



# Irish emigrant perspectives on emigration

Research report on the welfare experiences of Irish  
emigrants in association with the GAA

July 2016

## CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	2
METHODOLOGY .....	3
FINDINGS.....	4
• Emigration challenges .....	4
• Pre-departure advice.....	6
• Barriers to return.....	9
SUMMARY.....	11
• Main challenges for emigrants living abroad .....	11
• Top advice from respondents .....	12
CONCLUSION.....	14
CITATIONS.....	15

## INTRODUCTION

Crosscare Migrant Project is an Irish based non-government organisation that assists Irish emigrants before they leave the country and on their return to Ireland. We are funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs Emigrant Support Programme and as a part of the social care actions by the Dublin Archdiocese have been working with Irish emigrants since the 1950s.

In March 2015, the Minister for Diaspora Affairs launched *Global Irish: Ireland's Diaspora Policy* aimed at improving diaspora engagement including welfare, advice and communication funding for the coming years.

The *#HomeToWork* campaign launched at the end of the year, a call to return Ireland's global diaspora home. The campaign followed a noticeable drop in inward migration of Irish nationals in 2014. Despite an estimated decrease of 13% in Irish emigration in 2015, it appears fewer Irish are willing to return to live and work in Ireland since 2012.

Recent research from The Irish Australian Chamber of Commerce found 76% of Irish in Australia surveyed are hoping to return to Ireland in the next 5 years, with availability of employment being the most important factor in deciding to return.

Crosscare Migrant Project initiated this project to reach Irish emigrants globally within GAA clubs to capture their experiences of moving abroad and returning to Ireland. The research seeks to inform intending Irish emigrants of the welfare issues to consider when moving abroad and returning to Ireland. Equally, the research hopes to contribute to the knowledge-base of the Irish diaspora to work towards informed developments for a connected and prosperous diaspora.

## METHODOLOGY

With the cooperation of the GAA, we conducted an online qualitative survey asking the officers of each GAA club around the world what advice they would give to intending Irish emigrants and what issues they face if they wish to return home, based on their connections with Irish emigrants. The online survey was conducted from September to November 2015 and sent to a total of 412 GAA clubs globally. The survey was also published on the GAA website and newsletter. We received a 22% response rate to the survey with 80 responses from separate clubs. Due to time and resource constraints, follow up contact with clubs to seek further information was not possible.

The GAA global network is far-reaching and internationally renowned for its strong connections with the Irish Diaspora. The survey aimed to elicit the views of officers in GAA clubs internationally, with the reasoning that officers in GAA clubs would be in contact with and aware of the issues for a lot of Irish new arrivals and they would be in a good position to suggest useful pre-departure advice.

The survey had four main questions and targeted a finite cohort group which made it simple to complete and collate. The four questions from the survey were:

1. What is the name and location of your club?
2. What are the most important welfare related challenges facing Irish emigrants that you are aware of?
3. How do you think Irish emigrants could be better prepared before they depart?
4. Are there any particular barriers preventing people who wish to return to Ireland from returning home?

### Profile of the participants

- Each response was completed by a GAA officer with 80 received
- No other demographic detail was recorded (i.e age, gender, family status, employment)
- The country of residence was recorded with the majority of responses coming from Europe (33) – including UK, Netherlands, Switzerland, Spain, Gibraltar, Austria and France, followed by USA & Canada (29), Australia & New Zealand (18) and Asia/Middle East (7) – including Singapore, Vietnam, South Korea, Malaysia, South Africa and Qatar.

## FINDINGS

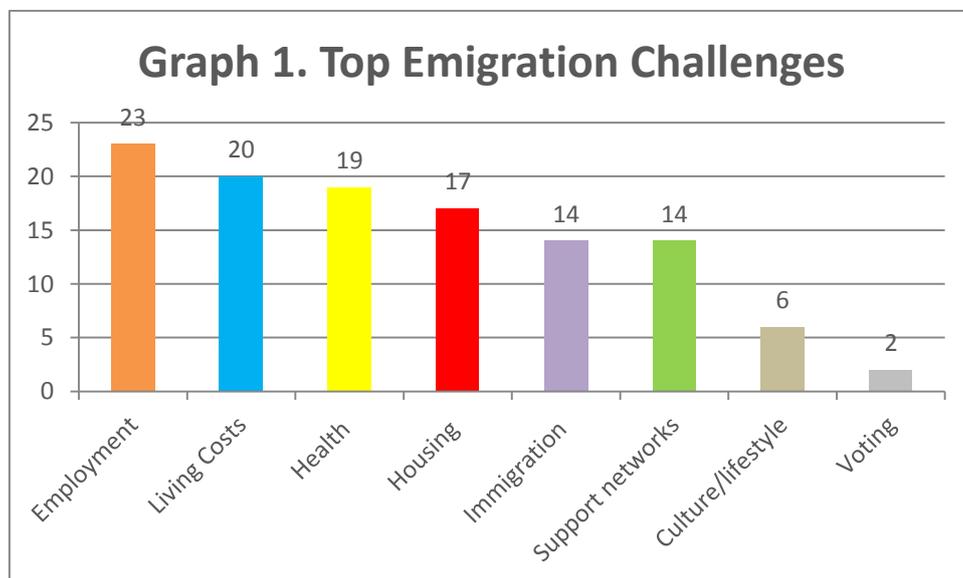
The findings of the survey revealed a number of thematic areas of interest for the respondents. The main areas are **Employment, Accommodation, Cost of living, Support networks, Health, Immigration, Culture / Lifestyle and Voting.**

