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# Connected Communities, Global Relationships

Findings from Research on Diaspora Engagement  
in the West and Northwest of Ireland

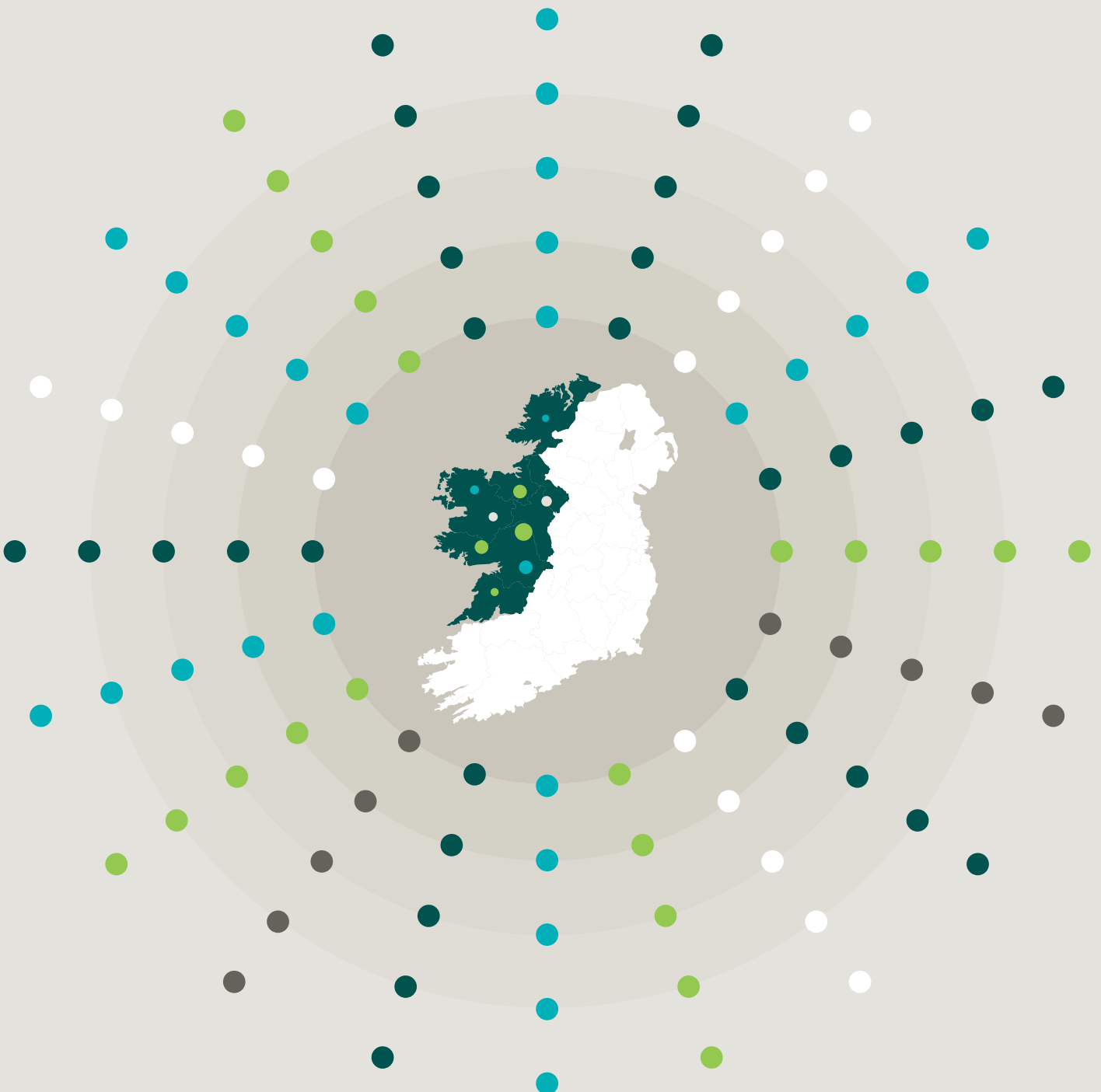
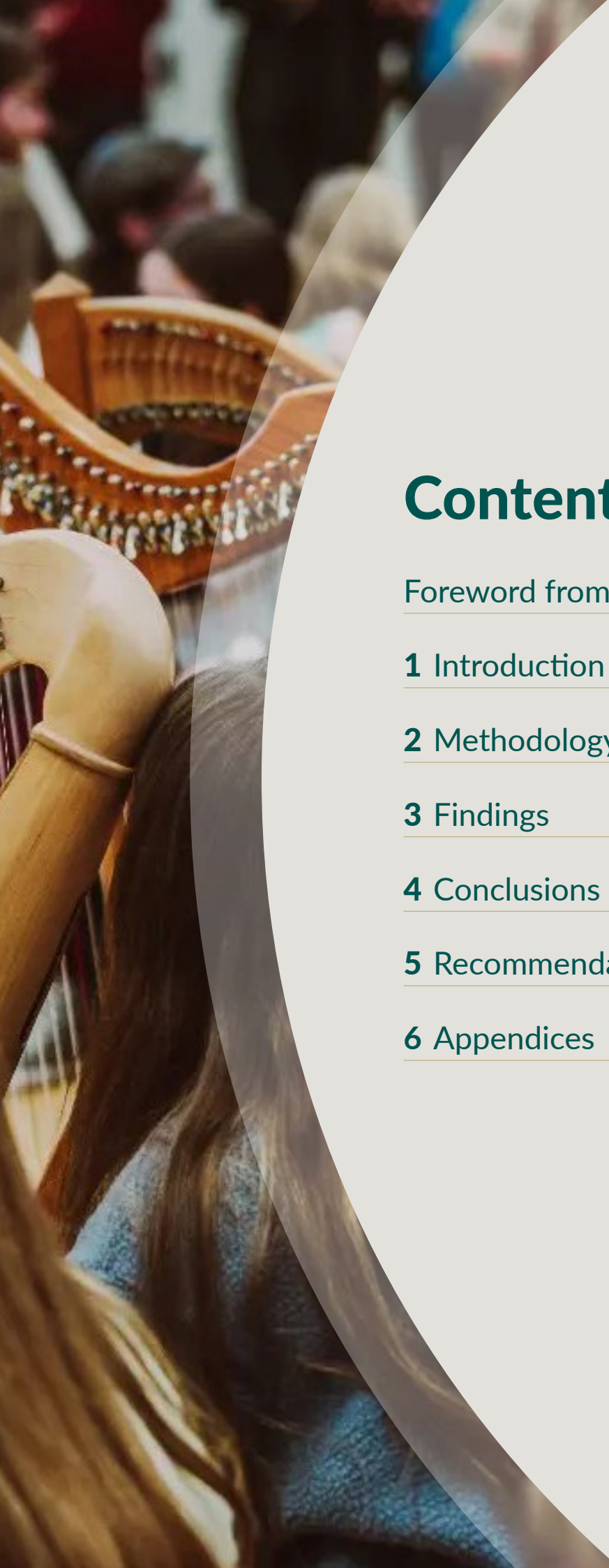




Photo courtesy of Comharchumann Forbartha Ghaoth Dobhair



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# Foreword

## Allan Mulrooney - CEO of the Western Development Commission



Migration has been one of the defining forces in the history of the West and Northwest of Ireland. Across generations, people from this region left to build lives elsewhere, often in difficult circumstances, while maintaining enduring ties to home, family and community. That experience has shaped our society, our economy and our sense of identity, and its effects continue to be felt across the region today.

However, the legacy of migration is measured not only in population change. It is also reflected in the enduring relationships that continue to link communities in the West and Northwest with people in other parts of Ireland and across Britain, North America, Australia, mainland Europe and many other parts of the world. Those connections are expressed through family ties, heritage, education, tourism, philanthropy, business relationships, cultural exchange and an ongoing sense of belonging to place.

For the West and Northwest, these relationships represent an important strategic asset. They include not only goodwill and affinity, but also skills, experience, professional networks, advocacy, market access, cultural capital and investment potential. Increasingly, regions across the world recognise that strong diaspora connections can support economic development, talent attraction, innovation and international visibility. For this region, with its distinct migration history and strong place-based identity, the opportunity is particularly significant.

At a time when Ireland is focused on achieving balanced regional development, resilient communities, global connectivity and sustainable

economic growth, effective diaspora engagement has renewed policy relevance. It offers a practical way to strengthen links between local communities and global networks, while helping regions such as ours compete for talent, ideas, visitors and investment in an increasingly connected world.

This report is the first comprehensive assessment of diaspora engagement across the West and Northwest. It provides an evidence base on the scale and nature of current activity, the motivations that underpin it, the barriers encountered by organisations and communities, and the opportunities for a more coordinated approach in the years ahead. Through a series of case studies, it also provides us with a fascinating insight into the everyday detail of how the themes of the research play out on the ground.

The findings are encouraging. They show that diaspora engagement is already active across the region, led by local authorities, community organisations, tourism bodies, educational institutions, sporting organisations, heritage groups and underpinned by high levels of volunteer commitment. The report also highlights an important point regarding motivation. The strongest driver of engagement was maintaining bonds of friendship and connection. This demonstrates that successful diaspora engagement is fundamentally relationship-based. Economic opportunity, philanthropy and wider collaboration can follow, but they are most sustainable when built on trust, relevance and long-standing connection.

## *This report provides a practical foundation for the next phase of diaspora engagement in the West and Northwest.*

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At the same time, the research identifies practical challenges that limit progress. Many organisations and voluntary groups cited constraints relating to time, resources, staffing and access to appropriate systems or networks. In many cases, valuable work is taking place, but it remains fragmented and dependent on individual effort rather than supported by shared infrastructure. The report also shows that different parts of the diaspora may engage for different reasons: recognising these differences will be important if future approaches are to be effective and relevant.

This is a challenge that has parallels across wider regional development policy. Experience shows that where strong local initiative is matched by practical coordination, common platforms and sustained support, greater scale and impact can be achieved. The lesson is not that local activity should be replaced, but that it should be enabled. In that regard, there are clear opportunities to apply similar principles to diaspora engagement across the region.

The role of the Western Development Commission is not to duplicate the excellent work already being undertaken by communities and organisations. Rather, it is to help strengthen connections, support collaboration, improve access to shared tools and ensure that local effort can benefit from a coherent regional framework aligned with national policy.

The timing of this report is significant. As Ireland advances a new national Diaspora Strategy, it is important that the distinct experience and opportunities of the West and Northwest are reflected within that wider agenda. Few regions have experienced migration on the scale seen here, or retain such strong emotional and cultural connections across generations. Equally, the unique focus of the report on those who are doing the everyday work of connecting with the diaspora provides significant learning for other counties and regions in Ireland but also for other regions in Europe with a large diaspora.

This report provides a practical foundation for the next phase of diaspora engagement in the West and Northwest. It points towards an approach based on partnership, evidence and long-term relationship building. With stronger coordination, dedicated support and sustained ambition, the potential exists not only to deepen existing relationships, but to unlock new opportunities for communities, enterprise and future generations across the region.

## Acknowledgements

The Western Development Commission would like to thank all of those who contributed to the research process. They include the many people throughout the region who both completed and shared the survey, the people who helped pilot it and those who agreed to be interviewed further at various stages. The latter group gave very generously of their time to help create a richer picture of the amazing, often quiet work which is happening every day to maintain connections with our people abroad.

We would also like to thank Niamh McGarry of NMG Consulting and Patrick Claffey of QMPC Consulting for the quality of their work but also for bringing such commitment and heart to the project. Thanks also to the staff members in WDC who have provided valuable supports and insights at key moments, amongst them Liam Horan, Stephen Carolan and Teresa Hooks as well as Karen Sweeney, Keira Burke and Louise Rooney from the Communications team. Finally, thank you to Andrea Kavanagh for her design work on this report and otherwise.

This project was funded by the Western Development Commission and was led by Dr Aisling Moroney. Please refer to this report as follows: Moroney, A., 2025, *Connected Communities, Global Relationships: Findings from Research on Diaspora Engagement in the West and Northwest of Ireland*. A Western Development Commission Report.

**Aisling Moroney**

May, 2026.



# 1 | Introduction

While emigration has been a defining feature of Irish life since at least the 1840s, its impact has been felt most sharply in the West and Northwest of the country. If we take population decline as a proxy for sustained emigration patterns, the scale of emigration from the region becomes clear.

The seven counties of the Western Development Commission region – Donegal, Sligo, Roscommon, Leitrim, Mayo, Galway, and Clare – were home to just over 2 million people in 1841. By 1926, that figure had declined to a little over 800,000, and in the 2022 Census had only recovered to around 880,000. The total population still remains at 56 per cent below the 1841 population, with some counties having experienced particularly sharp declines: the population of Roscommon declined by 72.5 per cent between 1841 and 2022 and Leitrim still has less than a quarter of the population it had pre-Famine. By comparison, although the rest of Ireland also experienced severe decline - losing just over half its population by 1926 - it has since recovered far more strongly, and by 2022 was only about 21 per cent below its 1841 level<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> All population figures: CSO

It is within this context of successive waves of emigration that engagement with the diaspora has become an embedded part of the social, cultural and economic life of the Western region. Communities, organisations and institutions have developed and maintained relationships with people who have left, with later generations of our diaspora, and with others who retain strong connections to place. This engagement takes many forms, from formal initiatives to more informal activity through local networks, heritage, sport, education, tourism, philanthropy and community connection. While not always labelled as “diaspora engagement”, this activity is longstanding and continues across the region.

In late 2025, the Western Development Commission (WDC) commissioned QMPC and NMCG Consulting to work with the Policy team to carry out a research study to better understand diaspora engagement in the West and Northwest, and to consider what role the WDC can most usefully play in supporting it into the future. The intention was to build a clearer picture of what is already happening, who is involved, how engagement is being carried out, where there are gaps or missed opportunities, and what kinds of support would be most useful. The brief emphasised understanding activity across the Western Region and using the findings to inform practical next steps.

The research did not begin from a blank page. It was informed by an earlier learning process undertaken by the WDC policy team in spring 2025, involving interviews with stakeholders already active in diaspora engagement. This highlighted both the level and range of activity already underway and the fact that much of it does not always come labelled as “diaspora engagement”. It also pointed to several themes that have shaped this report: the importance of long-term relationships; the variety of actors involved; the challenges of limited capacity and coordination; and the need for the WDC to consider where its distinct value lies. In particular, it suggested that the WDC’s greatest contribution may lie less in direct engagement and more in its ability to support and strengthen existing work across the region.

**The objectives of this research were to:**

1. Build a comprehensive picture of diaspora-related activity across the seven counties of the Western Region, including who is engaging, how, where and for what reasons.
2. Map activity across a range of sectors, from community groups and sporting organisations to education, culture and local authorities.
3. Capture the nature of relationships with different diaspora groupings (recent emigrants, alumni, legacy diaspora, Gen 2/3, and affinity diaspora).
4. Understand levels of interest in growing diaspora activity and opportunities for collaboration and capacity building.
5. Provide an evidence base to inform a practical next phase of diaspora engagement for the WDC.

This report is being produced at an important moment in the wider policy context. In April 2026, the Government launched a new National Diaspora Strategy for 2026-2030<sup>4</sup>, a number of themes of which are echoed within this report. These include Identity & Culture, Connection & Contribution and Sharing our Experience. At regional level, diaspora engagement is reflected in existing strategies, including Údarás na Gaeltachta’s Strategic Plan 2021-2025 and the WDC’s own five-year strategy to 2029, Unlocking Potential, Driving Change<sup>2</sup>.

The timing of this report is therefore significant. It provides an evidence base for the WDC’s next steps as national and regional approaches to diaspora engagement evolve. It also ensures that the specific circumstances of the West and Northwest are reflected in that next phase. The region has a distinct diaspora story, shaped by long histories of emigration, strong local identities and varied forms of ongoing connection. Throughout the report, the emphasis is on learning from what is already happening and identifying how future support can strengthen coordination, effectiveness and sustainability.

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2 Plean-Straitéiseach-Údarás-na-Gaeltachta-2021-2025.pdf

3 Unlocking-Potential-Driving-Change.-2025-2029\_Updated-December-2025.pdf

4 [https://assets.ireland.ie/documents/Irelands\\_Diaspora\\_Strategy\\_v9\\_LR.pdf](https://assets.ireland.ie/documents/Irelands_Diaspora_Strategy_v9_LR.pdf)

# 2 | Methodology

This research used a mixed-methods approach to build an understanding of diaspora engagement across the Western Region. The aim was to gather both broad evidence on the current landscape and more detailed insight into the experiences, motivations and challenges of those already involved in this work. The research combined a number of connected strands. It began with background desk research, including a review of learning from WDC's earlier pilot work on diaspora engagement. This provided a foundation for the wider study and helped identify key themes for further exploration.

An inclusive regional survey was then developed to capture the experiences of those engaging the diaspora in different ways, including in paid and voluntary roles, through formal organisations and groups, and for personal reasons. The survey was designed to understand who is involved in this work, what kinds of activity are taking place, what is driving that engagement, what barriers people are facing, and what kinds of support would be most useful going forward. The survey was promoted using a range of approaches in order to reach as broad a group of respondents as possible, including online and social media platforms, press and radio activity, emails to regionally and locally engaged groups and organisations and use of the wider contact networks of both the research team and the WDC. The survey ran for seven weeks between November 2025 and January 2026. The data was cleaned and in total it received 240 responses, representing 178 distinct groups or organisations. This provided a substantial sample for understanding the current picture of diaspora engagement across the region.

