Internal and external diaspora organisations share a commitment to enhancing social cohesion and fostering a sense of belonging, but have limited opportunities to exchange knowledge and best practice with each other and with other sectors.
- **Recommendation:** Research organisations can support internal and external diaspora organisations to exchange knowledge and best practice by providing neutral spaces for discussion, reflection and solidarity building; and by working together to provide evidence-based research for changing needs and contexts on the ground.

If you require further information about the project, please do not hesitate to contact us:

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