



The Language of Friendship: Refugees Learning with Locals

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Churchill Fellow 2019

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“The greatest tie of all is language ... Words are the only things that last forever.”

Winston Churchill, 15 May 1938

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THANK YOU

To the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust

I am immensely grateful to the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust for this exceptional opportunity to discover first-hand how volunteers in Greece and Ireland are helping refugees to rebuild their lives by learning the language of their new countries. I have 'travelled to learn and returned to inspire' ready to address the barriers to integration caused by a critical shortage of English classes in the UK. I would also like to thank the Linbury Trust for its support.

To every organisation and individual who took part in my Fellowship:



A heartfelt thank you to everyone who shared their time, expertise, resources, successes and challenges with me especially in the organisations where I spent the most time: Samos Volunteers and Blue Refugee Centre (of SolidarityNow) in Greece, and Fáilte Isteach in Ireland.

In Greece: Samos Volunteers (the entire lovely team), Banana House (Lizzie Croke) , Mazí School (Giulia Cicoli), Sunday School for Migrants (Athena Skampos) Open School for Migrants (Nikos Agapakis), Solidarity Now (Marianna Kallipoliti), Blue Refugee Center (Iyad Ladaa and Mohamed Ali Abu Marsa), Northern Lights Aid (Alexandra Zosso).

In Ireland: Fáilte Isteach (Liam Carey who generously coordinated project visits), and all coordinators, volunteers and students from: University College Dublin (Holly Dignan), Dunboyne (Mary Kirwan) ,Newbridge, Warrenmount (Pauline McGaley), Galway (Janet Kehelly) Cork City (Jo McCarthy), Portlaoise (Selena Grace and Irene Mulhall), Tyrellstown (Rafe Costigan), Dún Laoghaire (Claire Dalton).

Dervla Murphy: who made time for a special visit in Lismore between my Fellowship appointments and introduced me to Marwa and Aram Wahhoud who fled to Lebanon from Syria. They are now living in Lismore as participants in the Community Sponsorship Ireland initiative. David Stanton: who drove me to my appointments throughout Ireland.

ABOUT ME

You can't have a voice if you don't know the language. As a journalist for newspapers and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), I understand the importance of giving people a voice – ensuring that people are heard. This tenet goes hand-in-hand with my aim to increase routes to English language learning for asylum seekers, refugees and migrants through my Fellowship.

In England, France and America, I have worked for NGOs pursuing human rights, international development, rainforest protection and an end to child poverty and homelessness. In London, I volunteer for Islington Centre for Refugees and Migrants, Speak Street, Care4Calais and Creatives Against Poverty. Through local groups in Islington, I work to unite communities to protect our built and natural environments.

A determination to put women explorers and adventurers 'back on the map' led me to re-trace the global journey of journalist/humanitarian Nellie Bly who circled the world in 72 days in 1889 -- faster than anyone ever had -- alone with just a Gladstone bag. My book *'Following Nellie Bly: Her Record-Breaking Race Around the World'* will be published in Spring 2021. A founding trustee of the Women's Adventure Expo, I helped to organise 'The Heritage of Women in Exploration' conference at the Royal Geographical Society. I am a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and take very great pride in becoming a Fellow of the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust.

REFUGEE OR ASYLUM SEEKER?

Refugees and asylum seekers have the same fundamental rights to safety and protection as any other person. The fact that their citizenship status may not have been resolved does not alter this. Refugees have fled their countries because they are at risk of human rights violations, danger and persecution. In the UK, the term '**refugee**' describes a person whose asylum claim has been approved by the Home Office. **Asylum-seekers** in the UK are seeking refugee status, but have not yet been legally recognised as refugees. Both refugees and people seeking asylum are likely to have suffered violence, torture or inhuman and degrading treatment. **Migrants** are people staying outside their country of origin who are not asylum-seekers or refugees. In this report I generally use refugee as a general term for both asylum seekers and refugees.

INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

The Gift of Language

The gift of language is a practical response to one of the world's most tragic humanitarian crises - the global flight of refugees. It is one of the most valuable contributions that we can make to people who have fled war, persecution and violence. Language skills are the key enabler to do other things necessary to rebuild a life in a new country. A common language fosters understanding between people of different cultures and unites communities. I believe it is key to the WCMT/Linbury Trust migration theme: 'living well together, strengthening cohesion and communication, tackling isolation and supporting community engagement.' Especially when the local community is involved.