The survey findings then informed a follow-on qualitative phase, including the development of an interview guide, case study interviews and a number of case studies. This made it possible to explore the survey findings in greater depth and to ground the wider analysis in lived experience and practical examples.

This approach was chosen to capture both the breadth of activity taking place and the deeper learning behind it. It also allowed for careful analysis of the findings in light of existing policy knowledge, so that the final key findings and recommendations were not only evidence-informed, but immediately relevant in practice. In this way, the research was designed to help bridge the gap between research, policy and action. (Full detailed methodology available in Appendix 3).



Photo courtesy of Comharchumann Forbartha Ghaoth Dobhair

# 3 | Findings

The findings from this research point to a clear overall picture. Diaspora engagement in the West and Northwest is already active and valued. It is being carried out by a wide range of organisations, groups and individuals, often with strong commitment and clear purpose. The research also shows that there is potential to do much more. What is missing is not interest, but the time, resources, coordination and support needed to develop this work further.

## The results are divided into:

**Five key findings:** Particularly critical in shaping future direction and informing next steps.

**Additional results:** Provide a clearer picture of how diaspora engagement is being delivered across the region, who it is reaching, and where the principal differences and gaps lie.

Taken together, they give a fuller picture of what is already happening and what may be needed to strengthen it further. (Some further findings delineating the data further by county, sector, volunteer/professional, etc. are also available in Appendix 2)



Members of Kilrush and District Historical Society

# Five Key Findings

## 3.1 Diaspora engagement is relationship-led: connection comes before fundraising

The clearest finding from the research is that diaspora engagement is first and foremost about maintaining relationships. This matters because diaspora engagement is sometimes assumed to be mainly about fundraising or investment. The survey findings suggest otherwise. In the West and Northwest, connection comes first.

*“Engagement with diaspora by our organisation has always been on the basis of direct contact with individuals / families, often based on personal friendships” - Member of staff for a group/organisation, Mayo.*

Maintaining bonds of friendship and connection was the strongest-rated reason for engaging with our diaspora. It was rated as one of the most important reasons for engagement by 84 per cent of respondents. A further 12 per cent rated it as somewhat important, while only 2 per cent said it was not at all important. This made it the strongest result across all motivations tested.

By comparison, the two fundraising-related motivations included in the survey – funding for a community, group or organisation, and investment in economic development – were each rated as one of the most important reasons by 70 per cent of respondents. These are still strong results, but they sit clearly behind relationship-building.

This suggests that for most respondents, diaspora engagement is rooted in staying connected, maintaining identity and sustaining relationships over time. Other outcomes, including fundraising and investment, are important, but they are more likely to be built on top of those relationships than to replace them.



**Figure 1. Reasons for engaging with our diaspora (n=137)**

Maintaining bonds of friendship and connection was the strongest-rated reason for engagement, ranking ahead of funding and investment-related motivations.

## The Island Community

**Inishturk Community Club CLG**, currently in the process of becoming Inishturk Development Company, is effectively the development company for the island of Inishturk. On an offshore island with a resident population of around 60 people, it plays a central role in community-owned hospitality and accommodation, while also supporting work on ferries, harbours, housing, wellbeing, events and long-term development. As Sinéad Cahalan, Development Manager, puts it, *“all life on an offshore island runs through the development office.”*

Crucially, the organisation does not see the community as only the people currently living on Inishturk. It sees the island as having a much wider circle of belonging: residents, children and grandchildren of island families living elsewhere, and a broader network of people who may not be related but who have built a strong connection to the island over time.

Inishturk Community Club PLC is effectively the development company for the island of Inishturk.



Photo courtesy of Inishturk Community Club, CLG

Over the last two and a half years, that understanding has become more strategic. Inishturk Vision 2050 is a community led strategy and has a linked five-year action plan to build the Island into a resilient, sustainable, and vibrant community. The board has grown to ten members, supported by several subcommittees, and most of those involved now live off-island. In that sense, diaspora engagement is already shaping the island’s future from within.

The Inishturk Community Club engages with its diaspora in a deliberate and multi-layered way. This includes a monthly newsletter, WhatsApp groups, hybrid AGMs and town halls, family reunions, social media, and a dedicated section on the website focused on the island's future and opportunities to get involved. What is clear is that this engagement is not driven by nostalgia alone. As Sinéad Cahalan emphasises, it is about “*work, future strategy, and good governance.*”

There is a strong sense of connection and shared purpose, with many people feeling a genuine pull to contribute in a positive and meaningful way. The challenge is not a lack of interest, but the absence of clear structures and channels to translate that goodwill into practical support.

The island wants to build a better way of identifying its wider network, understanding what skills and support people can offer, and regularly putting out a clearer “menu” of ways to help. A strong example of what that can unlock is the board itself. One young man with grandparents from Inishturk became involved through the newsletter, joined the board, now chairs the heritage group, and has already gone after several funding streams while helping to document island life and argue for the conditions needed to move back. That story captures the wider point: people do not just want updates from home. They want to be useful.

The organisation is also finding that visibility creates opportunity. When the island shares its ambitions clearly, people respond. Current work on renewable energy, invasive species removal and the native Irish black bee is helping people see Inishturk not as a place standing still, but as a place trying to build something imaginative and worthwhile. As Sinéad puts it, when the island puts its dreams out there, “*somebody's catching them.*” That creates pride, engagement and, increasingly, practical support. The biggest barriers are time, staff capacity and the lack of a dedicated communications push. Sinéad says that the most useful support would be a skilled communications and outreach resource, someone who could help develop a smart social media campaign, create templates and messaging for regular asks, and build a better system for logging and thanking people for their contributions.

What this story shows is that Inishturk already has something many places would envy, a diaspora and friendship network that cares deeply about the island's future.

**The task now is not to persuade people to care, but to build the structures that let that care turn into action.**

### 3.2 Strong engagement already exists, with a large pipeline eager to grow

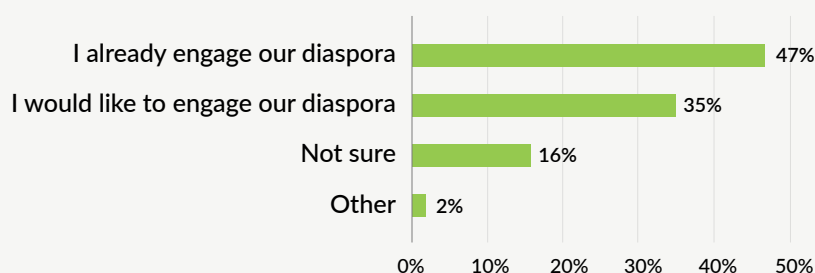
The research also shows that there is already a strong base of diaspora engagement activity happening across the region. Parallel to this, there is a further group of respondents who are not yet fully active in this space but would like to be. This presents a picture not of a region starting from scratch, but of one with real foundations already in place at all levels, from the institutional to the voluntary:

*“Diaspora engagement activities during 2024 and 2025 demonstrate continued momentum and strategic expansion. Academic partnerships have progressed significantly, notably through development of a Gaeltacht visiting scholar programme with the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota, reflecting strategic development of a transatlantic academic bridge anchored in Irish language and heritage... In San Francisco, ongoing coordination has focused on diaspora-focused programming, including the coproduction of an international minority language-focussed Artificial Intelligence conference... A proposed Global Centre for Irish Language, based in the Galway Gaeltacht and with its proposed market linked strongly with the third level sector in England, has been discussed in conjunction with the Boston Consulate. These engagements demonstrate programmatic coordination across key diaspora corridors. A new visitor centre focussing on the story of the Gaeltacht diaspora and emigrant is nearing completion in Carna... This project foregrounds lived migration histories within a Gaeltacht setting” - Member of staff, Údarás na Gaeltachta.*

*“Our Facebook Genealogy group has over 2000 members from across the world. We are a voluntary group that helps people make connections to their home place, give area tours, introduce people to distant relatives and make people feel welcome to the area... It would be great if the Government helped fund DNA testing or the work a group like ours do as we build lasting connections that are very important to the diaspora” - Volunteer with genealogy group.*

Almost half of respondents, 47 per cent, said that they already engage with our diaspora. A further 35 per cent said they would like to engage. Included within this latter group are those who may have engaged previously or to a limited extent but who were in any case knowledgeable and interested enough to proceed to complete the survey. Another 16 per cent said they were not sure. This points to a large group that is already active, alongside a further group that may be able to move into being more active with the right support. Some notable differences between staff and volunteer responses were observed. 65 per cent of staff said they were very interested in growing engagement, compared with 52 per cent of volunteers. This suggests there is strong appetite across both groups, but particularly among staff who may see clearer opportunities if additional infrastructure and support were available.

The significance of these findings is not simply that interest exists. It is that the conditions for growth already exist too. There is enough activity, goodwill and motivation in the system to justify a more intentional next phase. The issue is less about persuading people of the value of diaspora engagement and more about making it easier for them to participate, deepen or expand what they are already doing.



**Figure 2. Current level of diaspora engagement among respondents (n=240)**

Almost half of respondents already engage with our diaspora, while over a third would like to engage, pointing to both a strong base and clear room for growth.

## The International Project

The story of the **Global Irish Famine Way** begins with Caroilin Callery's father, who set out to preserve Strokestown House and, in doing so, protect an important but often hidden part of our history. What mattered was not only the house itself but the story of the tenants who left, the famine that drove them out, and the local experience of a national catastrophe. That work led to the development of the **National Famine Museum**. Building on that foundation, Caroilin developed the **National Famine Way**, tracing the journey of 1,490 famine emigrants from Strokestown to Dublin and turning archival history into something people could physically follow and experience.

Then “*out of the blue*”, as Caroilin put it, Dr Eamonn McKee, then Irish Ambassador to Canada, sent Caroilin an email. In Ottawa, he had come across the story of an unmarked famine grave and the fact that over 3,000 Famine emigrants has arrived there in 1847. He proposed extending the National Famine Way to Canada. For Caroilin, it was one of those moments where, you think “this makes total sense.” What followed was not a break with the earlier work, but the next stage of it. The Global Irish Famine Way began in Canada, where the Strokestown story first opened outward into the wider world and began connecting with communities overseas.

# CASE STUDY



The vision developed as a global project to mark the journeys of all Famine emigrants around the world.

Photo courtesy of Global Irish Famine Way project.

At the heart of the project is a simple and impactful symbol: **the bronze shoes**. In Canada, it was first used to mark the Famine grave in Ottawa. Other locations emerged as fitting sites as the trail developed. The vision then developed as a global project to mark the journeys of all Famine emigrants around the world. They are now used in locations overseas as a clear, repeatable, and deeply resonant way of marking famine migration. In that way, the bronze shoes do more than commemorate the past; they create a live connection between Strokestown, the wider National Famine Way, and the places overseas where the stories of Famine emigrants continued.

The GIFW project grows by *“following the energy”*. Rather than relying on a formal programme, it works with communities that already feel a connection to the Famine story. Each site is locally led, with communities fundraising, securing permissions, researching their local story and organising the unveiling. In Canada, that has helped bring Irish groups into contact with one another, in many cases for the first time. The launch in St John’s, Newfoundland in 2024 showed the strength of that response. The RV Celtic Explorer carried fifteen bronze shoes across the Atlantic, echoing the original famine passage, and after the ceremony people queued to approach and touch them. The reaction was described as *“profound and very moving.”*

Looking ahead, the ambition is to keep building on that connection. The project also wants to strengthen research, genealogy and links back to specific places of origin in Ireland, while connecting the growing overseas network to the planned **Famine Ports of Embarkation** project at home. The longer-term vision is substantial: a wider network of bronze shoe sites, each with a QR code linking to the GIFW website, a connected trail across Ireland and overseas, a 40,000km Global Irish Famine Way, and a major Global Irish Famine Way Conference in 2027 bringing together participants from Ireland, Canada, the US, Australia and the UK. The challenge is that all of this is still being carried largely through volunteer effort and intermittent funding.

**The model is clearly working, but to grow well it needs steadier support: dedicated coordination, research capacity and stronger institutional backing to help sustain the international relationships it has already created.**

### 3.3 Groups know what to do, but capacity and funding prevent consistent delivery

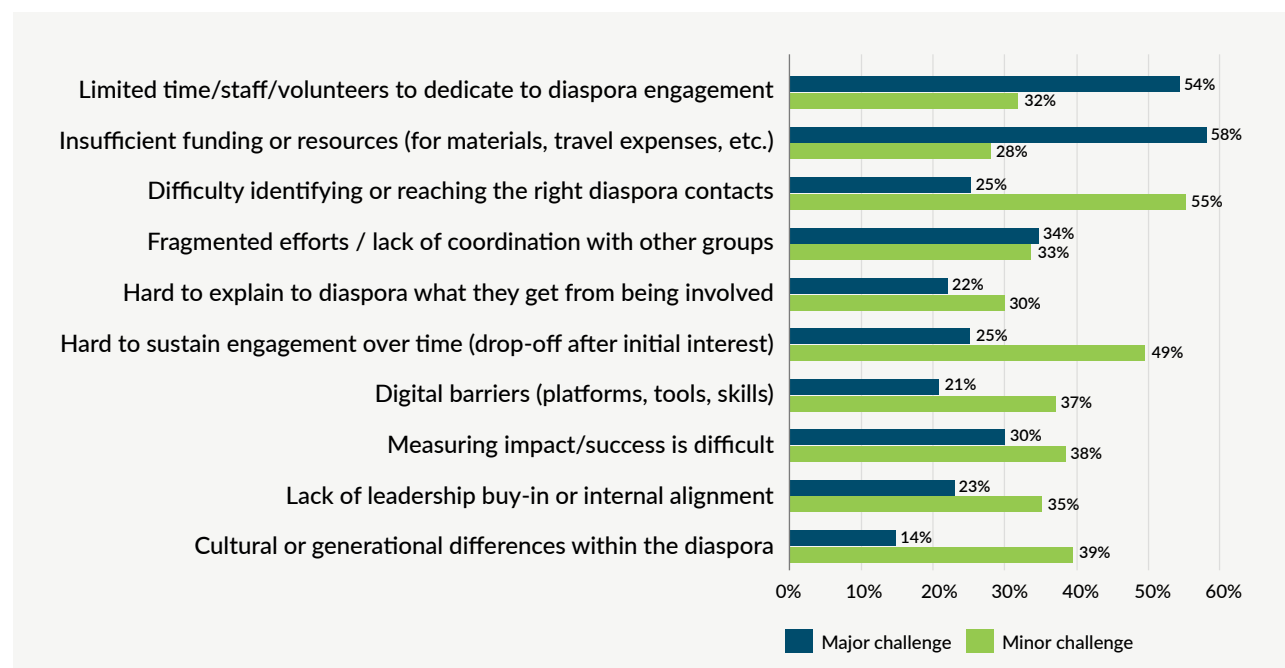
A third key finding is that the main barriers to diaspora engagement are practical. Insufficient funding or resources was identified as a major challenge by 58 per cent of respondents, while limited time, staff or volunteers was a major challenge for 54 per cent. Respondents are clear about the value of this work but are constrained by time, funding, staffing and the day-to-day realities of delivery.

*“Many initiatives are volunteer-led and lack long-term resources. Activity is often fragmented, strong projects exist but operate in isolation. Greater coordination is needed to ensure sustained engagement. Despite the challenges, the opportunities are immense. Every family connection rediscovered, every returning visitor, and every international collaboration is a testament to the enduring strength of our diaspora, and to the Western Region as its living heart” - Volunteer with genealogy group.*

Other commonly reported issues included difficulty identifying or reaching the right contacts, fragmented efforts and lack of coordination with other groups.

The findings also show the effect of these constraints on how diaspora engagement is actually delivered. One of the largest groups of respondents described their engagement as sporadic, seasonal or campaign-based rather than fully embedded in their work. This suggests that many organisations already have ideas and good intentions, but lack the capacity and infrastructure to respond consistently or to develop engagement to the scale they believe is possible.

This finding is important because it demonstrates where the pressure points are. In many cases, diaspora engagement is being carried out alongside many other responsibilities, often without dedicated capacity. The challenge is not simply one of ambition – it is one of continuity and support.



**Figure 3. Main barriers to effective diaspora engagement (n=110)**

Funding, resources and limited time were the most commonly reported major barriers to diaspora engagement

There were some notable differences between volunteer and staff responses to this question. Among volunteers, 78 per cent identified insufficient funding as a major challenge and 70 per cent limited time, staff or volunteers. The equivalent figures for staff were both 43 per cent, suggesting the same barriers affect both groups, but with sharper intensity for volunteers. For volunteers, 22 per cent said reaching the right contacts was a major challenge and 64 per cent said it was a small one; for staff, the figures were 27 per cent and 59 per cent. This suggests contact-building is a widespread friction point, even where it is not always a major barrier.

## The Community Festival

The story of the **Mary from Dungloe International Arts Festival** begins with a group of local businesspeople sitting around a kitchen table in Sweeney’s Hotel in 1967, trying to solve a practical problem: how to give people a reason to come home. At a time when more people were leaving than returning, they wanted to create something that would bring the diaspora back to west Donegal, even if only for a short time each summer. What began as a local response to emigration gradually became one of the best-known festivals in Donegal and beyond, with 45,000 visitors over a 10 day period in 2025.



Photo courtesy of Mary from Dungloe International Arts Festival

What began as a local response to emigration gradually became one of the best-known festivals in Donegal and beyond.

