



## PRESS RELEASE

### Luton Irish Forum

#### **Official Launch of Research Report: 'The Long-term Sustainability of Luton Irish Forum: A Minority Group Community Service Provider'**

***As an ethnic minority group with a lengthy history of settlement in Luton, the Irish community continue to exist in significant numbers; forming a large Irish-born elderly generation, and even larger second and third generations of Irish descendants. Luton Irish Forum has, since 1997, continued to grow, however its management are aware that the significant weighting of older, first generation persons engaging with its services versus the relatively small number of middle and younger age groups presents an important issue of 'cultural sustainability'.***

#### ***How can the organisation continue to survive in the longer-term?***

Saturday 10th July 2010 marks the official launch of a report entitled The Long-term Sustainability of Luton Irish Forum. Its objectives include understanding the degree to which the large second and third generations of people of Irish descent in Luton engage with their Irish heritage, and what can be done by Luton Irish Forum to attract a broader membership in the future. The Report, written by Head Researcher Mr Jonathan McElhatton, a student at the University of Southampton, recommends ways in which community service providers, such as Luton Irish Forum, can continue to exist past the generation they originally sought to assist.

During July 2009, University of Southampton student Jonathan McElhatton a student of Bachelor of Sciences in Geography began his third year dissertation research project. He decided to embrace his own family's history of Ireland-England migration and design a topic focusing on the identity of the Irish community in Luton; his place of birth and the area in which his parents and grandparents have lived for many years. Close conversation with Luton Irish Forum directed focus for the project towards the self-perceived identity of second and subsequent generations of Irish descent, and the impending crisis that cultural sustainability presents for the future of Luton Irish Forum. How can the Forum, an organisation that provides critical services and entertainment to hundreds of Irish people in Luton, continue to exist past the generation of elderly, Irish-born members to which it is currently dependant?

A detailed, 32-question survey was edited between Jonathan and the Forum, and distributed widely across Luton and Dunstable. Roman Catholic churches, schools, shops and organisations were contacted.

With over 140 sets of data and using a range of statistical data analysis tools, Jonathan has uncovered a 73 per cent level of 'Irishness' amongst the second and subsequent generations who responded to the questionnaire. This, he deduces, is a very healthy level of identification with their Irish cultural heritage. He goes on to explain that second and subsequent generations have a strong link to the Roman Catholic Church. Finally, and most importantly, he identifies where Luton Irish Forum must shift focus so to engage younger generations of Irish descent. Bearing in mind the strong levels of Irishness identified in answer to sub-question 1, the results show that 44 per cent of respondents, despite identifying with their Irish cultural heritage, quote lack of knowledge and disinterest as reasons for disengagement with Luton Irish Forum. This, Jonathan believes, signifies an

issue between the services provided and the effectiveness of publicity and advertising. The results also show that significant interest exists in at least four of Luton Irish Forum's current services, therefore requiring more to be done to access these interested people. Proposed services show great interest amongst second and subsequent generations.

In this way, Jonathan concludes that a future for Luton Irish Forum certainly does exist. Considerable identification with their Irishness and moderate levels of engagement with other community services in Luton support the continued importance of Luton Irish Forum in future years. However, more must be done to engage the younger generations, with a move to some new services/activities, greater levels of publicity and advertising and, in particular, a shift away from the perceived focus on the elderly, first generation, as this also proved a significant reason for disengagement amongst second and subsequent generations.

Noelette Hanley, Chief Officer of Luton Irish Forum said. 'Luton Irish Forum welcomes this Report, and is very grateful to Jonathan for producing a very valuable set of recommendations that we aim to advance over the next two years. The Report has important implications for Irish and other community service providers across the UK relating to future engagement with their communities. Over the coming months we aim to recruit a steering group of second and third generation Irish entitled 'Young Luton Irish Forum', to advise on how we can best do this'.

The Report will be available online from Monday 12<sup>th</sup> July 2010, at [www.lutonirishforum.org](http://www.lutonirishforum.org).

For further information on the Report information please contact Jonathan McElhatton at: [jmcelhatton@btinternet.com](mailto:jmcelhatton@btinternet.com)

For more information on the services of Luton Irish Forum, please contact Noelette Hanley at Luton Irish Forum on 01582 720 447/ 07934 442 861 or by email to [noelette@lutonirishforum.org](mailto:noelette@lutonirishforum.org).

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## Notes

1. In response to low levels of engagement among second and subsequent generations of Irish descent with their cultural heritage, it became evident that the issue of 'cultural sustainability' was one that required further study.
2. Despite strong levels of 'Irishness' throughout the elderly, first generation Irish in Luton, data suggests that within the large cohort of Irish descendants in Luton, only 7-8 per cent actually choose to identify as Irish (Walter 2006). It is assumed that the lack of recognition accorded to these generations remains a key issue in establishing an identity, as generations often tend to share health problems and social tendencies.
3. LIF will further the Research Report recommendations via 'Young Luton Irish Forum', a steering group of second and third generation Irish. The key aim of the steering group will be to advise on how we can best educate, sustain interest and increase participation of second and third generation Irish with their cultural heritage through a range of Irish music, drama, arts, language and through the annual St Patrick's Day Festival. Once engaged, second and third generations can begin to tackle issues inherent to the Irish community in Britain, for example social care, physical and mental health, isolation, and economic inactivity.