The findings are presented in three sections according to the theme of the three main questions:

1. **Emigration challenges**
2. **Pre-departure advice**
3. **Barriers to returning**

### Emigration challenges

The first section analyses the results in response to the second question asking respondents what they think are the most important welfare related challenges facing Irish emigrants. The graph below outlines the numbers of respondents who discussed challenges under the issue categories listed.



## Employment

Employment showed to be one of the most prevalent topics with 23 respondents (29%) describing it as a challenge when emigrating.

Some discussed the importance of securing employment before departure or as quickly as possible on arrival, another suggested to have “*appreciation of the job market differences that exist in CV preparation, terminology etc*”

Others referred to the downturn in work (e.g. construction in Brisbane), job prospects, lack of guaranteed income, particularly where there are visa difficulties, and no access to welfare support when unemployed.

## Living Costs

20 respondents (25%) talked about the cost of living abroad as a welfare challenge. They discussed the high cost of living in some places and adjusting spending habits (e.g. Perth). Several referred to access to social welfare when unemployed as a concern, e.g. Australia, USA, and Ireland on return.

Financial security and having sufficient savings was echoed, including having knowledge of setting up financially abroad (insurance, tax, banking, etc.).

Transport was mentioned as a need for some work roles (USA), and affordable return transport to Ireland (UK).

## Health

Health was discussed as an important challenge for 19 respondents (24%). Their main concerns were access to healthcare including lack of information on access, exclusion of entitlement to free care (e.g. Australia, USA, Canada), cost and quality. Transferring healthcare insurance was also stated an issue. Several respondents referred to concern for support for mental health issues and substance and alcohol abuse. Social isolation and dislocation are a concern particularly in unfamiliar cultures and language barriers (e.g. Asia, Middle East).

## Housing

Housing was referred to by 17 (21%) respondents. The main concerns were cost and availability, e.g. people forced to room-share in London. Overcrowding in student populated housing was a concern for one respondent and another mentioned location as an important factor in deciding where to live. Others referred to house prices and issues with getting a mortgage abroad.

## Support networks

The challenge of having support networks when emigrating was referred to by 14 (18%) respondents. One respondent stated that there were “*gaps in emigration patterns, many newly arrived Irish do not have families or relatives for support when they land*” (e.g. USA). Several referred to the need for support from local Irish communities such as the GAA clubs to assist with knowledge of the area, culture, having a sense of belonging, to aid good mental health (e.g. Canada) and making friendships when far from support networks in Ireland.

## Immigration

Respondents predominantly from the USA and Canada (18%) highlighted the issues with immigration and obtaining visas and the restrictions of travelling home to visit.

