

The Irish Emigrant Register

Presentation to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on
Foreign Affairs and Trade

1/10/14

Introduction

Crosscare Migrant Project is funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Emigrant Support Programme, the HSE and Crosscare to provide an information, support and advocacy service to Irish emigrants and returning emigrants. We are a project of Crosscare, the social support agency of the Dublin Catholic Archdiocese. Crosscare works with people across a wide spectrum, in the areas of homeless services, young people's residential and youth services, meals-on-wheels and food banks, disability awareness, older people's supports and community services.

Since the 1940s Crosscare has worked with and supported Irish emigrants. In 1987, in response to the increased levels of emigration to the US and UK in particular, our predecessor Emigrant Advice was established. Throughout the decades we have provided information and support to people leaving Ireland. In the 1990s we started working more with returning Irish emigrants – often people who had left Ireland in the 1950s and 60s who wanted to come home, but also families looking to come home and raise their children. We also work with people being deported or involuntarily returned to Ireland with high support needs. We have a long history of providing support to individuals and families, writing easy-to-access guides to intending and returning emigrants and of training and supporting other organisations that work with Irish emigrants. We work closely with services like the Irish Commission for Prisoners Overseas, homeless services in Dublin and Emigrant Support Programme-funded groups in the UK, Australia, Canada and the US

Key statistics

- We work intensively with over 250 vulnerable returning emigrants on average every year
- Our website has information for intending and returning emigrants on key issues like visas, family reunification, social welfare housing and employment – over 50,000 people visit it annually
- We distribute our 'emigration' and 'returning to Ireland' newsletters to over 600 organisations in Ireland and around the world

In addition to our face-to-face and information provision work, we undertake research and advocacy work on behalf of the people we work with. In recent years this has included:

2008 – 2010: advocating for the rights of returned emigrants to access social welfare, including submissions and presentation to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection on the Habitual Residence Condition and returned emigrants

2012: research into 'new Irish emigration', including into emigrants accessing homeless and welfare services

2013: a survey of emigration to Canada – 'What is Canada like? 101 answers from Irish Emigrants' (*released early 2014*)

2014: researching the mental health needs of recent emigrants through a global online survey promoted via social media (*to be released end 2014*)

We would like to welcome the review of Diaspora Policy initiated earlier this year by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and look forward to the outcome of the process. Of course we would also like to acknowledge the very significant development of the appointment of the first dedicated Minister for the Diaspora Jimmy Deenihan in July.

The issue

Emigration has been with us for hundreds of years and at least for the foreseeable future it is likely to remain an aspect of Irish life. Even in years of growth tens of thousands of Irish people have emigrated. Emigration and especially recent emigration has been problematic in many respects but one of its persisting challenges over the centuries is its legacy of disconnection. Emigration creates disconnected lives, families and communities. And yet we are led to believe that as a society and globally we are more interconnected than ever before.

Since April 2008 a quarter of a million Irish people have left the State.(April 08 – April14, 228,2000). Most worryingly recent CSO stats show that the year up to April 2014 show the lowest rate of return emigration since these records began 18 years ago in 1996. It could well be that those who have left are increasingly deciding to stay away.

As a pre-departure information service for emigrants we have seen that the recent wave of emigration has been substantially different to previous times. It has been the first wave of Irish emigration in the internet age. This has transformed the emigration experience significantly. It has allowed for a far higher degree of pre-departure preparation. For example it is now possible to search for, view and finalise accommodation online before departure. Successful job interviews are

often held via web based video link for jobs on the other side of the world. Communication options with home have improved dramatically with e-mail, social networking, photo sharing and live video linking via Skype for example, all available at extremely low cost. Last years UCC Emigre report 'Irish Emigration in an Age of Austerity'¹ found that 75% of emigrants use Skype regularly to maintain contact with family and friends in Ireland, with 90% using Facebook and other social network sites. Particularly from the point of view of what the State can do the internet has not been maximised in terms of its capacity to minimise the damage, loss and disconnection caused by emigration. This view is echoed in the recent UCD Clinton Institute report on Supporting the Next Generation of the Irish Diaspora².

From the UCC Emigree report it is very significant that *over 70% of emigrants frequently read Irish newspapers online, while another 16.4% read Irish papers sometimes. Many mentioned following the news on RTÉ's website or the RTÉ App. Many emigrants also listen to Irish radio stations regularly (32.8%).* At the same time Irish emigrants abroad continue to feel forgotten about by the Irish State with 48% of emigrants disagreeing with the statement that the government provided adequate support for Irish emigrants. Only 11.8% of emigrants agreed, with the remaining 39.3% neither agreeing nor disagreeing. In short there is a lack of reciprocity of interest. Once people have left the State it will have little or any interaction with them, unless they return home.

Proposal

What we are proposing is a remarkably simple idea. The creation of a State managed e-mail based database whereby emigrants would simply log minimal information such as name, e-mail address and country of residence. Then periodically they would receive an e-mail/newsletter from the Irish State. The Irish Emigrant Register could be used in a number of ways to improve the connection between the State and our ever growing diaspora. A very practical initial purpose of the Irish Emigrant Register would be to facilitate return migration by connecting Irish emigrants abroad and the developing labour market in Ireland. The State could for example contact emigrants directly with a list of job vacancies and emerging skills needs in the Irish labour market as part of a regular update or newsletter. The Department of Social Protection have sent welfare recipients in Ireland notifications of job adverts for countries as far away as Canada. Yesterday I found a total of 41 adverts for jobs abroad on Intreo's job search database. The Irish State should also be notifying Irish

¹ <http://www.ucc.ie/en/emigre/emigrereport/>

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<http://ucdclinton.ie/userfiles/file/Supporting%20the%20Next%20Generation%20of%20the%20Irish%20Diaspora.pdf>

emigrants abroad of jobs in Ireland. The Department of Jobs and in particular the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs could feed into such updates by providing information on current and emerging skills needs. The following is an excerpt from a report from the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs from July this year

Shortages are occurring across many occupations, although they continue to be confined to niche skill areas and in most instances remain of low magnitude. Skills shortages have been identified in the areas of ICT, science, engineering, sales, marketing, business, finance and healthcare, with signs of shortages emerging in areas related to logistics, manufacturing and even construction (limited at present to surveyors).