Refugees and people seeking asylum who arrive in the UK often face prejudice and resentment as they enter a 'hostile' environment derived from insensitive policies. A shortage of the language courses essential to integration means that some refugees and asylum seekers must wait as long as three years to start. Without English classes, the common language that could bring communities together keeps them apart, further dividing Britain.

Some actions can only be taken by governments, but much can be achieved by volunteers to assist those who have survived such devastating inhumanity. This report illustrates how we can harness the volunteer culture in the UK – unlock the skills and expertise within communities -- on behalf of asylum-seekers and refugees to address gaps in English-language learning. It sets out the benefits to language students, but also to volunteers who gain a sense of purpose, a cultural awareness and knowledge that we can be part of the solution. The 'with' in the Language of Friendship: Refugees Learning *with* Locals means that learning is reciprocal. It is a two-way 'street' that leads the way to integration.



Blue Refugee Center, THESSALONIKI

Through accounts of international and community initiatives, the report describes how volunteers are offering the 'language of friendship' to refugees, people seeking asylum and migrants in Greece and Ireland. Their voices -- and the voices of leaders, activists and officials -- can be 'heard' throughout these pages.

I chose to follow the refugee journey from the tense frontline on the tiny Greek island of Samos over to mainland Greece and Ireland where they are attempting to rebuild their lives.

I wanted to see first-hand how language learning could be delivered amid the devastation of a refugee camp where thousands of people live in tents clinging to hillsides with no sanitation, no health services and limited access to water. I was keen to meet the volunteers responding to this crisis who have travelled across the world (USA, UK, Germany, France, Italy etc) to the island 'hot spot' of Samos. (Samos Volunteers). Across the Aegean Sea in Athens and Thessaloniki, I choose to visit trailblazing organisations (SolidarityNow, Sunday School for Migrants, Open School of Migrants) recognised as inspiring models of best practice by international organisations. Across Europe in Ireland, Fáilte Isteach is also internationally recognised for its success in engaging local volunteers to provide free, quality language lessons.

Travelling to Greece and Ireland provided opportunities to contrast governmental responses to the refugee crisis, and compare them with the UK's approach. While Irish authorities strive to create a welcoming environment for asylum seekers and refugees through local and national initiatives, the newly-elected Greek government has introduced strict, and often inhumane, measures to discourage refugees. Indeed, reports in August 2020 state that Greece is illegally sending thousands of migrants back out to sea.

Field visits reassured me that when it comes to sharing our language, we need not set limits on what can be achieved even in the most challenging circumstances. English lessons can be delivered amid the inhumane chaos of a Greek refugee camp where learning represents hope and a future. On the other side of Europe, free lessons are taking place in Irish community centres and libraries where local people gather to welcome refugees and asylum seekers through the gift of language. In both of these situations, volunteers are essential; big budgets are not.

My aim was to document the best practice in both countries to explore what can be adapted for use in the UK. In Greece, I spent three weeks 'on the frontline', as a researcher and language volunteer on Samos, in one of Europe's most deplorable refugee camps. In the coastal town of Thessaloniki in northern Greece, I volunteered at SolidarityNow's Blue Refugee Center for two weeks. A side trip to Athens provided insight into two independent volunteer-run 'schools' that have offered free language lessons to migrants for more than 15 years. From Thessaloniki I made my way up the coast to Kavala to see community engagement in action on behalf of refugee families.

I travelled to Ireland to learn the 'secret' behind one small project that has generated 132 community groups providing 96,000 hours of free language lessons. A project of Third Age Ireland, Fáilte Isteach (Welcome In) inspires some 1,200 volunteers, mainly retired, to use their English skills to pave the way for asylum-seekers, refugees and migrants into local communities.

From the outset I was aware that Fáilte Isteach in Ireland would offer the answers and experiences most applicable to the UK. By visiting Greece as well, I gained a deeper understanding of frontline services and the desperation and determination of asylum seekers and refugees to learn the language of the countries where they hope to begin new lives. My findings on Samos, in Thessaloniki, Kavala and Athens are essential to my recommendations, but the model that could most easily be adapted to meet needs in the UK is Fáilte Isteach.

Time and time again, in Greece and in Ireland, the crucial role that language plays in integration was demonstrated. My key recommendations are followed by key advice for group coordinators and volunteers.