## Culture / Lifestyle

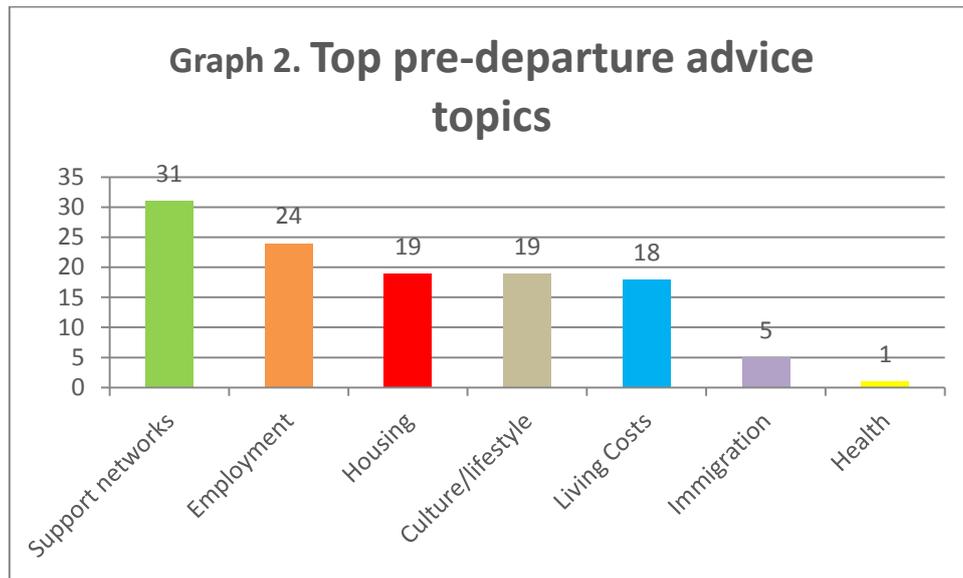
Culture and lifestyle was regarded as a challenge for 6 respondents, e.g. “*A different culture with regards medical care as not many people are aware of*” (Australia), drug and alcohol abuse culture (Australia), language barriers, and integrating socially with the local community (Europe).

## Voting

2 respondents referred to not having voting rights in Ireland when they are abroad as a challenge for emigration.

## Pre-departure advice

This second section is an analysis of responses from respondents on the third question asking them how they think Irish emigrants could be better prepared before they depart. Graph 2 outlines the numbers of respondents who gave pre-departure advice under the issue categories listed.



### Support networks

The largest number of respondents, 31 (39%), expressed support networks as the most important consideration when preparing to move abroad and offered advice to intending emigrants on finding support organisations to join (GAA clubs, Irish Centres) for the area they are travelling to for advice on settling in there. They suggest getting in contact with other Irish friends who are already living there who can give advice and perhaps be a point of contact on arrival. They recommend researching what communities, clubs, groups and consular services are available.

### Employment

30% (24) respondents placed employment as an important factor when preparing to emigrate. They recommended having savings and financial security to manage while securing employment, setting up interviews before departure, and to have contacts with people living in the destination country to seek advice.

Managing expectations of employment opportunities as there can be a lack of opportunities was one concern, warning *“being Irish doesn’t propel you up the ladder”*. Other suggestions were to make sure all education and work qualifications are assessed and transferable, find out about any courses that need to be completed before starting a job, research about the tax system (Australia) and how to obtain a social security number.

## Housing

The importance of securing accommodation was expressed by 19 (24%) respondents, with preference to having accommodation secured before departing Ireland.

Failing that, the advice was to check availability in the area of choice, be selective on which area to live, look at cost and exchange rates, and seek advice from the local GAA clubs and Irish communities on accommodation there.

Some advice mentioned to have a deposit ready and avoid sending a deposit in advance (Netherlands).

## Culture / Lifestyle

Almost a quarter of respondents, 19 (24%) highlighted culture and lifestyle as important to consider. Several mention making contact with the local GAA clubs for information on the social and cultural aspects of life in the country of destination. They mention administrative and language differences (Europe), restricted annual leave and long work day culture (USA). However, some mention the positives such as having exposure to a wide variety of nationalities and the importance of making opportunities to integrate with local people and not just Irish communities.

## Cost of living

A total of 18 (23%) respondents emphasised researching the cost of living. They recommend initially to check prices and exchanges rates, and to have enough savings to support living costs for the first few months whilst job-seeking. Again, they recommend contacting GAA clubs for advice on more affordable options in accommodation, car insurance, setting up bank accounts, etc. In some places like the USA it is common to expect to need a car for work and emigrants should be aware that there is very little “*safety net*” available (social welfare). It is advised also to arrange health insurance before departure.