Like many people locally, Gavin Boyle grew up with the festival. He first became involved as a teenager, when local lads were invited to act as escorts for the visiting Marys. From there, one role led to another. Over the years he took on more responsibility, hosting events, helping with organisation, and eventually becoming one of the festival's co-directors alongside Pat Connaghan. Three years ago, they decided it was time for a renewed approach. There was a feeling, as Gavin puts it, that the festival was “*slipping*”, and they wanted to bring it back to what it had been, something that gave younger generations the same sense of excitement and connection they had grown up with themselves.

Today, the festival is still entirely volunteer-led, and that remains one of its defining strengths. Gavin and Pat sit at the centre of a tight organising team of around eight people, but during the festival itself that expands to around 80 volunteers. Diaspora engagement still sits at the heart of all of this. From the beginning, the purpose of the festival was to reach out to Irish communities abroad and create a reason to return. Over time, that meant building relationships with Irish centres across the world and encouraging them to send a local representative, or “Mary”, back to Dungloe each year. At its height in the 1990s, there were nearly 30 Marys coming from around the world, each often accompanied by family and supporters.

Much of the work still depends on genuine personal relationships. The representatives of the festival travel to places like London, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Liverpool and New York. “*We do feel that you have to be seen,*” he says, and being physically present makes a huge difference. But social media, newsletters and local contacts abroad now play a much bigger role in keeping those links alive throughout the year. Three years ago, they brought in a young digital marketing student, to take over the festival's social media on a voluntary basis, and Gavin is clear that it transformed their reach. The festival now also runs a fortnightly newsletter, keeping centres, supporters and subscribers updated not only on the festival itself but on wider local events.

The challenge, as ever, is capacity. The interest is there. In fact, Gavin says one of the most encouraging changes is that places are now coming to them, St Louis, Vancouver, Boston, Sydney and Perth among them, asking to become involved. But following up properly, staying visible and building those relationships all take time. For Gavin, the single most useful extra support would be someone focused on marketing and reach, a dedicated person, even part-time, who could help with promotion, visibility and contact-building, freeing up the volunteer team to manage everything else. As he says,

*“once people know what is going on and that this is happening, they will come.”*

### 3.4 Collaboration and shared infrastructure are the supports people want most

The research shows a strong appetite not just to continue diaspora engagement, but to grow it. It also shows that when respondents think about what would help most, they tend to prioritise shared and collaborative supports over more individualised ones. 65 per cent said opportunities to collaborate with others would help them grow their diaspora engagement. A regional diaspora summit was selected by 63 per cent and networking events and peer learning opportunities by 62 per cent. Practical take-away toolkits were selected by 55 per cent, a centralised knowledge hub by 52 per cent, and training or capacity building by 50 per cent. As a priority groups are looking for shared structures and peer connection, not just one-off advice.

*“Building successful communications packages requires a suite of digital infrastructure and communications skills, it’s the actual support programmes, to build the digital and human capacity we need, not just training and toolkits” - Volunteer with local tourism and community development organisations, Mayo.*

This suggests that while toolkits and training remain useful, respondents are looking for more practical support such as sharing experiences and tools that can be put to work straight away. They want opportunities to work with others, to learn from others, and to reduce duplication. They want tools they can use today, not training that will take up more time that they are already short on. In practical terms, this points towards the value of coordination, shared infrastructure and mechanisms that make it easier for organisations to pool effort and sustain engagement over time.



**Figure 4. Supports respondents would find most useful (n=110)**

Collaboration, a regional summit, and networking and peer learning were the highest-ranked supports, pointing to demand for shared and enabling structures.

The likelihood of using the supports suggested was high overall. Among those interested, the majority in all cases said they would be either likely or very likely to use the support selected. This suggests the support needs identified are practical and likely to translate into use.

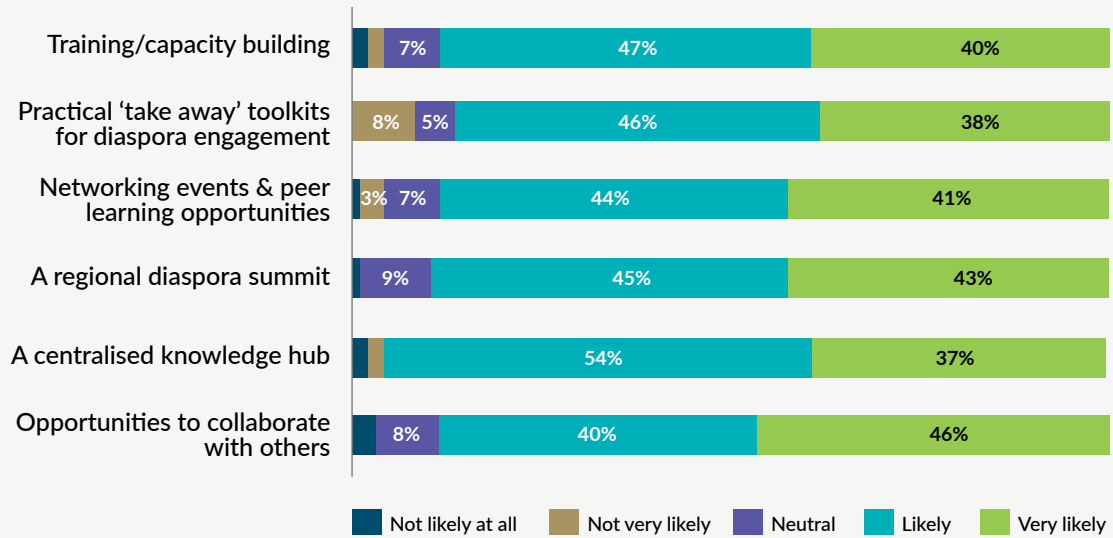


Figure 5: Likelihood of using future diaspora supports



## The Community Development Cooperative

Based in An Chrannóg in Gaath Dobhair, in the Donegal Gaeltacht, **Comharchumann Forbartha Ghaath Dobhair** has been part of community life since 1989. It is one of a network of Gaeltacht community development cooperatives (coistí forbartha) with core funding from Údarás na Gaeltachta to preserve and promote the Irish language and local culture through the provision of community services. Its work spans youth and family supports, services for older people, and a wide programme of cultural activity. These include a large traditional music school for children and young people and major festivals and events such as Scoil Gheimhridh Ghaath Dobhair (Winter School), the St Patrick's Day parade, poetry competitions, and summer camps. It also runs or supports social enterprises and community projects, including a local crafts coffee/gift shop and a gardening project with allotments and a polytunnel.

Its work spans youth and family supports, services for older people, and a wide programme of cultural activity.



Photo courtesy of Comharchumann Forbartha Ghaath Dobh

It is a practical organisation, shaped by the needs of the area and closely connected to everyday life in the community. Part of that story is a long history of emigration. Families from the area have settled across Scotland, England, the United States and further afield, and those connections continue to shape how people relate to the place. This is reflected in the dedication of a room in their centre, An Chrannóg to genealogy and local history, where people can explore townland-based archives, photos and stories.

Manager Caitríona Nic Gairbhígh says; *“We call it the seomra staire, the history room, and it’s filled with folders, there’s one for each townland in the area, and it’s filled with pictures of family, pictures that people donated or stories that people donated... A lot of them [diaspora] pop up and say, I’m an O’Donnell, and my great grandmother was born here. And they’ll refer them on to us here, because we’ll have some information for them.”*

The fact that An Chrannóg used to be the local Technical School provides a further source of connection: *“The building we’re in actually used to be a technical school, so we get ex-students. That’s another one that has surprised me, the amount of people that just wander in and they say my dad or my granddad learned his carpentry here before he moved to Boston, or whatever it is.”*

Alongside this, events and cultural activity provide natural points of return. Scoil Gheimhridh Ghaoth Dobhair, the winter school for traditional music, song and dance, has been running since the mid-1990s and has long attracted people back to the area. These kinds of moments create opportunities for reconnection, even if they are not always part of a wider or structured approach. The organisation remains busy, with strong participation across its activities, but the pattern of engagement has shifted. There is less regular travel from overseas than in the past, and many visitors engage with one aspect of the work without seeing the wider picture. Caitríona says that they would love to engage more with their diaspora and have involvement across the breadth of their activity but she is not sure how to achieve this, *“I mean, we have good raw material for engagement with the diaspora. It’s just that we’re lacking the knowledge of how do we connect? ... If they engage with us in the way that they do, they’re only familiar with us through that element of our work.”*

For Comharchumann Forbartha Ghaoth Dobhair, the next step is not to create diaspora engagement from scratch, but to build on what is already happening, making it easier for people to find the organisation, understand the full breadth of its work, and stay connected and supportive over time. At its core, this is an organisation sustaining language, culture and community in Ghaoth Dobhair.

**The potential is to extend that work further, turning existing connections into stronger, more lasting relationships.**

### 3.5 Diaspora engagement runs on two timelines: long-term strategy and rapid response

The qualitative findings add a further layer to the picture by showing that diaspora engagement often happens in one of two distinct patterns. These can be understood as long-term strategy and rapid response.

On one side is the longer-term work of relationship-building. This is more often associated with professional roles. It includes investing in relationships, having ongoing conversations, attending important diaspora events and following up over time so that opportunities can emerge. These opportunities may relate to tourism, skills exchange, partnerships or investment.

*"..events are used as gateways rather than endpoints. Contact information, feedback, and follow-up engagement ensure that relationships initiated at events are nurtured over time through newsletters, targeted communications, and invitations to future initiatives. This sustained approach helps transform attendees into long-term ambassadors" - Member of staff, Donegal County Council.*

On the other side is a more immediate and action-oriented form of engagement, more often associated with volunteers. This includes responding to queries, welcoming visitors, hosting or supporting events, and making introductions. There is often too little time to give to building and mobilising contacts lists and maintaining these networks for longer term work.

*"We had a major fundraiser for our dressing rooms and the word got out about it and money just started coming in from overseas without even asking people, from big sponsorship to small donations" - Volunteer for GAA club.*

This helps explain why diaspora engagement can look so different in practice while still being part of the same wider system. These are not competing models. They are complementary ones. The best results are likely to happen when rapid-response connections feed the long-term pipeline, and when the long game in turn strengthens the quality and value of immediate engagement.

This points to the need for support that recognises both ways of working. Some organisations and groups are better placed to build long-term continuity. Others are especially strong at local reach, responsiveness and welcome. Diaspora engagement is likely to be strongest where these different roles are supported in ways which are suited to their needs but which are also linked more intentionally.



## 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**, Briege 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.



Local authorities are amongst the most important actors in the diaspora engagement landscape.

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.

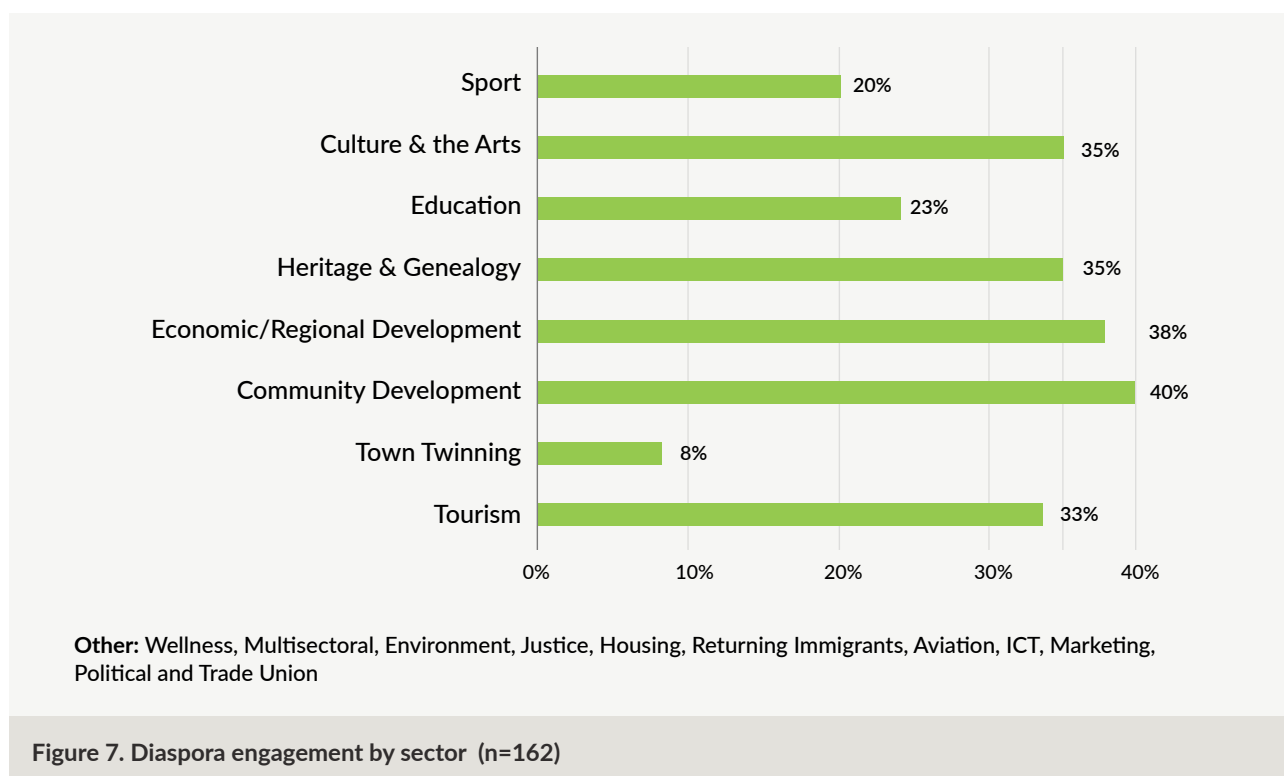
In both counties, the work is understood as cumulative, each event, each conversation and each contact builds the conditions for something else later.

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."*

# Additional Results

## 3.6 Diaspora engagement is happening widely across sectors and activities

The survey shows that diaspora engagement is already happening widely across the region and across a broad range of sectors. Community Development was the most represented sector among respondents at 40 per cent, but there was also strong representation from Economic and Regional Development at 38 per cent, Culture and the Arts and Heritage and Genealogy at 35 per cent each, and Tourism at 33 per cent. This shows the depth and breadth of diaspora engagement across the region and that clearly it is not confined to one “type” of organisation.



The activities being used to engage our diaspora also vary considerably. 88 per cent of respondents reported at least one diaspora engagement activity in the previous three years, and events were by far the most frequently mentioned activity type. Genealogy and research, planning trips or return visits, and social media were also among the most frequently mentioned activities. This suggests that much diaspora engagement is still organised around gatherings, festivals, visits and one-off occasions.

Taken together, these findings show that diaspora engagement is not a single model of work but a broad field of activity, with different sectors and approaches often overlapping in practice. The findings suggest value in support that can be used across sectors and activities, while also making it easier for different groups to connect, align messages and avoid fragmented outreach.

List 2 to 3 activities or actions you or your group/organisation have taken in the last 3 years to engage our diaspora.

Activity Type	Number of mentions
Email list/newsletter	16
Phone number list	1
Social media	17
Events	90
Visits	5
Networking	14
Tourism campaigns	10
Fundraising	15
Planning trips/visits/return to Ireland	21
Media coverage	8
Language/culture promotion	6
Geneology/research	24

**Examples...**

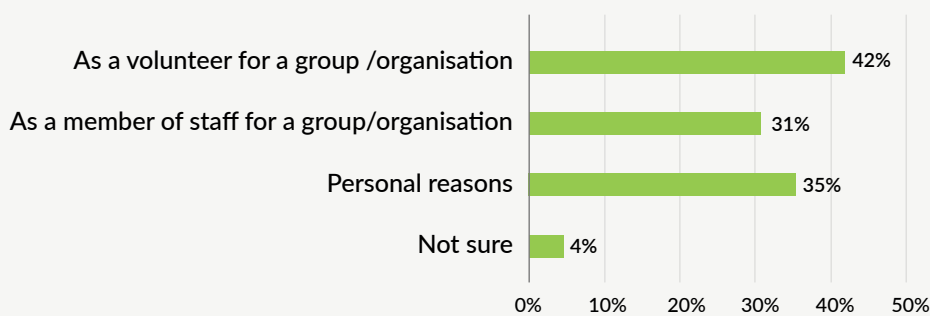
Radio coverage of events which are broadcast on the web  
 Trade fairs  
 Conference on genetic genealogy  
 Attended New York St Patricks Day events  
 Travelled to the UK and USA  
 Worked with US, African and Chinese Universities via connections to help drive greater collaboration  
 Festivals  
 Creation of a bilingual Mannion Clan StoryMap  
 Community facilities investment  
 Global Rossies Day  
 Media publication  
 Ongoing sponsorship of underage teams in club  
 Event at Irish CG Residence Oct 2025  
 Gatherings  
 Established a Facebook group for our diaspora  
 Engaged with Cleveland community and raised funds  
 Music festival  
 Fundraising  
 Roll out the Global Irish Famine Way Sites  
 Regular engagement with charity partners in London  
 London Irish Vintage Club Day  
 Plant a tree initiative  
 Social media posts  
 Sister City Relationship with Washington County  
 Clár babhtála cultúir le Nova Scotia

**Figure 8. Diaspora engagement activities**

Events by far the most popular activity but diverse array of examples of other activities shared by respondents.