Recommendations

1. Understand and honour the rights of asylum seekers and refugees to language learning and other services. Dismantle the hostile environment that fuels prejudice between fellow human beings. Make integration a shared responsibility across society.
2. Adapt the Fáilte Isteach model for use in the UK.
3. Contribute to the Mayor of London's Strategy for Social Integration by strengthening English language learning opportunities in the capital.
4. Don't set limits on what can be achieved. In Greece, language lessons continue against a backdrop of poverty, hunger and hopelessness. In Ireland, what started as one local group offering English conversation has blossomed into 132 groups who reach out to more than 3,200 asylum seekers, refugees and migrants. As anthropologist Margaret Mead once said: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

Advice

1. *Rights-based.* A rights-based approach upholds dignity and equality.
2. *Recruitment and management.* Stringent volunteer recruitment, induction and training are vital, including training on safeguarding.
3. *Support.* Language lessons often go hand-in-hand with meeting with basic needs like food, medical care and advice on crucial issues like accommodation. This can often be achieved through partnerships.
4. *Sensitivity.* People seeking asylum and refugees face many challenges. Cultural sensitivity, patience and understanding are needed.
5. *Community connections.* Community engagement bridges cultures and fosters integration. Collaboration can enhance opportunities for asylum seekers and refugees.
6. *Setting.* Welcoming spaces create an encouraging learning environment.
7. *Focus.* Practical language learning for everyday life is key. Involving students in how they learn gives them a voice as well as a sense of responsibility.
8. *Sharing cultures.* Introducing UK lifestyles and culture through lessons and field trips helps learners understand their new country. Equally, sharing cultures and lifestyles from their countries of origin instils a sense of identity and pride in newcomers.

CONTEXT AND CHALLENGES

World migration crisis

“The world is now witnessing the highest levels of displacement on record.”

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)



The 'jungle', home to 6,500 refugees. SAMOS

As a result of conflict or persecution, one person is forcibly displaced roughly every two seconds. At least 70.8 million people around the world have been forced to flee their homes. Among them are nearly 25.9 million refugees and 3.5 million asylum seekers -- the highest level ever recorded, according to the latest figures from UNHCR. War, violence and human rights violations continue to force people to seek safety in Europe. Many risk their lives to escape, and some lose them. In 2019 there were 70 deaths by drowning.

UNHCR figures show that in the first five months of 2020 alone, 23,658 people arrived in Europe seeking sanctuary. In many cases, they face resentment, discrimination and life in appalling camps. The prejudice against refugees is fuelled by policies and regulations that create a hostile environment, turning them into people without voices or human rights.

UK Government's approach to migration and integration

“Despite a national interest in the integration of migrants, the UK does not have a national strategy on integration.”

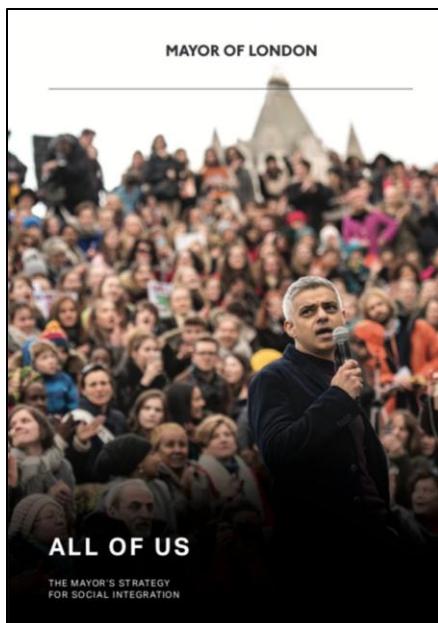
European Commission's European Web Site on Integration

Latest UNHCR statistics show there were 126,720 refugees, 45,244 pending asylum cases and 125 stateless persons in the UK which accounts for one quarter of a percent (0.26%) of our total population.

Measures in the Immigration Acts of 2014 and 2016 and related policies have created a 'hostile environment' for migrants with irregular immigration status. The policies seek to limit access to housing, health care, bank accounts, language lessons and driving licences for those without permission to be in the UK. Asylum seekers are not permitted to work.

These policy measures can lead to unwarranted discrimination. People seeking asylum and refugees are often confronted with barriers to becoming a part of, and contributing to, their UK communities. Delays in processing asylum applications have increased, leaving asylum seekers in limbo – unable to work and too often not supported to learn English.

Learning English is considered essential for social integration yet there is also no UK-wide strategy to guide language learning in the UK. The very diverse needs of refugees in the UK are not being met in relation to English language learning, according to research conducted at the University of Sussex for a policy briefing: *English Language for Resettled Refugees*, (2017).



