

The Local Authorities

Local authorities are amongst the most important actors in the diaspora engagement landscape and often across multiple internal teams and sections, from economic development to tourism to the arts office to the library service to corporate services. One of the most common refrains is that it is 'a small part of a lot of people's jobs'. In addition to this more dispersed kind of work, both **Leitrim and Donegal County Councils** have taken a more strategic approach which show what can be achieved through strong local commitment, and how much more becomes possible when that commitment is backed by dedicated resources.

In **Leitrim County Council**, Briega Shannon coordinates the work as part of a broader role within the Economic Development Team. Leitrim County Council has already had one diaspora strategy in place and is now developing a **new 2026-2030 strategy**, shaped through a consultation survey, an internal working group, and external steering group and consultation sessions with elected members and local communities throughout the county. The work combines structure with relationship-building.



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Photo courtesy of Leitrim County Council.

A good example is the **Global Business Network**, established in 2025, which brings together a small group of senior Leitrim-connected figures based mainly in the US, UK and Dublin. Meeting every few months, the group is used to brief diaspora contacts on council initiatives, draw on their expertise, test ideas and open doors to wider networks. The Council is deliberate about keeping the network small so that everyone can contribute and no one disappears into the background.

Alongside that, Leitrim is planning a new **Leitrim Ambassadors Summit**, designed to bring together around 50 people from business, sport, the creative sector, community life and the diaspora for a focused two-day event aimed at showcasing the county's strengths and building a new cohort of county ambassadors. Their approach also includes targeted events abroad, including a recent joint diaspora reception at the Irish Embassy in London with Longford, Roscommon and Cavan County Councils, where invitees were asked to bring someone new with them, a simple but effective way of widening the circle – followed by a Leitrim County Council-hosted diaspora breakfast briefing specifically for diaspora attendees from the previous evening. Leitrim County Council further sustains and deepens its diaspora relationships through the Cathaoirleach's annual attendance at the Leitrim London Association dinner and by participating each year in the St Patrick's Day Parade with the Leitrim New York Society.

Leitrim also works through partnership channels, for example via the Leitrim GAA's '50 Miles in January' challenge, which helps the council use GAA networks abroad to share information and stay visible. The local authorities work is also rooted in a strong sense of care and of responsibility towards those that left. As Brieghe puts it, the purpose is not only economic, but to make sure people abroad know that *"the people in Leitrim have not forgotten about you. You're still as important where you are, as you would have been if you had been here with us."*

In **Donegal County Council**, the same long-term, relationship-led understanding is visible, but with a more dedicated structure and a wider programme of delivery around it. Eoin Leonard works as a named **Diaspora Officer** within the economic development team, and that dedicated role gives the council greater capacity to run a busy calendar of engagement across key cities including London, Glasgow, Boston, Philadelphia and New York. Donegal's model is highly targeted. Rather than trying to keep in touch with thousands of people, Eoin talks about having a *"core network"* in each place, trusted contacts who can help shape the next opportunity, bring the right people into a room, and keep connections moving. That has allowed Donegal to run increasingly refined diaspora-facing events. One strong example is the sold-out event at the London Irish Centre featuring Packie Bonner and Shay Given. On one level, it was an evening to talk football with two much loved Donegal figures; in practice, it was also a diaspora and economic development platform, with 350 people in the room, a VIP reception for key connections, Donegal tourism and economic development stands, newsletter sign-ups, and follow-on conversations that helped lead to a London jobs fair and further embassy engagement.

Similarly, the council's long-running **Tip O'Neill Irish Diaspora Awards** function not just as a recognition event, but as a relationship-building tool, drawing in previous awardees, generating media attention, and giving Donegal a reason to deepen ties with influential diaspora figures over time. Honouring Eileen and Seán Donaghey in 2025 for the couple's decades of support for Donegal people arriving in Sydney has also helped Donegal open up a new strand of engagement in Australia. In London, attendance at the **London Irish Vintage Club Day** has created useful business links and visibility, while conversations in those spaces have contributed to tangible local outcomes. The **Wonder of Weave** event held Edinburgh in 2024 provided an opportunity to celebrate the long-standing connections between Donegal Tweed and Harris Tweed Authority as well as for key figures in the Donegal Diaspora Scottish Network to come together to discuss other common initiatives. What the dedicated role makes possible is not just more events, but more continuity between them, more follow-up, more depth and more room to turn informal goodwill into ongoing connection.

In one important way, the approaches taken by both councils are similar. Both focus on cultivating small, trusted networks in key places. The logic is the same: this is not about trying to know everyone; it is about knowing the right people well enough that trust can grow. That emphasis on the long game runs strongly through both cases. Briege speaks about the importance of perseverance, of keeping connections warm, and of not becoming discouraged if results are not immediate. Eoin says much the same in a different way when he describes how long it took to build relationships in the role, especially as someone not originally from Donegal.

In both counties, the work is understood as cumulative, each event, each conversation and each contact builds the conditions for something else later.

What the two cases show most clearly is that effective diaspora engagement depends less on scale than on consistency. It is built around staying in touch, following up, listening carefully, and slowly building mutual value over time. What both are trying to do is reduce the risk that diaspora engagement depends too heavily on one person knowing the right person. The value of dedicated resource becomes especially clear here. In Leitrim, Briege Shannon and her colleagues are building a county-wide approach through strategy, consultation, working groups and carefully maintained networks, but are doing so without a dedicated post or budget, and she is very clear about what that means in practice: limited time to deepen relationships and a constant need to prioritise. In Donegal, Eoin's dedicated role creates more room for that slower work of follow-up and continuity. He is clear that this is *"quite a unique role"* because it is *"so relationship focused"*, and that without continuity *"it would suffer."* He is equally frank about the limits even there, saying, *"If I could photocopy myself, it'd be great."*