### 3.7. Delivery is powered by a mix of staff and volunteers

Diaspora engagement is carried by a mix of formal and informal effort and is not confined to professional roles. The survey shows that this engagement is being carried by both volunteers and those in paid roles. 42 per cent said they engage as a volunteer for a group or organisation, 31 per cent as a member of staff, and 35 per cent for personal reasons, with some respondents selecting more than one option. Among the personal reasons delineated were ‘for business’; ‘because I was once part of the diaspora’, ‘curiosity’ and ‘for my community at home’. In some cases, respondents report engaging our diaspora as both volunteers for one group or organisation and as paid employees for another in parallel. This is significant because it points to a more mixed and overlapping delivery model than might first appear. Diaspora engagement is not only embedded in formal organisational roles, it is also being sustained through personal commitment, voluntary effort and people contributing across more than one organisation or setting.



**Figure 9. Delivery of diaspora engagement by role**

Diaspora engagement is carried by staff, volunteers and, in some cases, personal initiative.

This pattern helps explain both the strength and the fragility of current activity. Volunteer-led work and much of the work done for personal reasons often has strong local connections, extensive reach, and a lot of goodwill behind it, while staff-led work may have more continuity and structure. Both are important, but they do not operate under the same conditions. As we mentioned in the key findings earlier, this provides both challenges and opportunities. The different contexts for volunteer-led and staff-led connections will require different approaches, but if the two were to be joined up there is an opportunity for wider and more sustainable reach. The connections already existing in the volunteer-led work could increase the network of available contacts to a broader system, and the strategy and infrastructure available to the staff-led work could bolster efforts significantly providing a much more efficient and sustainable return.

In terms of sectors, volunteer respondents were more likely to work in Heritage and Genealogy, Sport and Culture and the Arts. Staff respondents were more likely to be working in Economic or Regional Development, Tourism and Town Twinning, suggesting a somewhat more institutional and development-focused profile.

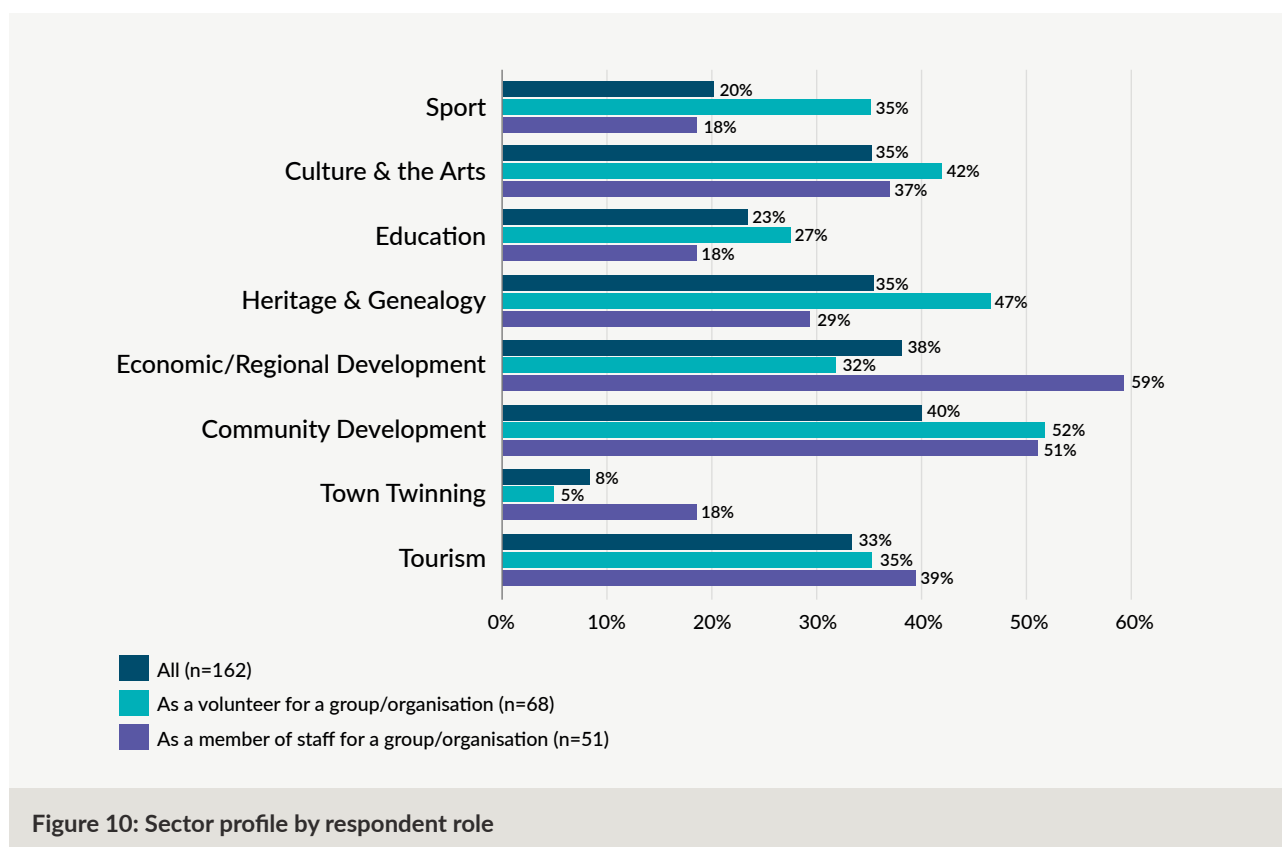


Figure 10: Sector profile by respondent role

### 3.8 Diaspora engagement is focused on a small number of key geographical regions

The strongest geographic links are clustered around a relatively small number of places. The USA was the region most respondents said they engage with most at 46 per cent, followed by other parts of Ireland at 30 per cent and England/Wales at 23 per cent, with additional engagement also happening across Europe, Australia, Canada and elsewhere. This suggests that many organisations are already engaging our diaspora where strong connections exist, but it also points to an uneven picture, with some routes to connection better developed than others.

This pattern of engagement shows that there is scope to both deepen activity where momentum already exists, and to use existing approaches to open up opportunities for engagement elsewhere. The county breakdowns also suggest that while these patterns of engagement are similar across the region, some counties have more engagement in different areas of the world than others. This highlights the potential for a joined-up approach where groups and organisations can learn from each other and build connections collaboratively.

## The Third-Level Institution

The **University of Galway** engages with the diaspora in more ways than might first be obvious from the outside. What this case study shows is not one single diaspora model, but a wide and evolving ecosystem of connection across the university.

In **alumni relations**, the emphasis is very clearly on sustained connection over time with graduates. The University's current approach is focused on building relationships steadily, creating opportunities for reconnection, and supporting volunteers to keep local momentum going between official visits. As Catherine Conroy, Alumni Relations Manager, put it, "*small consistent engagement builds stronger long-term relationships.*" Annual alumni events in London and New York have shown strong appetite for that kind of connection, while the University is now working to establish more structured local chapter activity in key diaspora cities. The intention is not just social. These networks can support mentoring, advocacy, philanthropy and student engagement, while also helping graduates abroad retain a sense of belonging to the University and to the West of Ireland



There's not one single diaspora model, but a wide and evolving ecosystem of connection across the university.

Photo courtesy of Professor Chaosheng Zhang, University of Galway.

Fiona Neary, Innovation Accelerator & Start Up Manager, adds another, more commercially focused layer to that picture. Fiona works in the university's **technology transfer and innovation office**, where the core work involves commercialisation, patents, spin-outs, high-potential start-ups, industry collaboration and regional development.

Diaspora engagement is not the centre of that role, but it comes into view when the conversation turns to external investment, international reach and the wider networks that Irish alumni and diaspora might bring. Fiona is clear that there is real potential there, particularly when it comes to commercial leads, scaling opportunities and access to international markets. But she is equally clear that the University and the region need more purposeful structures around that work. As she puts it, “*we’ve outgrown ourselves when it comes to being able to support ourselves.*”

What makes this case especially interesting is the breadth of Fiona’s perspective. She is not only talking about the University. She is talking about Galway and the wider region, and about the gap between strong international interest and the local conditions needed to sustain it. She speaks very openly about the fact that people want to come to Galway, study there, invest there and stay connected to it, but that the region is not always in a position to make the most of that interest, “*We’re fantastic. People want to come to Galway... but I just think we’re not giving them the best service.*”

**Imirce is a research infrastructure project** located in the University Library. It collects, preserves and shares through an online database the voices of Irish emigrants through letters, memoirs and other personal writings. The project grew out of the life’s work of Kerby A. Miller, the leading historian of Irish emigration to North America and author of *Emigrants and Exiles* (1985). Over many years, Miller gathered and transcribed emigrant letters and memoirs and when he retired, the case was made that these letters had been sent to Ireland and that an Irish university should be involved in curating the collection and making it available to researchers. The University of Galway, in the region of Ireland most defined by emigration since the time of the Famine, was an ideal institution to rise to this challenge. Miller agreed, donating the material to the University on the understanding that it would be made freely available in an online database and that the work of collection and transcription would continue, further expanding the database. That became the Imirce Project.

At one level, Imirce is a **research infrastructure project**, a digital archive built to support historians, literary scholars and others working on migration, but in practice it has become something much bigger. By making emigrant writing freely available online, it gives people a way to connect with the lived experience of emigration through the words of those who left, the families they wrote to, and the places they carried with them. As historian Breandán Mac Suibhne, one of the project directors, puts it, “*it’s a resource for people to use*” and once it is out there, “*people grasp it and engage with it.*”

What makes Imirce especially interesting is the kind of diaspora engagement it creates. It is not a formal membership scheme or an outreach programme.

Some engagement happens through talks and events at home and abroad, explaining the project and encouraging people to contribute letters sent to and from Ireland and to see the archive as something that belongs to them. Members of the Imirce team have presented at events around Ireland and, in the USA, in Philadelphia, Wilkes-Barre and Hazleton, PA, Chicago, IL, and New York. But most engagement happens organically with the material used by family historians, artists, researchers and people simply interested in migration and Ireland. Breandán sees the project as taking on “a life of its own.” For example, Irish artist, Domino Whisker, on her own initiative, completed a series of works based on material from the archive which was subsequently exhibited in a leading gallery in Manhattan.

A key strength of the project is that it connects people not just to “Ireland” in general, but to specific places and migration routes. Breandán speaks strongly about the need to link the places people left with the places to which they went—Donegal, Derry and Tyrone with Pennsylvania, Galway with Pittsburgh and Boston, and so on. For him, these place-based connections are more meaningful than trying to connect to the diaspora through organisations once important to Irish American communities such as labour unions, church and fraternal organizations, and the Democratic party. *“Many of those organizations are not as Irish as they once were. You need something imaginative and inventive to hook on to,”* he says. Imirce is one such hook, allowing people of Irish descent to connect *“in a very real way with the place that their forebears left behind.”*

What has worked well is that the project offers something meaningful rather than making a direct ask. *“The shakedown doesn’t work,”* Breandán says. What does work is putting something into the world that people can value, a resource, a story, a genuine way of connecting. The project has attracted support from the University, the Department of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, and smaller donors including the Galway Association of New York. The challenge is capacity. Much of the work still depends on a very small number of people. He is clear about what would make the biggest difference: a project manager who could help sustain outreach, collaboration and growth over time. Looking ahead, the project has clear next steps, including the launch of an anthology of emigrant letters in the autumn, edited by Kerby Miller with an introduction by Breandán, and a major event on Ellis Island in spring 2027. Beyond that, Breandán sees real potential in genealogy, visual art and music as new ways of deepening diaspora connection. What Imirce shows is that a carefully built archive can resonate far beyond academia.

**With the right support, it could become an even stronger bridge between places in Ireland and people of Irish descent across North America.**

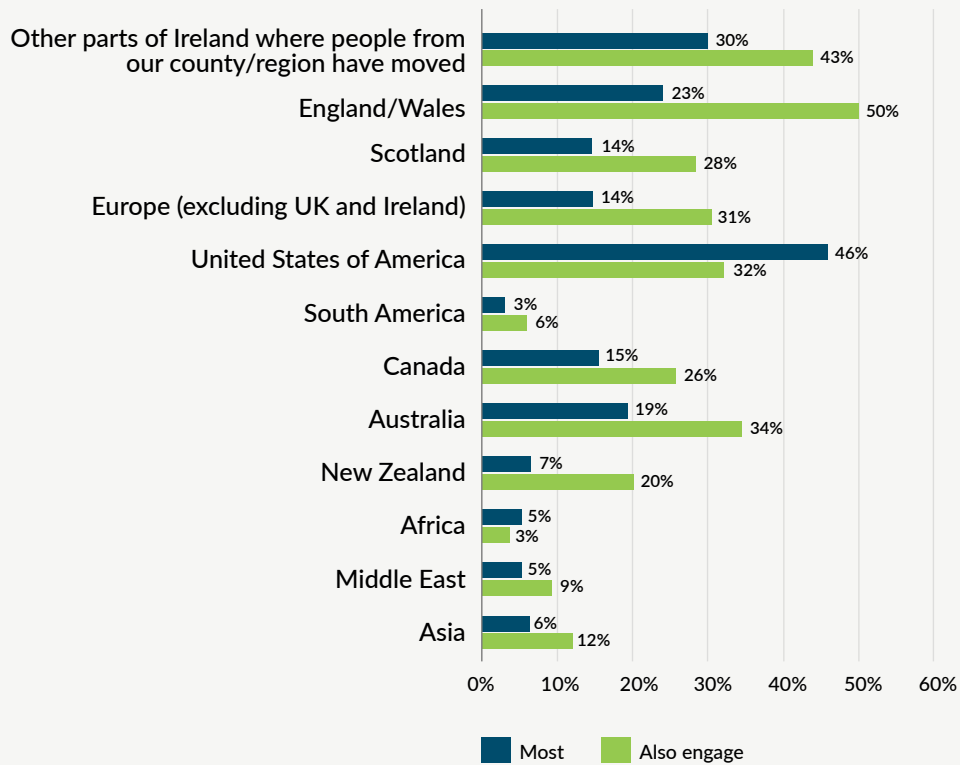
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Photo courtesy of Donegal County Council



### Regions mostly engaging with

	Clare (n=13)	Donegal (n=32)	Galway (n=56)	Leitrim (n=14)	Mayo (n=25)	Roscommon (n=22)	Sligo (n=21)
Other parts of Ireland where people from our county/region have moved	23%	25%	20%	29%	20%	23%	24%
England/Wales	23%	22%	11%	29%	20%	23%	14%
Scotland	8%	34%	5%	7%	8%	5%	0%
Europe (excluding UK and Ireland)	15%	9%	11%	0%	8%	18%	10%
United States of America	54%	44%	38%	36%	20%	36%	24%
South America	8%	3%	2%	0%	4%	0%	0%
Canada	23%	19%	11%	7%	4%	14%	5%
Australia	23%	13%	18%	14%	8%	23%	14%
New Zealand	8%	6%	9%	7%	4%	0%	0%
Africa	8%	6%	4%	0%	4%	0%	5%
Middle East	8%	6%	4%	0%	4%	0%	5%
Asia	8%	9%	4%	0%	4%	5%	0%

**Figure 10. Main regions where we engage our diaspora (n=137)**

Engagement is concentrated in England/Wales, elsewhere in Ireland and the USA, with additional activity across other locations. At individual county level, the regions most frequently engaged with are shaded.

Thirty-seven per cent of respondents reported deeper engagement with specific cities or regions. London, Boston and New York were the most frequently mentioned. This highlights the often personal nature of connections and engagement with our diaspora.

### Cities or regions with which respondents have particular connections

Placename	Count
London	16
Boston	14
New York	12
Australia	9
Philadelphia	6
USA	6
Chicago	5
UK	5
Dublin	4
Glasgow	4
California	3
Dubai	3
Sydney	3
Canada	2
Castlerea	2
Edinburgh	2
Europe	2
France	2
Minnesota	2
San Francisco	2

**37%** of respondents reported deeper engagement with specific region(s)

Other regions mentioned once:			
Amsterdam	Devon	New Orleans	San Fernando
An Spideal	England	New South Wales	San Jose
Argentina	Germany	Newfoundland	Santa Monica
Atlanta	Ghaath Dobhair	Nova Scotia	Scotland
Belmar	Hawaii	Pennsylvania	St. John Island
Birmingham	Leeds	Perth	Temora
Brisbane	Lille	Phillippines	Washington, DC
Cape Breton	Los Angeles (LA)	Phoenix	Western Isles
China	Melbourne	Rath Cairn	Whittier
Cincinnati	Minneapolis	South Africa	

Figure 11: Specific cities and regions with deeper diaspora links



Photo courtesy of Donegal County Council

### 3.9 Long-term emigrants and people of Irish descent are the core audiences

The survey shows that organisations most often engage with long-term emigrants and people of Irish descent. These groups are more central to current activity than recent emigrants, affinity diaspora or reverse diaspora. This highlights both where most activity is focused and where the biggest opportunities lie.

It also suggests that different diaspora groups are likely to need different routes in. Long-standing diaspora communities may be more strongly motivated by heritage, belonging and place, while more recent emigrants may respond to practical connection, professional networks and current links back home. One generic offer is unlikely to work equally well for all groups and a market segmentation exercise would likely be a great addition to knowledge building across all sectors.

*“Many of these are return visitors, in some instances bringing other family members with them to experience the thrill of visiting their ancestral homelands and walking through history in the footsteps of their forebears”*  
- Volunteer, clan gathering group.

*“Some regular donors to our club are based in the UK and US, and we try to make sure to welcome them for an evening at the club when they are at home, bring them to a match etc. In the past we have arranged introductions to local people with historical knowledge and brought one US visitor to the location of his ancestors birthplace, which was very important to him”* - Volunteer for a GAA club.

