

RESEARCH BRIEF

Diaspora Community Engagement and Social Cohesion:

Reframing Engagement for Community Futures in Ireland and
Scotland

Prepared for: Policymakers, Local Authorities, and Public Service Leaders

Briefing Overview: This briefing provides evidence-based insight into how top-down governance frameworks intersect with grassroots diaspora engagement across Scotland and Ireland. It highlights the structural realities, friction points, and delivery mechanisms that shape community integration.



Prepared by: Centre for Migration, Diaspora, Citizenship & Identity (CMDCI,
University of the West of Scotland) and Maynooth University Social Sciences
Institute (MUSSI)

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 how top-down governance frameworks intersect with grassroots diaspora activity, two multi-stakeholder knowledge exchange plenary 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 ground-level practitioners such as, Health and Social Care Partnerships (HSCPs) and Integration Joint Boards (IJB) in Scotland and Local Authority Integration Teams (LAITs) in Ireland, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil servants, academic researchers, and public sector representatives. 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 actionable recommendations for policy development and everyday practice.

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 engagement:

- **Cultural Preservation as Cohesion:** Heritage initiatives act as core foundations for building multi-generational community roots rather than simple

recreation. In Scotland, structured activities include language learning, history, and traditional sports, such as utilising Glasgow's 850th celebration to emphasise the city's historical Irish roots. In Ireland, engagement spans diverse creative areas; arts, music, crafts, and cultural celebrations.

- **The Survival Baseline:** Delegates emphasised that "basic needs need to be met first". In Scotland, efforts focus on addressing core structural issues such as "gaps in mental health care" and providing initial pastoral packages for new arrivals. In Ireland, this work encompasses dedicated men's groups, women-focused spaces, and youth engagement.
- **Socio-Economic Autonomy:** Programs aim to transition individuals from survival mode to self-reliance. Scotland focuses on skills-transfer and enterprise (e.g., working with Nigerian engineers to navigate local professional registration, alongside financial literacy on transferring remittances home). In Ireland, training took a dual approach, targeting both the individual and the system, for example combining employment workshops and English language classes with civic education on democratic participation; but also carrying out employer inclusion training, and the training of International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS) centre managers.

2: Who are your partners?

Participants mapped complex ecosystems which support front-line delivery:

- **Multi-Agency Pillars:** Scottish actors highlighted how they rely on Glasgow City Council, the NHS, local chapels/ministries, BBC advisories, and the Home Office. Irish actors partner with NGOs, local authority staff, youth groups, sports bodies, embassies, the LGMA, and the National Integration Network.
- **Informal Digital Networks & Arts:** Official frameworks rely heavily on informal bottom-up networks. In Scotland, "WhatsApp groups partnered in" serve as crucial micro-partners. In Ireland, the arts sector is leveraged as a primary structural partner alongside grassroots voluntary groups.
- **Resource Divide & Power Dynamics:** In Scotland, Irish diaspora activities are predominantly funded by the Irish government rather than Scottish local authorities, whereas the Scottish Government directly funds other migrant groups. In Ireland, funding competition actively undermines cohesion, prompting calls for collaboration over competition.

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

Key insights emerged regarding the lived experience of integration:

- **Navigating Blended Identities:** In Scotland, delegates framed belonging as "figuring out a way to be both X and Scottish... marrying those blended identities" without compromise. In Ireland, belonging is often established within one's micro-diaspora first as an initial route to safety.
- **Civic Empowerment & Voice:** Belonging requires structural agency. In Scotland, belonging is generated by "giving a voice to policy makers". In

Ireland, delegates questioned who defines "meaningful" consultation, stressing that transparent dialogue builds genuine trust.

- **Geographies & Racial Boundaries:** Place-based belonging becomes exceptionally difficult in Ireland under temporary IPAS accommodation placements. Crucially, Scottish data exposed a structural boundary driven by race, noting a "fundamental difference between the use of the Irish communities, and first [and subsequent] generation... migrant communities of colour," who face persistent othering regardless of generational status.

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

- **Creative Crafting & Neutral Spaces:** Scotland's "Women in the Farm of Community" initiative consciously brings "African fabric, Afghan fabric, and tartan to be able to tell a story using the fabric". Cross-community sports like hurling are introduced in Scottish schools because, as a new sport, it lacks the "historical baggage associated with soccer... or rugby".
- **Asset-Based Integration:** Irish participants advocated for Asset-Based Community Development rather than deficit charity models, creating sustainable networks that outlast short-term staff contracts.
- **Destructive Pressures:** Cohesion is explicitly threatened by external pressures, notably hostile international frameworks (e.g., the EU Migration Pact) and the rising visibility of far-right exploitation.