## Immigration

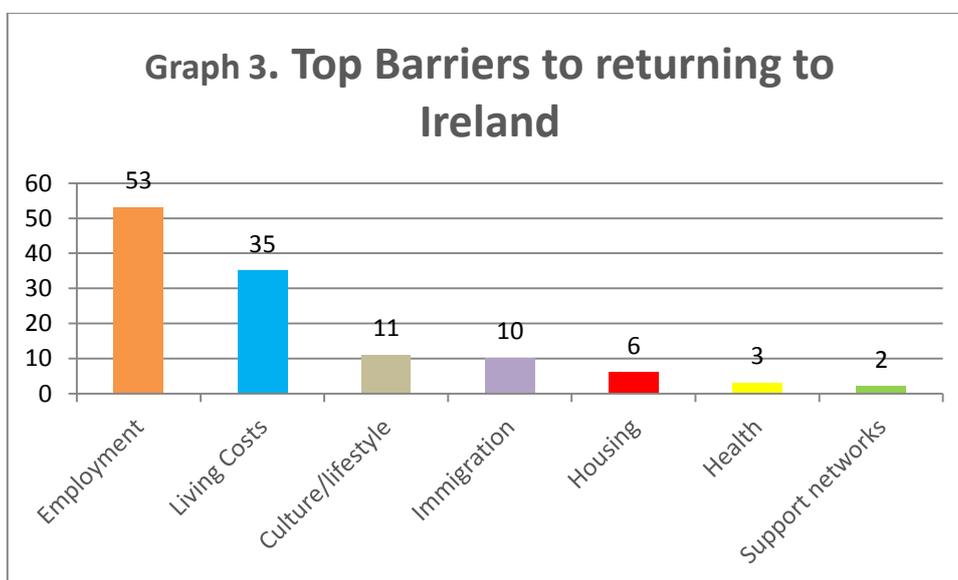
Just 5 (6%) respondents mentioned preparing for any immigration challenges before departure such as finding out what visas are required or available, and how to obtain national insurance or social security numbers.

## Health

1 respondent from the USA pointed out the importance of arranging health insurance before departure.

## Barriers to return

The final section of findings is an analysis of the third set of responses, from the fourth survey question which asks what the key barriers are for Irish emigrants when they are considering returning to live in Ireland. Graph 3 outlines the top barriers to returning to Ireland as listed by respondents according to the issue category.



## Employment

The most consistent response came from 53 (66%) respondents who placed employment as the most important factor in deciding to move back to Ireland. More specifically, the barriers were in relation to finding suitable and career related work, the availability of work, the prospect of lower wages, high tax rates and a lack of secure, full time and permanent roles.

Others discussed the barriers around transferability of skills, including job entry in Ireland as some overseas experience is not recognised (Australia) and some professional qualifications may not be officially recognised (medical professionals in the UK).

Rurally, job opportunities are seen to be limited outside of Dublin and one respondent stated there is a lack of job progression in Ireland.

### Living Costs

Almost half of the respondents, 35 (44%), referred to living costs as a barrier to returning to live in Ireland. Expensive living costs, tax rates, difficulty accessing social welfare and third level education on return, high car/health insurance and housing costs were their main concerns. An example of extra costs is the categorisation of returning emigrants as new drivers, disregarding any no-claims bonus abroad and driving up their cost of car insurance.

### Culture/Lifestyle

A smaller number, 11 (14%) respondents, talked about issues with the culture and lifestyle change. These included loss of their current standard of living, the cost of re-adjustment on return, friends having moved on or emigrated, re-adjusting to the Irish weather, the “*conservative lifestyle*” of Ireland and the preservation of a good lifestyle for the wealthy only.

### Immigration

Only 10 (13%) respondents mentioned immigration issues as barriers to returning i.e. difficulties obtaining a visa for a non-Irish spouse, and the risk for those in the USA who are overstaying on a visa to be prohibited from re-entering for 10 years.

### Housing

6 (8%) respondents cited the difficulties in accessing housing or rented accommodation, including cost, quality and availability.

### Health

3 (4%) respondents stated healthcare was an issue when transferring healthcare insurance back to Ireland, the quality of care available (e.g. lower standard than EU countries), no free healthcare (versus free healthcare in Canada), and expensive and unaffordable healthcare (if ineligible for the medical card).

## Support networks

On barriers in terms of support networks, 2 respondents said most friends live in different countries and there are no counselling/advisory services for returning emigrants to support their transition.

## SUMMARY

The aim of this survey was to reach Irish emigrants globally within GAA clubs to capture the experiences of Irish emigrants with regard to moving abroad and returning. The findings contribute both to informing intending Irish emigrants of the welfare issues to consider when moving abroad and returning to Ireland; and contribute to the knowledge-base on the diaspora.

Variations between responses from clubs were often geographically specific, but there are some commonalities such as social isolation, access to employment, health and accommodation. Some of the advice suggested by respondents is very practical and valuable coming from first-hand experiences of emigrants.

## Main challenges for emigrants living abroad

An analysis of the findings reveals interesting insight into the experiences of the Irish diaspora in GAA clubs and how they identify the challenges shared by their fellow diaspora. We can identify shared challenges when grouped regionally:

- **Australia and New Zealand:** health and mental health were the main issues
- **USA & Canada:** visas and overstaying were the main issues – however this can be a skewed result as the interpretation of the question may not have been taken as a permanent return to Ireland by these respondents.
- **EU/Asia/Middle East:** social isolation and cultural differences were the main issues. This can be a predictable response from these countries given the considerable language and cultural differences compared to the English speaking countries above.