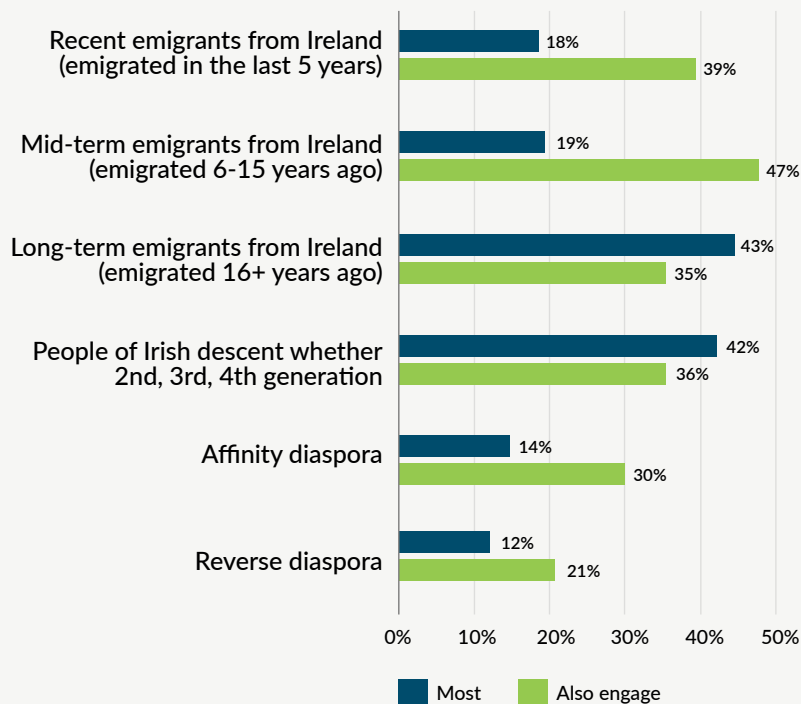


Figure 12. Main diaspora groups engaged by respondents (n=137)

Long-term emigrants and people of Irish descent are the most commonly engaged diaspora groups.

## The Heritage Group

**Kilrush and District Historical Society** evolved from a Facebook group set up by Kilrush teacher Laura Hogan but it quickly became something more when local historian Paul O'Brien drew attention to the neglected state of the pre-Reformation graveyard surrounding the former Church of Ireland while researching the Glynn family. What began as an effort to clean up an overgrown churchyard soon developed into a wider local history initiative. A first public meeting in December 2011, brought together people with a shared interest in heritage, and the society quickly found its direction.

The turning point came when Paddy Waldron, the group's PRO, identified the National Famine Commemoration as an opportunity not only to tell Kilrush's own famine story, but to bring diaspora back to the town in a meaningful way. A Facebook post about bringing the commemoration to Kilrush was the catalyst: the then mayor, Councillor Ian Lynch replied within an hour to say it was "*an excellent idea*", and both the town council and county council got behind it. With support from council staff, local historians and volunteers across the town, the society helped deliver a major programme of lectures, tours and public events, culminating in thousands gathering on Frances St. to hear President Michael D. Higgins. As Paddy Waldron recalled, "*The whole town came out and joined in.*"

Kilrush and District Historical Society... has a regular lecture series, local outings, commemorations, plaques, conferences and collaborations.



Paddy Waldron, PRO of Kilrush and District Historical Society

Since then, the society has continued to build on that foundation through a regular monthly lecture series, local outings and bus tours, commemorations, plaques, conferences and collaborations with other heritage groups. Alongside this, it has developed a strong **genealogy and diaspora engagement role**. Much of that is shaped by Paddy Waldron's long-term research, including a substantial genealogy database covering families connected to West Clare over the last two centuries, as well as extensive DNA work that has made the area unusually well mapped in genealogical terms. Through years of encouraging local people to submit DNA samples, it is possible for descendants abroad to trace ancestry not just to County Clare, but in many cases to the Loop Head Peninsula, the north-west Shannon estuary, or even to a specific townland, farm or house. The society engages diaspora through its website, mailing list, Facebook presence and YouTube broadcasts, but also through direct contact with people tracing ancestors, planning visits, or reconnecting with local roots. One particularly striking expression of that work is Paddy's **West Clare Diaspora Visitors Book**, begun in 2017 to record the signatures and genealogical details of diaspora visitors who find their way back through the society's research and outreach. That work will continue into October 2026, when the society plans to host a conference linked to the online release of the 1926 census, creating another opportunity to bring people back to Kilrush through family history and local connection.



Members of Kilrush and District Historical Society

With the right support, the society could begin to meet a level of interest far greater than current voluntary capacity allows. As Paddy put it, even one graveyard in Kilrush may connect to *“thousands of people tracing their roots back to that one graveyard or back to the town of Kilrush.”* The society's work is still largely volunteer-led, and meeting that demand is difficult without dedicated capacity. As Paddy put it, *“It would be nice to be able to pay somebody to have office hours there even a day a week... where people could drop in for help.”* With even a small amount of staffed support, the society could do much more to care for its archives, assist visitors, and strengthen Kilrush's role as a meaningful homecoming point for descendants across the world.

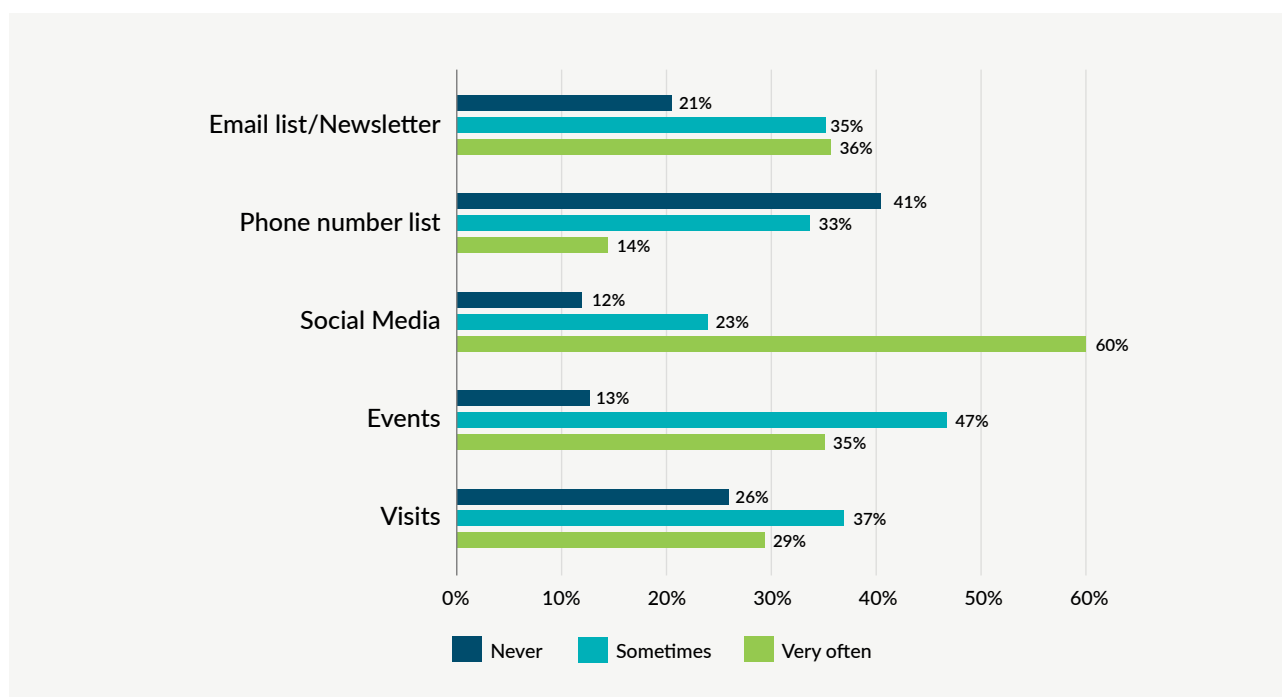
### 3.10 Social media, events and newsletters do much of the work

Social media stands out as the most frequently used channel for engagement. 60 per cent said they use social media very often, compared with 36 per cent for email or newsletters, 35 per cent for events and 29 per cent for visits. This suggests social media now acts as the main communications infrastructure for much diaspora engagement.

It sits alongside events and newsletters or email as the main ways organisations stay in touch, share opportunities and keep relationships active. Much of the current work is being done through channels that are relatively low-cost and manageable, especially for smaller teams. At the same time, these channels can be time-intensive and difficult to sustain. The issue is not reach alone, it is turning contact into ongoing relationships and follow-through. This points to the value of practical tools to support communications approaches, not just training.

There are some notable differences between staff and volunteers in their use of engagement channels. Fifty-one per cent of staff said they use events very often, compared with 30 per cent of volunteers; 38 per cent of staff said the same for visits, compared with 26 per cent of volunteers. This may reflect greater institutional capacity among staff-led organisations to plan and deliver structured engagement.

This is useful because it shows that the same support offer may not suit everyone equally well. Some groups may need stronger communications tools, while others may need simpler ways to keep momentum going between activity peaks.



**Figure 13. Main channels used for diaspora engagement**

Social media is the most-used channel, supported by events and newsletters or email.



Members of Kilrush and District Historical Society

### 3.11 Volunteers and staff are both relationship-led, but the focus of their diaspora engagement activity differs

When asked about their motivations for engaging with our diaspora both volunteers and staff share the same broad direction, but with slightly different points of emphasis. Both groups are strongly relationship-led, but there are differences across community-building, cultural exchange, tourism, support for vulnerable diaspora, and funding or investment motivations.

It's clear that organisations are not all trying to achieve the same thing when they engage with our diaspora. Some are being directly approached by our diaspora who are interested in genealogy or heritage and tourism, and some are reaching out to our diaspora in search of practical or financial support. Future support offers should allow for different engagement pathways rather than forcing one model onto all groups.

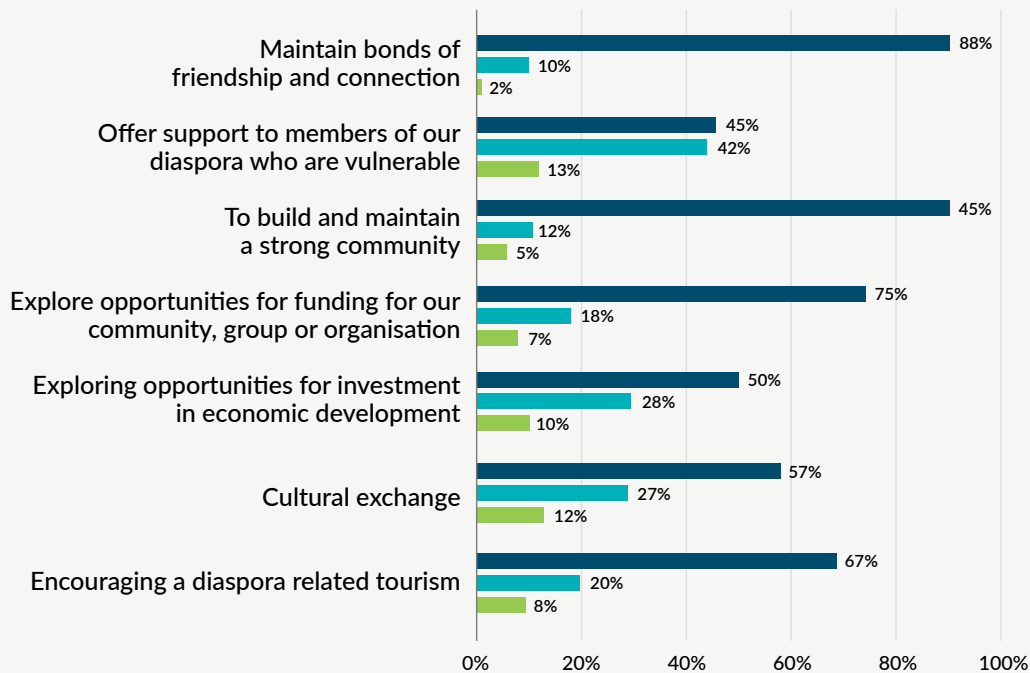
*"(Through) my involvement in hospitality and retail for the past 25 years I have met and retained friendships with diaspora, some related and some not, but it has been a worthwhile connection"*

- Volunteer for a community organisation, Galway.

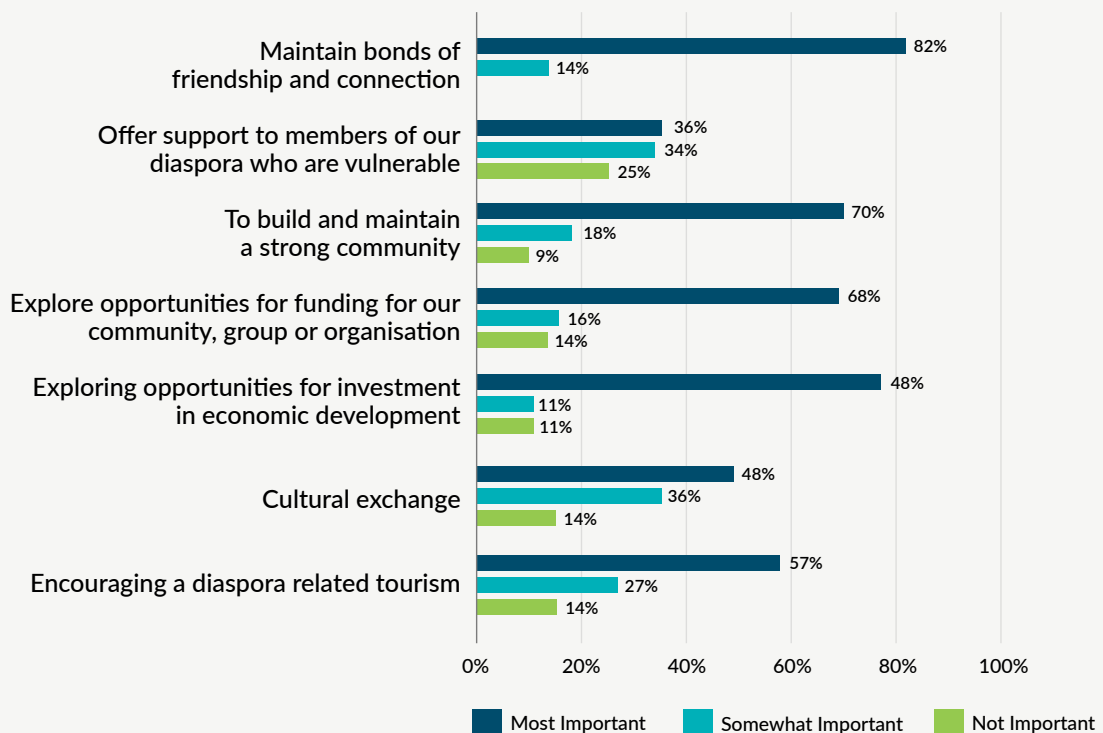
*"We visit cities and countries where our diaspora are based to attend events which allow us to connect better with the diaspora and allow them to get involved in what we do here"* - Volunteer for a community festival.

*"Donegal County Council strategically uses events as a core tool to strengthen, sustain, and grow its relationship with the Donegal diaspora worldwide"* - Member of staff, Donegal County Council.

### Volunteer: most important reason for engaging with our diaspora (n=60)



### Staff: most important reason for engaging with our diaspora (n=44)



**Figure 14. Motivations for engagement by volunteer and staff role**

Volunteers and staff are both relationship-led, but differ somewhat in how they rate the importance of community, culture, tourism, support and economic motivations.

## The Community Arts Centre

**Trinity Arts Centre** is a restored community arts and cultural space in the heart of Castlerea. Housed in a repurposed 200-year-old historic building, it has become a flexible, multi-use centre for creativity, community activity and local service delivery. Today it hosts everything from yoga and Zumba to HSE outreach, to arts projects and intercultural events. In the words of the Chair of the Board Breege Callaghan, it is a space that has *“lent itself to everything.”*

The origins of the project go back more than twenty years, when the building was still a ruin. Breege, then studying community development part-time, identified it as a community project and began building a group around a shared vision. As she explains, the group put real work into team-building and feasibility planning at the outset, knowing that the success of the project depended as much on the strength of the people behind it as on the building itself. That volunteer effort carried the project through years of work, funding applications and financial pressure.



Trinity Arts Centre is a restored community arts and cultural space in the heart of Castlerea.

Photo courtesy of Trinity Arts Centre, Castlerea

The financial challenge was constant. Trinity Arts Centre had to assemble support from a range of agencies over time, while also finding ways to cover match funding and manage debt. The group established a patronage scheme early on and secured charitable status so that supporters could donate in a structured way.

That brought in an initial pot of local support, but the project still needed something bigger if it was to fully succeed. That turning point came through the Finneran family, originally from Castlerea, whose support proved transformational. Breege had identified them as a possible connection because of their roots in the town and wrote a careful letter that was not simply asking for money, but setting out a positive vision of what was being built and why it mattered. The response was extraordinary. Support came first through the International Fund for Ireland and then through the wider family itself. As Breege put it, *“The substantial contribution from the family ensured both the completion of the project and its future.”*

The Finneran family were not responding to a generic appeal, they were responding to memory, place and the sense that something meaningful was happening in Castlerea. Breege describes how they had *“the most fabulous memories of growing up in Castlerea”* and how that connection made them want to help. She also recalls asking one of the brothers why the family had been so generous. The answer was telling: from the outside, they could see the value of what was being created. They could see a town with energy, activity and ambition, and they wanted to be part of that story. For Breege, that is the real lesson of diaspora engagement. It is not about “begging bowls”, but about showing people something positive and real that they can believe in and reconnect with.