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

- **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 develop professional skills, crafts, or shared hobbies.
- **Valuing Lived Experience & Mitigating Burnout:** Systems must "value people's time [and] experience". Irish data emphasised that true organisational capacity relies on paid staff rather than over-exploited volunteers suffering from burnout.
- **Institutional Certainty:** Effective collaboration requires clear national integration strategies to mitigate a funding landscape described by delegates as "chaotic on purpose".

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

- **Fast Feedback & Storytelling:** Delegates 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" and to "bring [social] class into that discussion more".

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

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

1: Which existing policies effectively support your work?

Participants identified key legislative mechanisms providing structural support:

- **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, for internal integration and external diaspora engagement respectively.
- **Generalist Policy Extensions:** 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.
- **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.

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".
- **Erosion of Housing Rights:** Delegates 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.
- **Strategic Invisibility & Media Vacuums:** Scottish data noted that public authorities struggle to recognise the Irish as a distinct group, dropping them into "the big bucket of white people". In Ireland, the lack of an updated national migrant integration strategy creates a vacuum where far-right narratives operate unchecked.

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. In Scotland, repetitive consultation without visible outcomes has caused severe "consultation fatigue".
- **Hierarchies of Support:** Policy frameworks create inequitable support tiers, contrasting the robust resources given to Ukrainian refugees against the neglect experienced by Syrian and South Sudanese asylum seekers.
- **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.
- **Demilitarising Language:** Policy documents must be translated into plain, accessible language to "demystify entitlements" for ordinary citizens and frontline operators.
- **Neighbourhood Assemblies:** Scotland recommended using local council neighbourhood centres and adapting Ireland's Citizens' Assembly model for bottom-up policy feedback.

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

- **Survival Trumps Integration:** "Before we start discussing community engagement and integration... no one even begins to think about belonging and integration before their basic needs are met".
- **Equitable Sharing & Safe Spaces:** Sustainable alliances require the fair sharing of resources and safe environments built on trust where practitioners can candidly exchange challenges without fear of judgment.

Part 3: Findings & Strategic Policy Recommendations

Based on the synthesis of both plenaries, the following major findings and actionable items are directed toward local, regional, and national policymakers:

1. The Nature of Diasporas and Community Activity

- **Finding:** Diaspora activities operate on a dual spectrum: formal institutional setups and agile, decentralised grassroots channels (e.g., WhatsApp micro-networks, creative collectives).
- **Recommendation:** Avoid imposing rigid, top-down governance structures that stifle small groups. Instead, formalise communication pathways by

incorporating local neighbourhood hubs and specialised coordination actors (like LAITs in Ireland) into primary planning phases.

2. Economic, Regional, and Social Contributions

- **Finding:** Diaspora networks are highly active economic and social engines, often bringing specialised professional skillsets and rich historical value. However, their operating capacity is severely limited by short-term, hyper-competitive funding streams that promote inter-group friction.
- **Recommendation:** Collaborate with diaspora organisations to strengthen routes of integration for individuals into wider communities.
- **Recommendation:** Move away from short-term project grants toward flexible, long-term operational funding blocks. Standard public funding instruments (such as sports, enterprise, and educational grants) must be systematically adapted to include diaspora-led organisations, minimising administrative blockages/barriers across generations.

3. Impact of Government Engagement on Community Cohesion

- **Finding:** Cohesion is heavily eroded when the state limits its interactions to extractive, repetitive consultation exercises without providing robust feedback mechanisms or visible systemic updates. This gap fuels community distrust and leads to widespread volunteer burnout.
- **Recommendation:** Institutionalise a model of direct co-production. Ensure all policy shifts and changes are communicated directly and openly to local teams through clear, jargon-free channels rather than public media or leaks.
- **Recommendation:** Integrate housing, health, and legal status frameworks into a singular, cohesive national strategy, recognising that secure, stable housing is the absolute baseline for all social integration.

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

- **Prof. Murray Leith:** murray.leith@uws.ac.uk
- **Prof. Mary Gilmartin:** mary.gilmartin@mu.ie