

ISAS ASSISTS ANYONE OF IRISH BIRTH OR DESCENT WHO NEEDS HELP TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF THEIR LIFE, THROUGH SOCIAL MEETINGS, EXCURSIONS, HOME VISITS AND BENEFITS ADVICE

Irish Support & Advice Service: 40 years of caring for the elderly and vulnerable



In need of care: Statistics reveal that Irish people living in England have worse health than those in Ireland

By Maggie Beirne

A FORMER client of the Irish Support & Advice Service who, thanks to its work, was rehoused, has donated several major artworks which will go on display at Hammersmith's Irish Cultural Centre in London from December 4. This exciting exhibition will mark the start of the service's 40th anniversary celebrations.

The Irish Support & Advice Service (ISAS) was established by Fr Brian Lawlor in 1969 as an advice and self-help group, in the grounds of St Augustine's church in Hammersmith, and providing everything from clothes and food parcels to help with the cost of funerals for the destitute. The waves of Irish immigrants who had arrived in England during the Second World War and shortly afterwards were beginning to reach retirement age. Many had no extended family network to rely on. Their Irish 'home' was still very much real to them but, decades after they had left it, was no longer recognisable. Their new London home had gradually ridden itself of the 'No Blacks, No Dogs and No Irish' signs but was still at times

unwelcoming. This atmosphere became more difficult when the Troubles revived in Northern Ireland. In the 1970s, simply having an Irish accent could create problems. The recent talk of a 'war on terror' and the marginalisation and alienation of members of Britain's Muslim community mirrors some of the experiences of Irish immigrants during the height of the Troubles. There are probably many useful historic parallels to be shared, and lessons to be learned.

Injustice

For example, the Catholic hierarchy often played a vital role in challenging unhelpful Irish stereotypes. The unstinting work of Cardinal Basil Hume on behalf of the Guildford Four and Maguire Seven is an important case in point. Having to experience injustice only feeds and fuels alienation on the part of those who are made to feel excluded, and is just as important today as it was three decades ago. ISAS has consistently challenged the isolation and depression that can befall the 'outsider'. Thanks to campaigning for the Irish population in Britain, census data has

highlighted many problems faced by this increasingly elderly group. For example, Irish people in England have worse health than the Irish in Ireland. They suffer from exceptionally high rates of cancer, heart disease, fatal accidents, mental illness and suicides. While many Irish living in Britain have extended families able and willing to support them, many elderly Irish live in isolation, are homeless, or are living with limited means. At the same time, most Irish came to Britain for economic reasons and have, for the most part, been successful in earning a livelihood here. They were the backbone of the growth in Catholicism and Catholic church attendance in the post-war years. Many Catholic churches built since the Second World War were built with the generous financial donations of the local Irish community. It is difficult in many parts of the country to think of the work of the Knights of St Columba, or the work carried out by volunteers in the St Vincent de Paul society, without also thinking of the many Irish men and women who donate their time and energies to this

work. In the same way, ISAS has found that many of the Irish who come to the organisation for help do not want, and would reject, hand-outs. They do, however, want what they deserve, and many people are not getting that. Either their pension from work in Ireland decades ago is not coming through, or they are not receiving disability living allowance or other benefits that they should be being paid. Some people find themselves homeless, or in poor accommodation, and these ISAS clients also just want what they deserve – no more, no less. ISAS is not only about getting people the money they deserve. It organises six pensioner groups in west and south London and they meet weekly – two in Hammersmith, two in Ealing, one in Merton and one in Sutton, which meets fortnightly. The groups organise bingo afternoons, as well as outings, tea-dances, pub lunches and gentle exercise. The main idea is to have an opportunity to meet up and socialise with other friends from 'home'. Health studies all tell us that older people live longer and happier lives if they keep active. So, in the absence of close family,

or when families live far away, building up strong networks and friendships with people living close by is very important. Funding for social events, outings and the advice service comes from several sources, not least the Irish Government's Emigrant Support Programme in Britain. ISAS, however, has more ambitious plans. It is celebrating its 40th anniversary year over the coming months, and the forthcoming art exhibition is the first of many projects intended to promote and raise money for its work.

Exhibition

The artist Tom McCullough is a living example of the kind of work ISAS does – helping people to help themselves – and he is donating his artwork for exhibition and eventually sale. Over the coming year, ISAS intends to organise a series of events to raise money. The organisation will try and make more people aware of the 'invisible' minority in their midst, and show them how to engage with them more effectively. There is a lot of talk about the need for greater social and community cohesion, both in the lan-



Above and below: Former ISAS client Tom McCullough is exhibiting his artworks as part of the organisation's 40th anniversary celebrations



Isolated: Many Irish people living in England have no family in the country to help support them

RAYMOND CUBBAY PRESENTS

MESSIAH

by

CANDLELIGHT

Four superb soloists perform Handel's sublime choral masterpiece in full 18th Century costume in an evocative candle-lit style setting.

MOZART FESTIVAL ORCHESTRA
In full period costume

Sunday 29 November at 7.30pm
CANTONMENT CHORUS
Gail Pearson soprano, Madeleine Shaw alto, Joshua Elliott tenor, Dean Robinson bass, Gareth Hancock conductor

THE BRIDGEWATER HALL - MANCHESTER
Box Office 0161 907 9000 Book online www.bridgewater-hall.co.uk

Friday 4 December at 7.30pm
LONDON ORIANA CHOIR
Rebecca Bottome soprano, Madeleine Shaw alto, Joshua Elliott tenor, Dean Robinson bass, David Drummond conductor

ROYAL FESTIVAL HALL - LONDON
Ticket Office 0844 847 9910 Book online www.southbankcentre.co.uk



Get-together: Pensioner groups help to establish a social network of friends



Vulnerable: Many people are unaware of the benefits that are available to them

McKeefry Irish Music Festival

★ ★ Mill Rythe Holiday Village ★ ★

16 Havant Road, Hayling Island, Hampshire PO11 0PB
James & Tina McKeefry from the Celtic Fringe on BBC Radio in the East Midlands invite you to their Irish Music Dance Festival

A weekend with Sean Wilson and guests

STARRING SEAN WILSON

BARRY DOYLE

THE BENN SISTERS

CONOR MCKAY

URSULA

BLAKE & BRAZIL

MIMF

McKeefry Irish Music Festival

Friday 15th - Monday 18th January 2010

Three Nights Dinner, Bed & Breakfast and admission to all shows
£180 per person

BOOKING DETAILS: 01827 64696
mimf96@hotmail.com www.mimf.co.uk