That same understanding shapes her wider work in Castlerea, including through the Sunday Evening Roundup, which began during Covid as a local information effort and unexpectedly became a way of keeping diaspora connected too. People now tune in from New York, California, Australia, Europe and beyond, just to hear what is happening in the town. As Breege says, *“We’re only on there talking like you’d be talking in the pub or in the shop,”* but that ordinary, positive local voice is exactly what people want. It keeps connection alive.

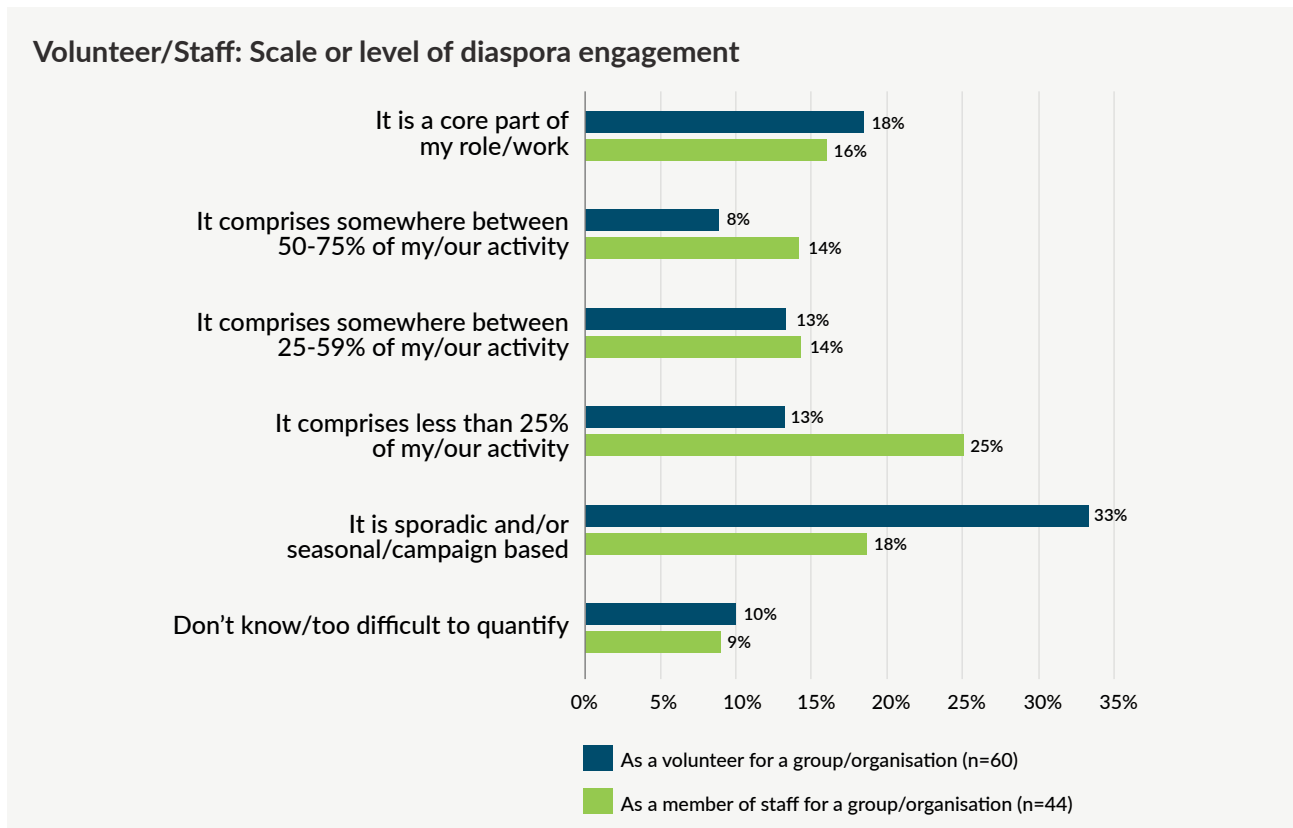
The story of Trinity Arts Centre shows that diaspora relationships can be hugely important, but they work best when they grow out of strong local effort and a visible commitment to place. Diaspora support did not replace that work; it recognised and strengthened it. And crucially, that contribution was valued and made visible, with plaques in the building acknowledging the family and others who supported the project. As Breege says,

*“That’s all they wanted... and that makes all the difference. Makes them part of it.”*

### 3.12 Diaspora engagement is often intermittent rather than a full-time function

A further clear result is that diaspora engagement is rarely a full-time function, especially for volunteers. A third of volunteers said their engagement was sporadic, seasonal or campaign-based, compared with 18 per cent of staff. This reflects the responsive nature of volunteer-led diaspora work, where work is more focused around events, requests, visits, or other time limited projects. Staff-led engagement is somewhat more likely to sit within an ongoing role structure, even if it still forms only a minority part of the workload.

So regardless of whether the role is a staff or volunteer role a lot of current activity is happening in bursts, around events, visits, campaigns or moments of available capacity. Support therefore needs to suit intermittent delivery rather than assume dedicated time is already in place.



**Figure 15. Extent to which diaspora engagement is embedded in respondents' work**

Diaspora engagement is often intermittent, especially in volunteer-led settings, rather than a fully embedded function.

## The GAA Club

**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.

Eastern Harps is rooted in a wide and dispersed community, and its role extends far beyond sport.



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.**

### 3.13 Volunteers feel time and funding barriers most sharply

The barriers data suggests that volunteers are more likely to report limited time and insufficient funding as major challenges. Staff also report substantial barriers, but the volunteer picture is sharper. This points to a difference not just in role, but in the conditions under which diaspora engagement is being delivered.

*“Many people who have had ancestors or living relatives in our area call or contact us for help tracing homesteads, following up on history or events of the past... but as our group is newly formally founded and lacks admin ability and fundraising and IT knowledge we are finding it hard” - Volunteer for a heritage group.*

At the same time, staff also face coordination, continuity and measurement challenges. So while the barriers overlap, they do not land in exactly the same way. This suggests that different kinds of support may be needed for different delivery models.



### Volunteer: Challenges engaging our diaspora (n=50)



### Staff: Challenges engaging our diaspora (n=37)



**Figure 16. Main barriers by volunteer and staff role**

Volunteers report sharper time and funding pressures, while staff also face coordination and evidencing challenges.

### 3.14 Reaching the unknown diaspora remains a practical gap

The qualitative findings point to a gap between engaging people who are already known to an organisation and reaching people who are not. Existing networks, events and local connections can help maintain relationships with known diaspora, but many organisations struggle to reach unknown diaspora members unless those people first make contact themselves.

This can create a huge barrier for growth. Some organisations can maintain existing connections but find it harder to broaden their reach. Without better discovery routes, engagement can remain dependent on individual relationships and repeat contacts.

*“We are currently drafting a diaspora strategy from 2026-2030. There are a series of events which take place over the course of a year to engage KNOWN members of the diaspora- however it is hard to reach UNKNOWN members of the diaspora if they don’t reach out to us” - Member of staff, Leitrim County Council.*

*“Elderly diaspora abroad don’t always know how or have access to the internet and social media. Any advertising of events would need to use traditional means of advertising to reach them, e.g. television ads for older persons in the UK” - Person engaging with diaspora in various ways for personal reasons.*

*“Maidir leis an gcaoi a ndearna muid rannpháirtíocht lenár ndiaspóra, chuir muid glaoch ar chuid acu, rinne muid teagmháil leo ar na meáin shóisialta agus bhí aithne pearsanta againn ar chuid eile acu” [In terms of how we engaged with our diaspora, we called some of them, we contacted them on social media and we knew others personally] - Member of staff, Údarás na Gaeltachta.*

### 3.15 Some stakeholders want clearer mutual benefit from engagement

The qualitative material also shows that some stakeholders want clearer value and more tangible outcomes from diaspora engagement. This does not displace the relationship-led finding. It points instead to a desire for stronger follow-through and a clearer sense of what engagement is leading towards.

This matters because it raises the issue of quality as well as quantity. For some organisations, the challenge is not making contact, but turning contact into visits, involvement, support, ambassadorship or some other meaningful next step.

*“But how do we capitalise on this, i.e. encourage people to visit, and how do we make this connection worthwhile... As you can see I am not a fan of being friends for friends sake. I feel we need to have better quality diaspora engagement if the diaspora wants that” - Member of staff, public sector organisation.*

*“We are relying on family connections to bring people home. As life changes it would be very great to make an effort to structure engagement and create opportunities for people to get to know each other again” - Volunteer for a GAA club.*

### 3.16 Support for vulnerable diaspora members is part of the picture

Support for vulnerable diaspora members appears less prominently than connection, community, funding or tourism in the survey, but it remains part of the overall picture. The qualitative findings suggest that some stakeholders feel this part of diaspora engagement can be under-recognised, especially where the focus falls too heavily on business or economic value.

This matters because it broadens the picture of what relationship-led engagement can mean. It is not only about culture, heritage or economic opportunity. For some groups, it also includes care, welfare, recognition and support for people in difficult circumstances abroad.

*“Lack of recognition and support for those in the Diaspora community who may find themselves in vulnerable and challenging circumstances abroad. Focus seems to always be on those who are in business and can bring ‘worth’ and connections back” - Member of staff, national charity.*

*“Regarding anyone who has left the region to live and work anywhere (in Ireland, or abroad), we actively keep in touch to keep them updated on opportunities that they may be interested in returning home to take up / take on” - Person engaging with diaspora in various ways for personal reasons, Mayo.*



# 4

## Conclusions

The findings from this research show that there is already a great deal of diaspora engagement happening across the West and Northwest. This work is being carried out by a wide range of organisations, groups and individuals, across different sectors and in different ways. It is also clear that much of this activity would not be happening at the level it currently is without the very significant contribution of volunteers. Even in cases where diaspora engagement is being carried out by paid staff it appears that, for the most part, it is being sustained by people giving their time, energy, contacts and local knowledge alongside many other responsibilities. What comes through strongly is that there is already a solid base of activity in place, but that much of it is being held together by commitment rather than by dedicated capacity or infrastructure.

A second clear conclusion is that connection sits at the centre of this work. The strongest finding in the survey was that maintaining bonds of friendship and connection is the most important reason why people engage with our diaspora. This matters because it challenges a narrow view of diaspora engagement as being mainly about fundraising or economic return. Those things matter, and they are part of the picture, but the research suggests they are most effective when built on top of strong relationships rather than used in place of them. The same point can be seen in how respondents describe both their motivations for engaging and the ways in which diaspora communities respond.

The biggest investments of time, and often of money too, are connection-led.

The research also shows clearly that there are real challenges limiting what can be achieved. The most consistent barriers are time, funding and capacity, but respondents also pointed to difficulty identifying and reaching the right people, sustaining engagement over time, and having the tools, systems and know-how needed to do this work well. These are practical barriers rather than barriers of ambition. The issue is not that people do not see the value of diaspora engagement. It is that many are trying to do it in a fragmented way, without the structures that would make it easier, more co-ordinated and more sustainable.





At the same time, the research points very strongly to untapped potential. There is already a large amount of activity, a strong appetite to do more, and a clear sense from respondents about what would help. This means there is no need to reinvent the wheel. What is needed now is a more co-ordinated approach that can connect, support and strengthen what is already happening. That includes practical tools, better coordination, more opportunities for collaboration and peer learning, and a clearer strategic framework to guide future activity. Most importantly, it points to the need for a dedicated resource that can coordinate this work and build the infrastructure around it, so that the many efforts already underway can come together more effectively and be sustained over time.

That next phase will also need to remain responsive. If diaspora engagement is to grow in a way that is useful and grounded, there will need to be ongoing consultation with those already doing the work, so that support continues to reflect the reality on the ground.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the next phase of diaspora engagement in the West and Northwest should focus less on creating entirely new activity and more on helping existing activity to connect, align and grow. There is already strong commitment, a wide range of interesting work, and a clear willingness to build on that further. With the right support in place, that work could become more coordinated, more effective and more sustainable.

At the heart of all of this is relationship. That is what the findings point back to again and again: relationships between people, between communities, between place and memory, and between those living in the West and Northwest now and those who remain connected to it from elsewhere in the world. The strength of diaspora engagement lies in those relationships on the ground here and in the sense of connection that continues across generations and across distance. The opportunity now is not only to support activity, but to recognise and strengthen those relationships in a more intentional way. If that can be done, the benefits will not be felt only in stronger programmes or better coordination, but in deeper and more lasting relationships between communities in the West and Northwest and our diaspora communities worldwide.

# 5

## Recommendations

Taken together, these findings point to a system that is already active, relationship-led and widely distributed across sectors, but which is constrained by capacity, fragmentation and a lack of shared structures. They highlight not a need to create diaspora engagement from scratch, but to better support, connect and sustain what is already in place. The implications are therefore less about individual interventions and more about how the system as a whole is organised and enabled. In practical terms, this suggests a small number of interconnected areas of focus, including leadership and coordination, shared infrastructure, more collaboration, more targeted approaches to audiences and reach, and strengthening pathways from initial connection to longer-term impact.

Recommendations are therefore grouped into five themes:



Strategic Leadership and Coordination



Shared Infrastructure and Capacity



Collaboration, Networks and Learning



Targeting, Audiences and Reach



From Connection to Impact



# Strategic Leadership and Coordination



## Recommendation 1: Establish a dedicated diaspora engagement post at regional level

The clearest overall recommendation from this research is the need for a dedicated diaspora engagement post at regional level. The findings show that there is already a great deal of activity underway across the region, carried through both significant volunteer effort and formal, paid roles across local authorities, development bodies, educational institutions and other organisations. The case for a dedicated post is not that little is happening, but that activity is not yet sufficiently co-ordinated.

This post should be framed as a coordinating and enabling role rather than a delivery role. Its purpose would be to support what exists, connect activity and stakeholders across the region, reduce fragmentation, build shared infrastructure, including tools and templates, and create a more coherent regional approach. It could also develop and act as a bridge between local activity, regional priorities and national policy. This recommendation should align with Ireland's new Diaspora Strategy and existing regional strategies, including those of the Western Development Commission and Údarás na Gaeltachta.

## Recommendation 2: Develop a regional diaspora framework and implementation plan for the West and Northwest

The research does not suggest a need for a separate formal regional strategy. Rather, it points to the value of a clear operational framework and implementation plan tailored to the West and Northwest. This framework should build on the evidence in this report and align with the forthcoming national Diaspora Strategy and existing regional approaches, including the work of Údarás na Gaeltachta, county-level diaspora strategies, etc.

In practice, it should set out a small number of clear regional priorities, identify where the Western Development Commission and other key county and regional level organisations add value, and show how different sectors and counties can connect to a shared approach. It should be practical, with defined actions, relevant partners and a clear process for review, while keeping relationship-building at its core.

## Recommendation 3: Build in ongoing consultation and light-touch metrics from the start

The research points strongly to the need for an approach that can learn and adjust over time. Plans should include ongoing consultation with those active in diaspora engagement, supported by light-touch shared metrics that volunteers and staff can realistically use. The aim is to maintain an up-to-date picture of activity and support ongoing review and refinement.

In practice, this could involve a small set of common indicators, such as engagements, follow-up contacts, visits, events, partnerships and volunteer input. These should be simple to record. Short periodic check-ins could then be used to review what is emerging and respond in real time.

# Shared Infrastructure & Capacity



## Recommendation 4: Build shared infrastructure that reduces pressure and strengthens continuity

A strong message from the research is that groups do not need more encouragement, and in most cases do not have capacity for additional training. What they need is practical support that makes diaspora engagement easier to sustain. This points to the value of shared infrastructure that can be used across organisations, sectors and counties.

In practice, this could include shared communications templates, event follow-up tools, newsletter formats, simple contact tracking, reusable sign-up forms and a central knowledge hub with examples, guidance and opportunities for peer learning and exchange. A regional calendar of diaspora activity and a shared directory of contacts could also support this.

The aim is not to centralise activity, but to make existing effort more connected, consistent and less dependent on individual capacity. Models such as Connected Hubs show how shared supports can strengthen activity while allowing for local variation.

## Recommendation 5: Invest in shared communications capacity, not just communications training

The findings show that much of the current work is carried through social media, events and newsletters or email. Communications are central to diaspora engagement, but can become time-intensive and inconsistent where capacity is limited.

This could be addressed through shared infrastructure in two ways. One approach is to focus on shared communications, including seasonal campaign packs, reusable content, regional story banks, newsletter templates, event materials and simple guidance on follow-up after initial contact.

Alternatively, the load could be shared through a common communications system or mailing list that diaspora can sign up to, with different organisations contributing content. This would maintain regular, varied engagement without relying on any single group.

The objective in either case is to make the most-used channels easier to use well, improving continuity without requiring each organisation to build systems from scratch.

## Recommendation 6: Design supports for intermittent capacity and mixed delivery models

The findings show that diaspora engagement is often not a full-time function, particularly for volunteers, but also for many staff whose diaspora work sits alongside wider responsibilities.

Support therefore needs to reflect intermittent capacity. It should be easy to use in bursts, resilient to staff or volunteer turnover, and not dependent on specialist expertise. Practical examples include plug-and-play campaign packs, standard follow-up journeys, simple handover templates, shared inbox approaches, and small flexible funding.

The wider point is that support must reflect how this work is actually delivered, prioritising systems people can sustain over those that look best on paper.

# Collaboration, Networks & Learning



## Recommendation 7: Create regular structures for collaboration, peer learning and exchange

The findings show strong interest in collaboration, networking and peer learning, suggesting the need for regular structures through which organisations can share experience and develop more co-ordinated activity.