## Globally shared challenges

Looking more broadly at the challenges that appear consistently and across various countries globally, the findings conclude the most common shared challenges facing respondents were:

- 1. Establishing support networks before departure**
- 2. Employment opportunities to return to live in Ireland**

Ultimately, the responses to question 2 and 3 speak to similar responses as they are discussing both the challenges when moving abroad and the advice they would give to other intending Irish emigrants. There is a natural overlap of these responses, therefore the most common response and most important rated factor in moving abroad is to establish support networks and making contact with support groups such as GAA clubs. Social isolation is repeatedly raised as an area of concern as the disruption to an emigrant's life is immense and it is an important time to be prepared to support their emotional and mental well-being.

Establishing employment in both the country of destination and returning to live in Ireland is consistently important to respondents across all the clubs. Employment is generally the main source of income for households therefore it is a key factor in their decision to emigrate or return. Various specific issues are cited such as job availability, job security, career-path and transferability of skills and qualifications. Employment will often be the reason for emigrating as has been well documented to be the case for the most recent wave of emigration from Ireland since 2010. The draw to return to live in Ireland by these respondents and their associates will be highly dependent on the job prospects in Ireland on their return. It is also likely that they will seek some security of employment in Ireland before they move back.

## Top advice from respondents for future emigrants

- Research the place you are going as much as possible before departure
- Prepare as much as possible with savings, employment, accommodation, and connections with Irish living there/GAA club
- Be prepared to take time to source a job and accommodation
- Learn the language if moving to a non-English speaking country

The following are some suggestions from respondents who volunteered their ideas on what would be useful to improve the experiences of emigrants both emigrating and returning.

### Recommendations from respondents

*“A list of support organisations in areas to destination countries, e.g. the IASAQ’s Immigrants handbook”*

*“A downloadable app to quickly register in the case of a catastrophe”*

*“A program to secure employment and housing before departing for America”*

*“A GAA list of clubs and contacts in every city to ease the transition”*

*“An Information Pack or guide about each destination country provided by the embassies/consular services”*

*“Irish networks and consular services could work together more closely in order to inform intending emigrants of the support networks available abroad”*

*“A joint DFA/GAA booklet on clubs abroad for people who do not know about the GAA community, as new arrivals can get a lot of information very quickly from club members already there”*

*“An easily accessible directory of GAA clubs and Irish societies in one place”*

*“Country-specific advisory services in Ireland for emigrants before departure”*

## CONCLUSION

This research sought to build on the diaspora knowledge-base and development of the connection between Irish diaspora and Ireland. It captures a contemporary record of opinions and experiences of Irish emigrants as accounted by GAA officers globally. It aims to encourage further interest and interaction from the diaspora to engage on issues affecting emigrants both intending and returning.

There is space for further analysis and investigation on the needs of the diaspora. Perspectives from different age-groups, gender and household size could also give further insight on group-specific issues or concerns. It would be interesting to develop more information on the regional needs of the diaspora based on geographical context.

The contribution of the GAA clubs in this research has been instrumental and further proves the strength of the clubs as focal points who are meeting new emigrants and acting as a first hand resource to capture information on concerns and issues of Irish emigrants. Further collaboration with the GAA clubs globally, including officers and members, could generate broader and more in-depth information on the needs of the diaspora.

## CITATIONS

Irish Australian Chamber of Commerce, *Strategies to help support Diaspora seeking a return to Ireland* (2015)

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Ireland, *Global Irish – Ireland’s Diaspora Policy*, (2015)

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Ireland, *#Hometowork* campaign (2015)

CSO Census 2011

## MORE INFORMATION

If you are considering moving abroad or returning to Ireland and you would like some more information, you can **contact us** by phone at +353 (0)1 873 2844 or by email at [migrantproject@crosscare.ie](mailto:migrantproject@crosscare.ie).

You can also see our websites:

[www.migrantproject.ie](http://www.migrantproject.ie)

[www.mindhowyougo.ie](http://www.mindhowyougo.ie)

Or follow us on social media:

[www.facebook.com/CrosscareMigrantProject](https://www.facebook.com/CrosscareMigrantProject)

<https://twitter.com/irishmigrants>

In association with



Crosscare Migrant Project is a project of Crosscare,  
the social support agency of the Dublin Archdiocese.



Our work with the Diaspora is funded by the Emigrant Support Programme of the Department of  
Foreign Affairs & Trade



AN ROINN GNÓTHAÍ EACHTRACHA AGUS TRÁDÁLA NA HÉIREANN  
DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TRADE OF IRELAND