

Eastern Harps

Eastern Harps was founded in 1973 through the amalgamation of Keash and Gurteen, at a time when depopulation continued to reshape rural life in south Sligo. More than fifty years later, that same reality still frames the work of the club. Eastern Harps is rooted in a wide and dispersed community, and its role extends far beyond sport. Alongside football, it sees itself as part of the wider work of sustaining community life, providing community facilities and helping make the area a place where people want to stay, return and belong.

That broader role is central to how diaspora engagement is understood. For Eastern Harps, diaspora is not only about people living overseas. It also includes a strong Dublin-based diaspora of younger adults who have moved away for work or college but remain closely tied to the club. Around a third of the senior team is now based in Dublin, travelling back for training and matches.

CASE STUDY



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Sean Scott, Chair Eastern Harps GAA Club

The club also sees ongoing ties through supporters, former players, sponsors and the wider GAA network at home and abroad. As club Chair Seán Scott puts it, *“We have a lot of people abroad, and when you start thinking about it, they do connect with the club in various guises.”* These links matter in practical as well as emotional ways. The club’s main sponsor is from the area but now based elsewhere, and that support is seen as an expression of loyalty to place and community. *“Without him, he’s a huge support to us...”* Asked what drives that support, the answer was clear: *“I’d say his love of the community... commitment to his roots.”*

Diaspora also matters as a network. Through GAA clubs abroad, young people leaving the area can find work, contacts and a sense of safety when settling somewhere new. As Carmel Taheny from the Healthy Club committee put it, *“If you have a network, and we have kids who go out through that network... there’s someone there to kind of look out for them and they’re safe. That’s important.”*

The club has a five-year strategic plan, but diaspora engagement has not yet been a dedicated focus within it. There is a clear sense, however, that this is an area with real potential. The club’s 50th anniversary celebrations showed how strong those connections still are: *“My God, it was no problem coming back... and they’re delighted to re-engage.”* Events such as the club’s annual Camino walk point to that potential too. It is a fundraiser, but also a community event that brings people together from across the area and beyond, including families returning and wider networks reconnecting through the club.

The challenge is not a lack of goodwill or connection, but the limits of volunteer time and the scale of the club’s existing responsibilities. Eastern Harps is already operating across sport, facilities, healthy club work, fundraising and wider community concerns. Diaspora engagement is seen as promising, but difficult to progress without support. As Seán reflects, *“We need to map that a little bit, and understand it a bit more... and get a strategy around it.”* For Eastern Harps, this is tied to a much bigger issue: the long-term future of rural communities. Housing, population change and population retention are major concerns, and the club sees its work as part of a wider effort to keep the area viable. Diaspora engagement therefore matters not just as a source of support, but as part of the wider task of maintaining connection between people and place.

At its core, this is a club working hard to hold community together across distance and change.