This could begin with a regional diaspora network convened by the WDC, supported by a regular forum and, in time, a regional summit. Smaller peer-learning groups could also be developed around themes such as heritage, tourism, community development, communications, sport, education and enterprise. The focus should be on practical exchange: sharing what works, making connections, coordinating activity where useful, and reducing isolation.



# Targeting, Audiences & Reach



## Recommendation 8: Prioritise key geographies while keeping flexibility

The research shows that engagement is strongest in a relatively small number of geographies, particularly England, other parts of Ireland and the USA. The recommendation is not to fix a set list of priority locations, but to adopt a principle of focused prioritisation.

This means recognising that some locations already have stronger pathways, contacts and momentum, and may justify more intentional effort, while retaining flexibility to test and grow activity elsewhere. In practice, the regional framework could identify priority locations on a periodic basis, based on emerging evidence. This could begin with places where organisations are already having some success, allowing activity to build on existing connections rather than starting from scratch.

## Recommendation 9: Develop a more differentiated approach to engaging with the diaspora

The findings suggest that long-term emigrants and people of Irish descent are the most commonly engaged groups, but also show that the wider diaspora is varied. Different groups will respond to different forms of engagement, so support should encourage organisations to think in terms of the different ways people find their way in rather than a single approach.

Heritage and genealogy routes may suit descendant communities, while networking and professional connection may be more relevant for recent emigrants, alongside cultural, sporting or place-based offers.

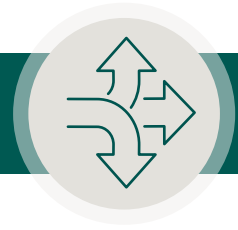
This does not require complex segmentation. A practical step would be to develop simple pathway models that organisations can adapt, making engagement clearer, more relevant and easier to evaluate.

## Recommendation 10: Make it easier to reach the “unknown diaspora”

A clear operational gap in the findings is the difficulty many organisations face in moving beyond existing contacts and networks, limiting growth and sometimes leaving engagement dependent on the same people.

A practical response to this challenge would be to develop a shared, diaspora facing, approach to connecting with what is happening in the region. This could take the shape of a shared system, a newsletter that our diaspora can sign up to, or a dedicated website. When diaspora connect with any organisation within the region, they could then be signposted to this system or resource. Or for those not currently engaging, a regional campaign could build up a list of those interested but not yet actively engaged. This audience can then sign-up to receive or engage with the information that interests them the most. Key to the effectiveness of a system like this is attentive support that runs campaigns, follows up and directs people to organisations and activities that match interests, and in line with everything we have mentioned so far, builds relationships.

A shared pathway like this would also make better use of festivals, genealogy platforms, consular networks, Irish associations and other settings where people with an interest in the region are already present. While a standalone database would ultimately be highly valuable, a ‘how to’ guide to help organisations find, welcome and retain new contacts could also be a useful first step.



## **Recommendation 11:**

### **Support organisations to move from first contact to meaningful involvement**

The research found that some stakeholders want clearer mutual benefit from engagement and stronger pathways from initial contact to something more concrete. This is not at odds with the relationship-led nature of the work, instead it points to the need to build more intentionally on these relationships once they are established. Often the diaspora themselves are not aware of what else is on offer, and if they were they may be interested in engaging even more.

A useful next step would be to help organisations articulate both a clearer offer and a clearer progression route. In practice, this might mean supporting a simple pathway from first contact, to sign-up, to participation, to visit, to involvement or support. What that involvement or support might look like will of course be highly individual. Not every organisation will need every stage, but a clearer sense of what happens next would improve follow-through and make it easier to explain the purpose of diaspora engagement to both local stakeholders and diaspora audiences themselves.

## **Recommendation 12:**

### **Ensure support for vulnerable diaspora is recognised within the wider model**

Although support for vulnerable diaspora members is not the strongest driver overall, the qualitative findings show that it remains part of the picture and can feel under-recognised. National policy discussions should continue to inform how this is approached, with support for vulnerable members of the global Irish community remaining a core priority.

At regional level, the recommendation is not that the WDC or any other regional-level body should necessarily take on a direct welfare role. Instead, the approach should recognise that relationship-led engagement includes care, connection and signposting alongside culture, heritage and economic opportunity. A practical step would be to map relevant support organisations and referral routes, and include simple guidance so groups know where to direct people when needs arise.

# 6

# Appendices



# Appendix 1. Research Instruments

## Appendix 1.1 Diaspora engagement survey

The survey instrument, titled Engaging our Diaspora, was developed as a bilingual English and Irish questionnaire. It was designed to gather information on respondents' current level of diaspora engagement, the capacity in which they engage, the sectors and geographies involved, the motivations behind engagement, the diaspora groups being reached, the methods used to stay in touch, the barriers experienced, and the types of support that would be most useful going forward. It also included open-ended questions to capture respondents' wider experiences, successes and challenges in their own words.

The survey opened with an introduction explaining the purpose of the research, the role of the WDC, QMPC and NMCG Consulting, and how responses would be used and protected. It then moved through a series of sections covering respondent and organisational details, the story of current diaspora engagement, the scale and geography of that engagement, challenges faced, and possible next steps for future support. It concluded with optional consent questions on follow-up contact and inclusion in a public map of diaspora activity.

Copy of Diaspora engagement survey instrument available on request.

Bilingual survey instrument used to gather quantitative and qualitative data on current diaspora engagement activity, motivations, geographies, challenges and support needs across the region.

## Appendix 1.2 Case study interview guide

The case study interview guide, titled Case Study Interview Guide & Interviewer Form, was developed to support the qualitative follow-on phase of the research. Its purpose was to help collect consistent, publishable case study material that could bring the survey findings to life through real examples, while also ensuring that interviews covered the main themes emerging from the wider research.

The guide includes sections on interviewer details, consent and publicity permissions, the interviewee's story and experience of diaspora engagement, the barriers they face, the forms of support that would make the biggest difference, and the case study example they would choose to highlight. It also includes prompts to gather strong quotes, concrete examples, practical learning and material suitable for use in the report and related communications.

Copy of Diaspora engagement survey instrument available on request.

Interview guide used in the qualitative phase of the research to structure case study interviews and explore key themes emerging from the survey findings.

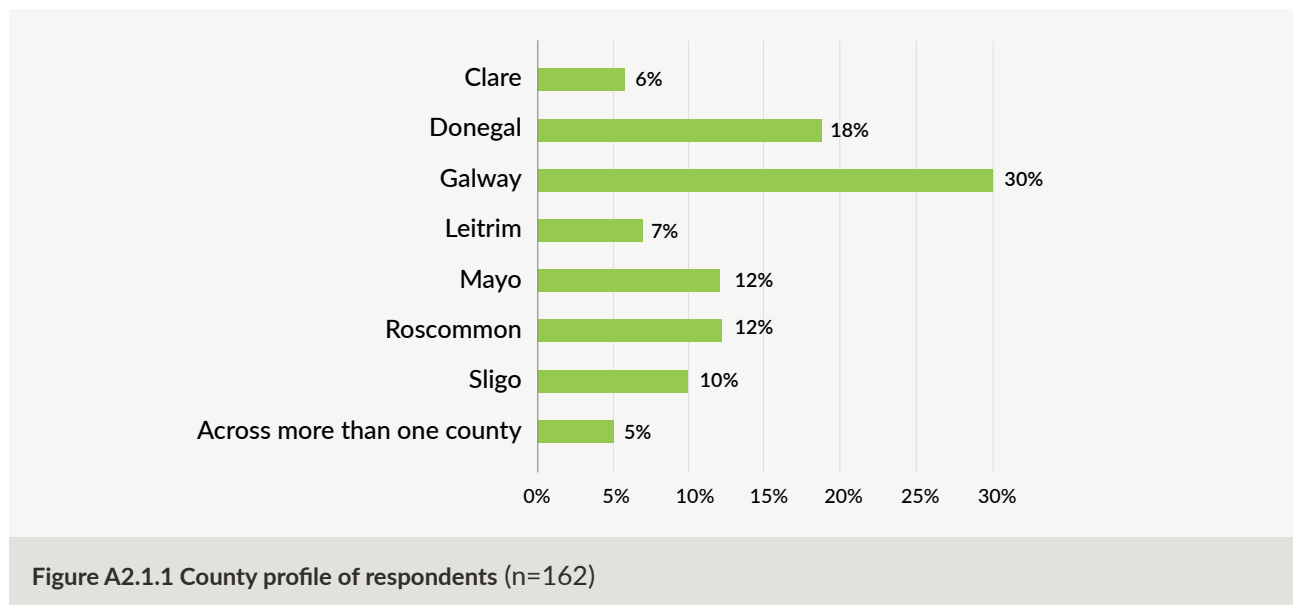
## Appendix 2. Detailed survey findings

This appendix provides a more detailed breakdown of the survey findings. It is intended to sit alongside the main Findings section by setting out the wider pattern of responses across the survey, including overall frequencies, role comparisons and county comparisons.

### Appendix 2.1 Overall frequencies

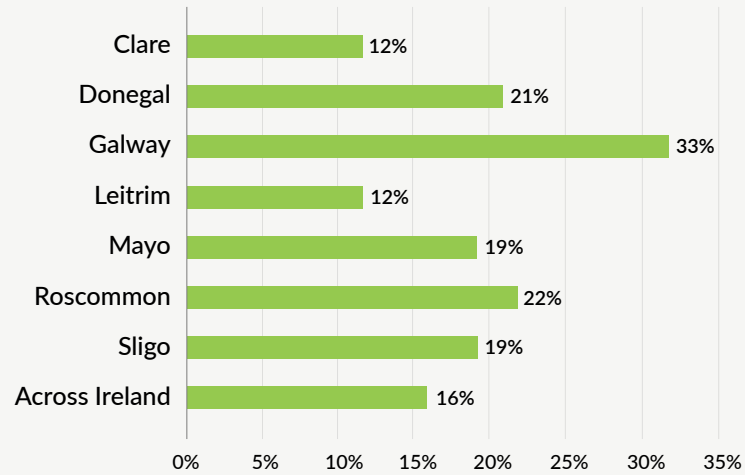
#### Appendix 2.1.1 The respondent base was strongest in Galway and Donegal

While Galway and Donegal accounted for the largest proportion of the responses at 30 per cent and 18 per cent respectively, there was also relevant coverage of other counties with 12 per cent of responses coming from Mayo and Roscommon, 10 per cent from Sligo, 7 per cent from Leitrim, and 6 per cent from Clare. This gives a useful spread across the region, while also suggesting that some county-level findings should be read with sample size in mind.



#### Appendix 2.1.2 Much of the work is county-based, but some activity reaches beyond county boundaries

When asked what geographic area their work related to, Galway was mentioned most often at 33 per cent, followed by Roscommon at 22 per cent, Donegal at 21 per cent, and Mayo and Sligo at 19 per cent each, while 16 per cent said their work was across Ireland. This suggests that diaspora engagement is often rooted in place, but is not always limited to the single county of origin.



Other: Dublin, Tipperary, Northwest, Worldwide, Western Seaboard, Gaeltheacht Centre (Kerry, Cork, Waterford & Meath)

Figure A2.1.1 County profile of respondents (n=162)

## Appendix 2.2 Role comparisons

### Appendix 2.2.1 Wide mix of Volunteers, staff and personal respondents across all counties

There was representation from volunteers, staff and those engaging our diaspora for personal reasons across all counties, with higher levels of volunteers responding from Clare, Galway, Roscommon, Mayo and Sligo. This shows that diaspora engagement is being driven by both volunteers and staff across all areas of the region.

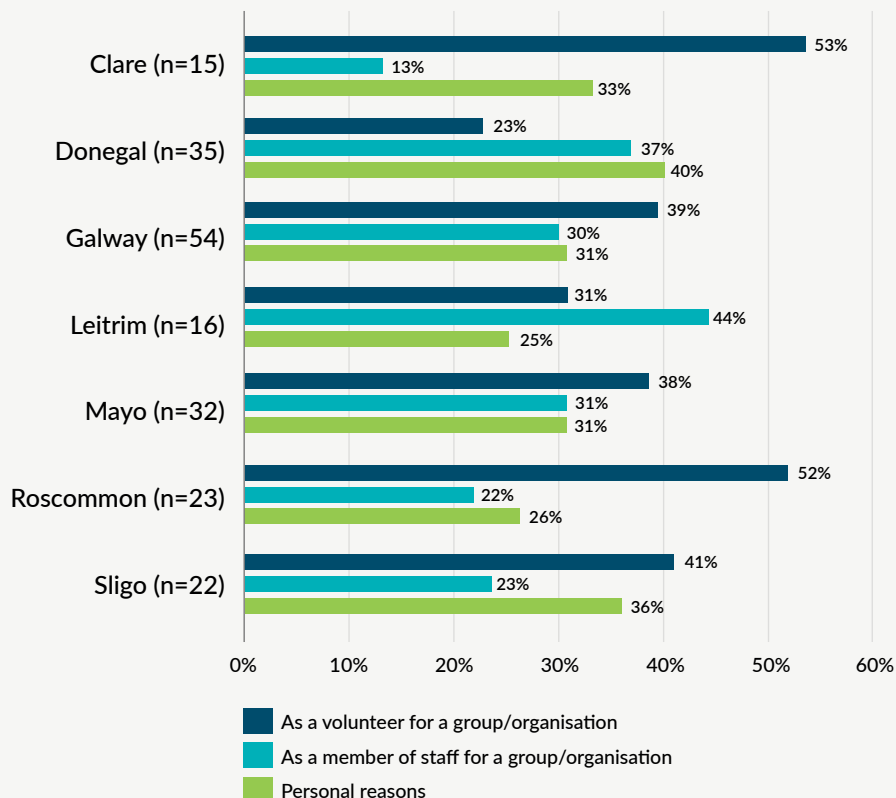


Figure A2.2.1 Volunteer and staff led engagement by county

## Appendix 2.2.2 Staff are especially likely to say they would use supports if available

Among staff who were interested in each support, large majorities said they would be very likely to use collaboration opportunities, training, peer learning and a regional summit. This reinforces the point that demand for support is practical rather than theoretical.

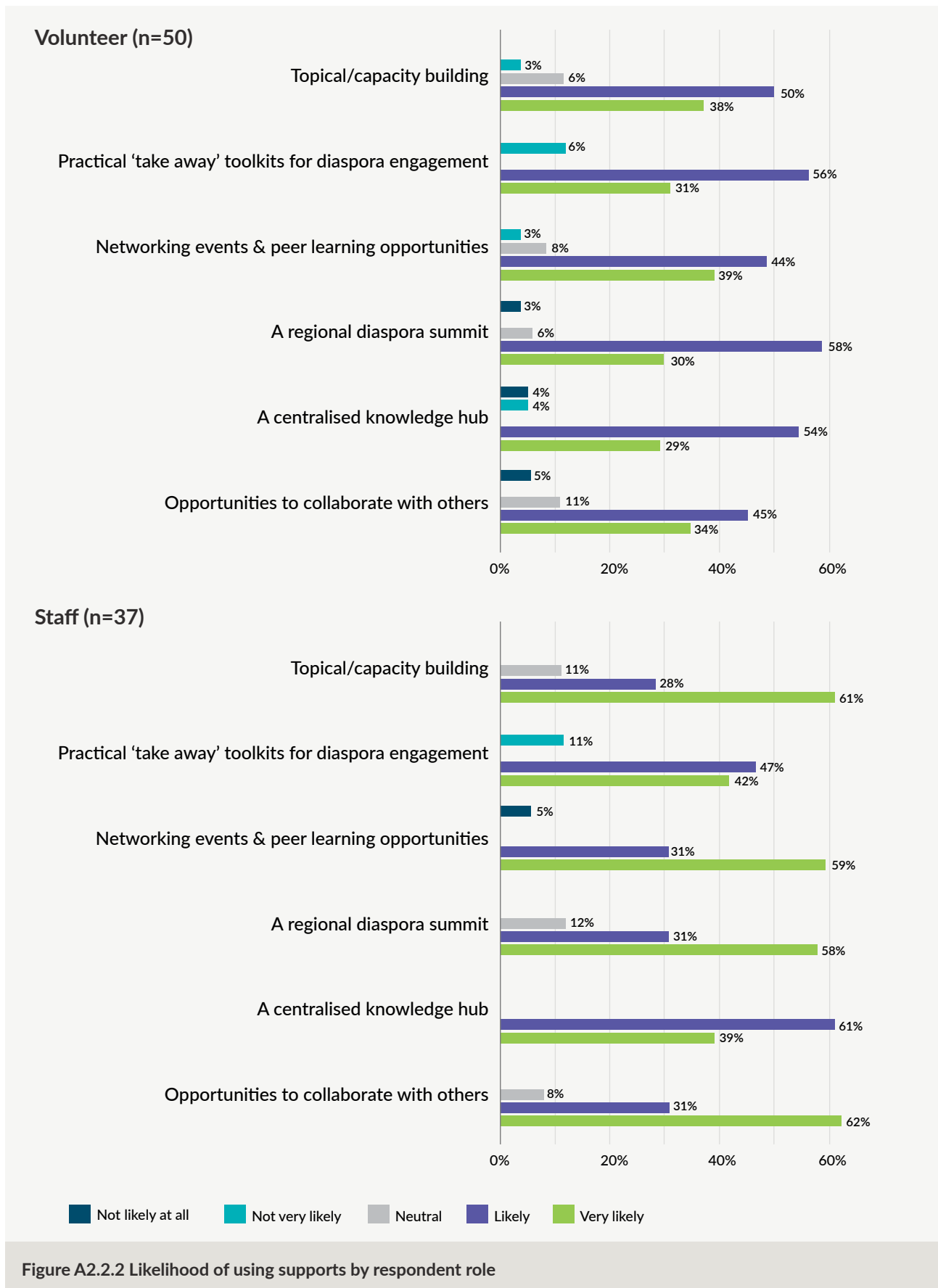


Figure A2.2.2 Likelihood of using supports by respondent role

## Appendix 2.3 County comparisons

### Appendix 2.3.1 Existing engagement is strongest in Mayo and Roscommon

By county, Mayo had the highest share saying they already engage with the diaspora at 64 per cent, followed by Roscommon at 59 per cent and Leitrim at 50 per cent. This suggests particularly strong existing activity in these counties, though this does not necessarily imply that more activity is happening in these areas, instead this provides more information about the sample responding to this survey.