This is information that our emigrants abroad should have as soon as it comes out. I attended a National Youth Council conference on return migration two weeks ago where a representative from the Construction Industry Federation expressed concern that the industry was unable to fill emerging technical posts.

The register is a way of getting people home. Particularly in the context of unemployment and austerity measures people are feeling there is an implied invite to leave the country by the State. Whatever amount of truth there may be in this, many would agree that there should be an explicit invite to return and stay connected. Not surprisingly the availability of jobs was one of the most common factors cited by emigrants abroad that would influence the chances of an emigrant returning home, according to the UCC Emigre report. The establishment of the Irish Emigrant Register would be a very clear way of saying that 'we want you back'. However it could also be used for other purposes such as informing citizens about relevant embassy and consular services available and passport and travel advice issues. It could also be used as the basis of a consultation tool in the development of various relevant government policy. In the internet age our citizens abroad can be as connected with and invested in political, economic and social issues in Ireland as those of us still living here - their views could and should be elicited and invited in a more direct manner that the IRISH EMIGRANT REGISTER could facilitate. In essence it would act as a connecting mechanism between the Irish State and its citizens abroad.

We would propose that the register might be best managed by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade with inputs from the Department of Jobs and Intreo in the Department of Social Protection.

So to re-iterate the Irish Emigrant Register would be a simple database with minimal information that the Irish State would use to send its citizens abroad a direct and regular message. An initial

focus of the Irish Emigrant Register could be as a connector with the labour market although this focus could be broadened to a wider function.

Potential challenges and solutions

While in some respects the creation of an Irish Emigrant Register is a relatively straightforward project to action there are some readily identifiable challenges.

1. Populating the register. Getting people to register will be the biggest challenge. Crosscare suggests a number of ways to overcome this initial barrier:
 - The Irish Emigrant Register would need to be **marketed by Government at a very high level** and globally. St. Patrick's Day 2015 could for example offer an ideal platform for the register to be launched and promoted in a manner that would get the attention of Irish emigrants globally. Ministers, Junior Ministers and indeed the Taoiseach could carry the message of the Irish Emigrant Register on their visits to Irish communities across the globe on March 17th. It also offers a reasonable yet swift timeframe to get the register up and running. Irish embassies, consulates, NGOs, businesses and media globally should be engaged in the promotion of the Irish Emigrant Register.
 - At another level The Department of Foreign Affairs could negotiate with the Australian and Canadian immigration services (with whom we have reciprocal visa agreements) to **amend their working holiday visa application forms** for Irish people to include a mechanism whereby people could agree for their name and email address to be sent to the Irish State for inclusion on the Irish Emigrant Register. These measures alone could potentially lead to 20,000-30,000 people being registered every year. If we are allowing other countries to take our young people on working holidays visas then I believe that we should do so under a further condition – namely that the Irish State is provided with the capacity to connect directly with them, via their e-mail address.
 - **Keeping requested data minimal.** Name, e-mail address and country of emigration could be the only required information with further options to detail the types of job notifications that would be of most interest
 - **Showing that it works.** It would need to be shown after a period of time that people were benefitting from the register notifications. It would be relatively simple to update people on the register of such statistics and successes

2. Keeping it updated. Like any database or register there will need to be resources dedicated to maintenance and expansion.
3. Data Protection issues would need to be considered carefully. The usage parameters of the register should be very clearly defined and communicated upfront.

Asks of the Committee

- The Committee to champion this proposal by writing to Minister Flanagan and Minister Deenihan asking them to progress the proposal by
 - setting up of a Cross-Departmental Working Group between Foreign Affairs & Trade, Jobs and Social Protection/Intreo to implement the Irish Emigrant Register
 - ensuring funding in Budget 2015 for the proposal
 - Marking March 17th 2015 as a launch date for the register with associated marketing campaign to promote population of the register
 - Asking DFAT to open negotiations with Australia and Canada in terms of option to give info to Ireland in working holiday applications

Conclusion and benefits of Irish Emigrant Register

The Irish Emigrant Register will not transform emigration into something easy nor will it make forced emigration more acceptable.

What it does have the capacity to do is to serve as a link between the State and its citizens abroad many of whom feel poorly supported and forgotten about. Ultimately it can help to improve our relationship with our diaspora not in an ethereal way but in a very practical and tangible sense by, for example, making the Irish labour market more connected to Irish emigrants abroad.

The proposal will need a modest amount of funding compared to its potential gains. It will need focussed co-operation between a number of government departments and it requires a dedicated responsibility being assigned and persisted with.

Many of our emigrants abroad are only waiting to get the call home only waiting to feel more connected with their country. In a globalised world let us take the lead in showing other global nations how to stay connected and prove how much our diaspora means to us by establishing the Irish Emigrant Register.