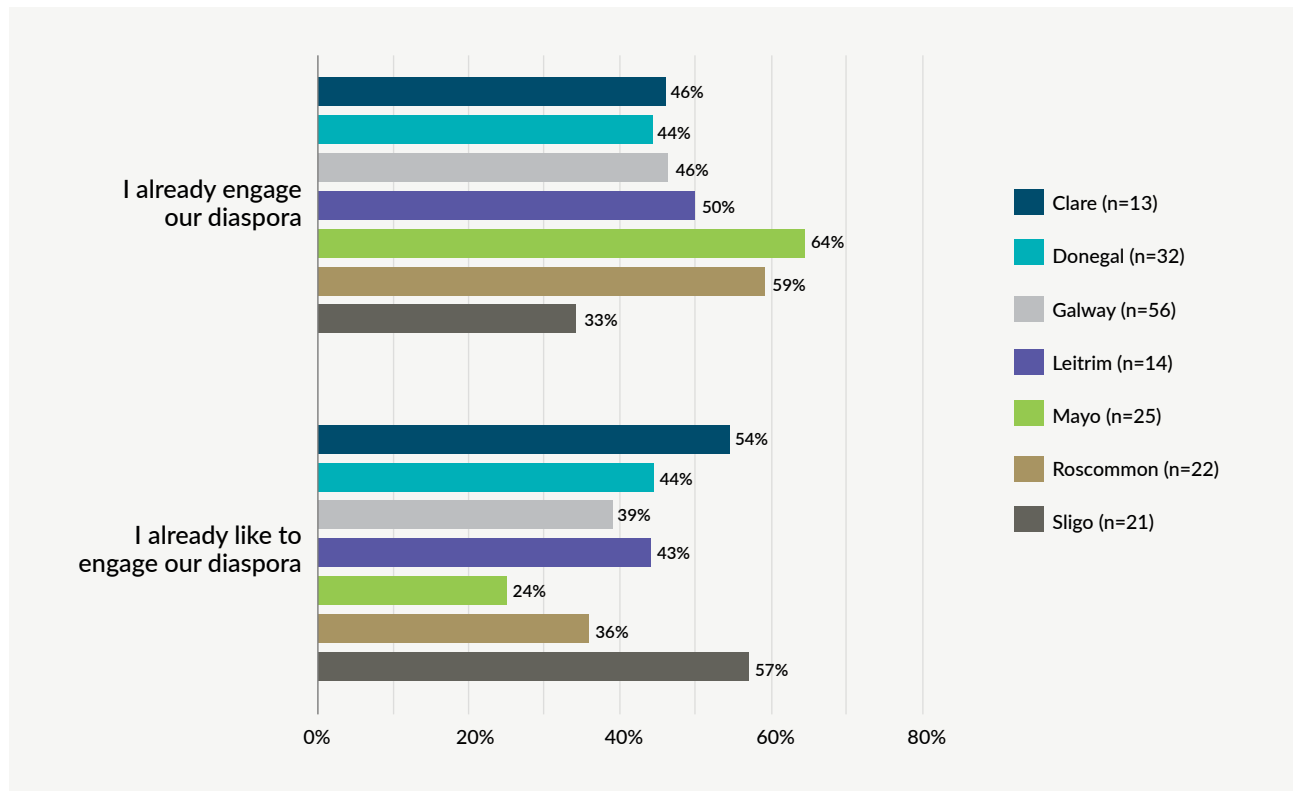


Figure A2.3.1 Current engagement with the diaspora by county

### Appendix 2.3.2 County patterns show different role mixes

Volunteer respondents were especially prominent in Clare and Roscommon, while staff respondents made up a relatively larger share in Leitrim and Donegal. This suggests county differences in diaspora engagement may partly reflect who is carrying the work locally.

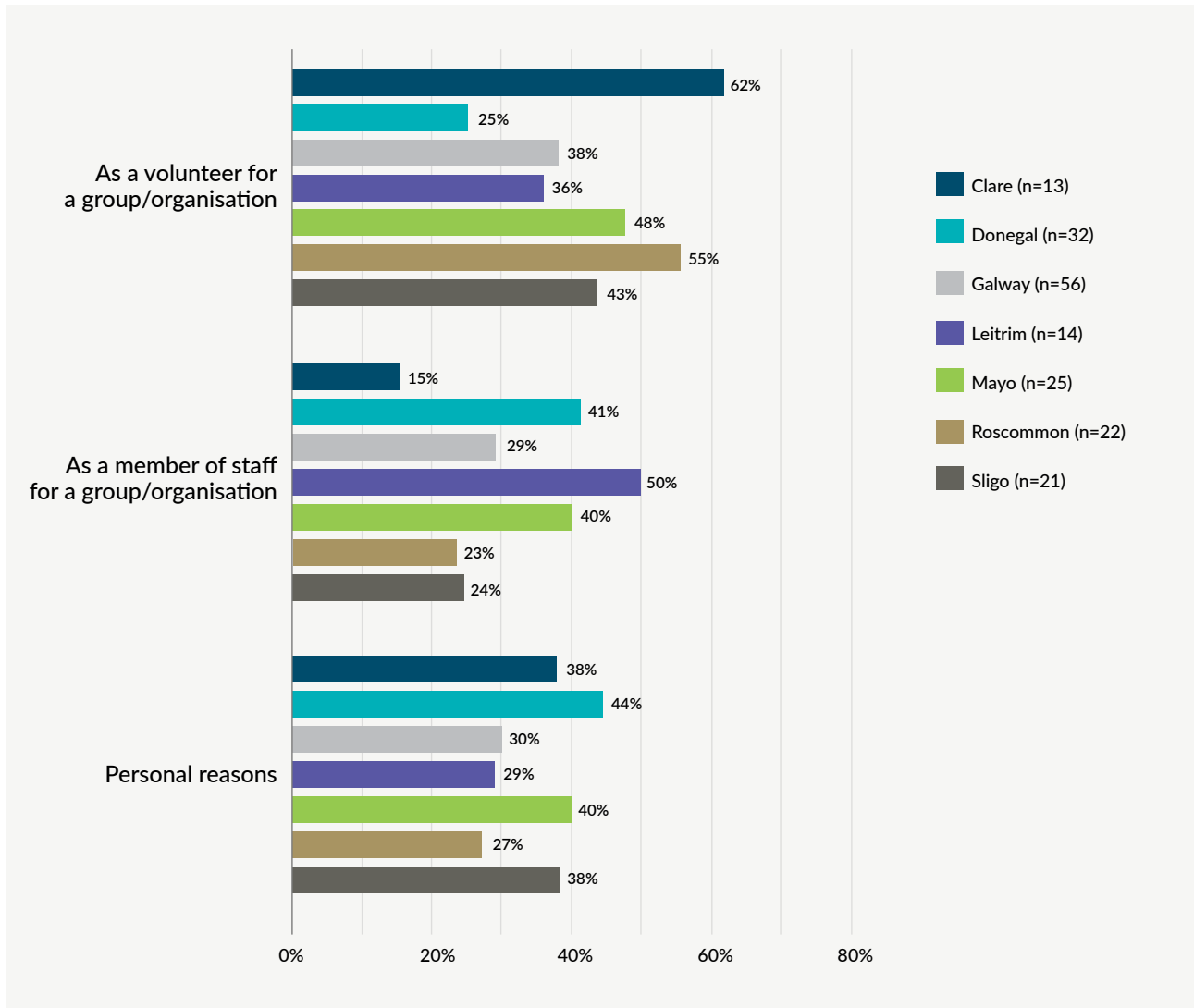


Figure A2.3.2 Respondent role mix by county

## Appendix 3. Methodology

### Appendix 3.1 Overall research approach

This research used a mixed-methods approach to build an understanding of diaspora engagement across the Western Region. The intention was to gather both broad evidence on the current landscape and more detailed insight into the experiences, motivations and challenges of those already involved in this work.

The research involved a number of connected strands. First, background desk research was carried out, including a review of learning from WDC's earlier pilot work on diaspora engagement. This provided a foundation for the wider study and helped identify key themes and areas for further exploration. The research then involved the design and delivery of a regional survey, followed by analysis of both quantitative and qualitative survey responses. These findings were then used to inform the development of an interview guide for a follow-on qualitative phase, including case study interviews and the development of a number of case studies.

This approach was chosen to ensure that the research captured both the breadth of activity taking place and the deeper experiential learning behind it. It allowed the study to look at who is engaging with diaspora communities, how they are doing this, what is motivating them, what challenges they are facing and where there may be untapped potential for further development. It also supported the development of a set of findings that are evidence-based but practical in their application for WDC and for organisations working in this area.

### Appendix 3.2 Survey design and delivery

The survey was developed to provide a broad evidence base on diaspora engagement activity across the Western Region. Its purpose was to understand who is currently engaged in this work, what kinds of activity are taking place, what is driving that engagement, what barriers people are facing, and what kinds of support would be useful going forward.

The survey included questions across a number of areas. These covered respondents' organisational profile, the sectors and areas in which they were active, their motivations for engaging with our diaspora, the places and diaspora groups they were engaging with, the methods they were using, the main challenges they faced, and their interest in possible future support. The survey also asked whether respondents were engaging as staff members, volunteers or in a personal capacity, which was important in understanding the different kinds of capacity currently underpinning this work. (Appendix 1 - Survey)

In survey design careful consideration was taken to include questions and answer options relevant to those engaging our diaspora on both a paid and voluntary basis for both groups and more formal organisations, as well as for personal reasons. In order to ensure that the questions and answer options were fully inclusive and well understood we undertook three 'Thinking Aloud' testing sessions where participants read the questions aloud and spoke through their thinking process as they responded. This led to some edits, inclusions and alterations to the survey design that ultimately produced a more inclusive and sensible research instrument.

In order to extend this inclusivity further the survey was designed to be bilingual and included both structured and open-ended questions. This made it possible to generate quantitative findings while also giving respondents the opportunity to describe their experiences and priorities in their own words. This was important given the wide variety of organisations and individuals involved, and the fact that diaspora engagement often takes different forms depending on local context, capacity and purpose.

With an estimation of over 1,000 organisations engaging with diaspora across the Western Region we aimed for a target sample size of 150-250. More importantly, from the desk research and pilot study we were aware of the diversity of organisations and roles that are often involved in diaspora engagement, including across multiple sectors and both volunteer and paid roles. Taking this into consideration we also targeted our sampling to ensure this diverse mix of sectors and roles would be represented in the survey sample.

The survey was promoted using a range of approaches in order to reach as broad a group of respondents as possible. Online and social media platforms were used to share the survey widely. This was complemented by press and radio activity to raise awareness and encourage participation. The survey was also circulated through a large email list to regionally and locally engaged groups and organisations, including both voluntary and corporate contacts. In addition, the wider contact networks of both the research team and the WDC were used to help spread the word and encourage engagement. This combined approach was important in reaching both organisations already active in diaspora engagement and those who may have had an interest in the topic but were less visible.

### **Appendix 3.3 Survey sample and response profile**

The survey ran for 7 weeks between November 2025 and January 2026. After cleaning, the dataset contained 240 responses, representing 178 distinct groups or organisations. This provided a substantial sample for understanding the current picture of diaspora engagement across the region.

Importantly, the respondent base reflected a mix of counties, sectors and organisational types. It also included respondents engaging in different capacities, including paid staff, volunteers and people involved for personal reasons. This was an important feature of the dataset, as the research found that diaspora engagement in the region is not confined to one type of organisation or one type of role. In many cases, this work is being carried out by volunteers or by individuals whose engagement is strongly rooted in personal or local commitment, while in other cases it is more formalised within an organisational remit.

The sample also reflected the cross-sectoral nature of diaspora engagement. Respondents came from a range of areas including community development, local development, culture, heritage, tourism, sport, education and other local and regional activity. This broad spread supported one of the core messages of the research from an early stage: that there is already a wide range of interesting and committed work happening across the Western Region, but that there is also considerable potential to do more.

### **Appendix 3.4 Approach to analysis**

A full analysis of the survey data was conducted to identify and explore themes and trends in the data, and to develop the main headline findings. This included analysis of both the quantitative results and the qualitative material provided through open-text responses. From there, findings were examined by subgroup where this added value to the analysis. This included looking at patterns by county, sector, staff or volunteer role, geography of engagement and diaspora type.

Reviewing the survey data in this way made it possible not only to identify the strongest overall trends, but also to better understand the variation within the sample and the context behind particular findings. The qualitative survey responses were particularly useful in adding explanation, texture and nuance to the headline results.

These survey findings then informed the next stage of the research. They shaped the focus of the qualitative follow-on exercise, including the development of the interview guide, the selection of themes to explore further, and the identification of areas where case studies could add depth, practical examples and further insight. In this sense, the qualitative phase was designed to build on the survey analysis rather than run alongside it independently.

## Appendix 3.5 Qualitative research

As well as qualitative analysis of the open-ended responses in the survey a qualitative follow-on strand of the research was carried out between March and April 2026. It involved interviews with a range of stakeholders involved in, or connected to, diaspora engagement across the Western Region. These included representatives from local authorities, higher education, cultural and sporting organisations, philanthropy, and people with wider expertise in diaspora engagement and regional development.

These interviews were carried out to explore in greater depth some of the themes emerging from the survey findings, to better understand current practice and experience, and to identify common challenges, opportunities and areas of potential support. They also helped to bring more depth to the overall findings by adding perspectives from organisations and individuals with different types of experience in this area.

Alongside these stakeholder interviews, a number of case studies were developed. The case studies were intended to bring the main findings to life through practical examples and to show the variety of diaspora engagement activity already taking place. In selecting these cases, the focus was not simply on choosing the most visible or highest-profile examples. Instead, the emphasis was on selecting case studies that would be useful, relatable and relevant to those already engaging with our diaspora, interested in doing so, or looking to build on and support diaspora engagement in the region.

## Appendix 3.6 Developing the key findings and recommendations

The key findings in this report were developed through an iterative process of analysis, interpretation and synthesis across the different strands of the research. The survey provided the main evidence base for identifying the strongest headline findings, drawing on both the quantitative responses and the qualitative comments provided by respondents. The follow-on interviews and case studies were then used to test, deepen and add context to these findings, helping to distinguish between what emerged as most important overall and what helped explain how diaspora engagement is working in practice.

In developing the key findings, the emphasis was placed on identifying the issues that were most significant across the dataset and most relevant to future action. In other words, the main findings were not intended simply to describe the survey results, but to highlight what matters most for WDC and for others interested in supporting diaspora engagement in the region. This meant looking not only at which responses scored most strongly, but also at what the patterns and trends in the data say about the wider picture of diaspora engagement in the region.

The process of developing the findings therefore involved moving from individual data points to broader thematic conclusions. The key findings were framed as headline messages about what to do or what to pay attention to. These became the main findings of the report. Alongside this, a second layer of findings was developed to capture what the research suggested about how diaspora engagement can be carried out most effectively. These additional findings help explain the conditions, approaches and enabling factors that can support stronger engagement and greater impact.

This distinction was important in moving from analysis to recommendations. The recommendations were developed by considering what the main findings suggested in strategic terms, and what the additional findings suggested in practical terms. Put simply, the main findings point towards the areas that most need attention, while the additional findings help identify the kinds of support, approaches and actions most likely to make a difference. This helped ensure that the final recommendations were grounded in the evidence and shaped not only by what respondents said matters, but also by what the wider research suggested is most likely to work in practice.

# Recommendations - In Summary

Each recommendation responds directly to the challenges and opportunities identified in the findings, with a focus on practical supports that can enable more coordinated, effective and resilient diaspora engagement across the region.



## Strategic Leadership and Coordination

Recommendation 1: Establish a dedicated diaspora engagement post at regional level

Recommendation 2: Develop a regional diaspora framework and implementation plan for the West and Northwest

Recommendation 3: Build in ongoing consultation and light-touch metrics from the start



## Shared Infrastructure and Capacity

Recommendation 4: Build shared infrastructure that reduces pressure and strengthens continuity

Recommendation 5: Invest in shared communications capacity, not just communications training

Recommendation 6: Design supports for intermittent capacity and mixed delivery models



## Collaboration, Networks and Learning

Recommendation 7: Create regular structures for collaboration, peer learning and exchange



## Targeting, Audiences and Reach

Recommendation 8: Prioritise key geographies while keeping flexibility

Recommendation 9: Develop a more differentiated approach to engaging with the diaspora

Recommendation 10: Make it easier to reach the “unknown diaspora”



## From Connection to Impact

Recommendation 11: Support organisations to move from first contact to meaningful involvement

Recommendation 12: Ensure support for vulnerable diaspora is recognised within the wider model





COIMISIÚN  
FORBARTHA  
AN IARTHAIR

WESTERN  
DEVELOPMENT  
COMMISSION