London-wide approach to integration

“A common language is necessary for a common life.”
Mayor of London Sadiq Khan

One in three Londoners was born outside the UK, and more than 300 languages are spoken on the streets. This is considered a great strength for the city, enabling London to play a leading role in the global economy. But, says Mayor of London Sadiq Khan, a common language is necessary for a common life. *All of Us: The Mayor's Strategy for Social Integration* (left, March 2018 and an update in February 2020) calls for improved provision of English language training and support for learners. Many find themselves locked out of language learning, stuck at a basic level, and unable to progress to a level that would support their independence and integration. This is due to huge funding cuts that have slashed capacity within the

ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) sector, the Mayor's strategy states. Promoting English classes is a part of the Mayor of London's policy to bring Londoners together. For my Fellowship, I liaised with the Mayor's Social Integration Team in the Communities and Social Policy Unit at the Greater London Authority.

Language for integration

“Learning English is essential to life and work in this country and people see huge benefits when they can speak our language fluently.” Robert Jenrick, Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, March 2020

Aside from providing vital communication skills, English language programmes help to build the social networks and support that limit the isolation and challenges of adapting to a new culture. A YouGov poll in April 2019 found that 91 percent of the adult population in Great Britain believes that it is important for refugees in the UK to speak English.

Shortage of English classes

“Improving access to English lessons is vital for a less divided Britain. All too often, refugees can’t access the English classes they need due to government funding cuts.”

Refugee Action

Language provision is not meeting the needs of many refugees who desperately need to learn English. Some wait up to three years to access classes. Underfunding over the past decade has left colleges and other providers struggling to meet demand, according to research by Refugee Action. Charities and community groups, like Speak Street and Islington Centre for Refugees and Migrants where I volunteer, are stepping in to support refugees and asylum-seekers to learn English and make new friends.

New language, new life



- Learning the language is central to a new beginning and goes hand in hand with adapting to a new culture.
 - It is important to understand the importance of language for refugees and its effect on their resilience and integration.
 - Learning a language together fosters integration enabling individuals and communities to engage in meaningful dialogue.
 - Language strengthens community relationships. It is important when refugees and communities come together to learn.
- Language learning promotes social and life skills that are necessary for building relationships to integrate into new communities/countries.
 - Language classes can serve as safe, shared spaces where belonging to a group (class membership) can reduce divisions between the local community and refugees and between refugees themselves.

Language for Resilience: Cross-disciplinary perspectives on the role of language in enhancing the resilience of refugees and host communities The British Council (2018)

AIMS OF MY FELLOWSHIP

1. Document community-based innovations and best practice to address the barriers to integration caused by the critical shortage of English classes in the UK to:

- Help those seeking sanctuary to access their rights and rebuild their lives in the UK.
- Create a welcoming, not hostile, environment for refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants.
- Unite communities through language learning initiatives with local volunteers.
- Demonstrate that community language initiatives benefit not only learners; but also local volunteers, with a focus on retired people.

2. Provide a framework for expanding language services that can be adapted and used by community groups across the UK.

Why? Through my volunteer work in London, I know the vital role language plays on the path towards integration. Linking people seeking sanctuary with community initiatives and local volunteers can be a win-win formula for all.

1. Asylum seekers and refugees benefit from the welcoming support of long-term, skilled volunteers from within their communities.

2. Volunteers benefit from a sense of purpose and community involvement, and the opportunity to share their experience and expertise.

3. Local initiatives in London like Speak Street and Islington Centre for Refugees and Migrants benefit from a skilled, dependable, long-term volunteer team. With a sustainable bank of volunteers, coordinators can spend more time on quality learning and scaling their initiatives instead of constantly recruiting and training volunteers.

4. Organisations like the University of the Third Age can provide their members with meaningful activities and opportunities that utilise and value their lifetime skills.

How? 1. Learn first-hand through the work and examples of best practice from citizen's initiatives in Greece and Ireland. Collect practical language learning materials, methods and ideas that can be implemented in the UK.

2. Explore how the Fáilte Isteach conversational English programme in Ireland can be adapted for use in the UK.

METHODOLOGY

In the research for my application, I identified pioneering initiatives most relevant to my project aims. All were commended for their 'best practice' work and innovation by authorities including the European Economic and Social Council, the European Commission's European Web Site on Integration and the British Council.

Greece



I made visits to eight organisations in four locations to gain an understanding of:

1. mobilising and managing language volunteers on the frontline of the migration crisis
2. effective teaching methods in the field, often in challenging environments
3. liaising with communities managing large numbers of refugees
4. how migration – particularly traumatic journeys and detentions – impact the lives of the asylum seekers and refugees who make it to the UK.

I gained first-hand experience at Samos Volunteers (three weeks) and the SolidarityNow's Blue Refugee Center in Thessaloniki (two weeks). On Samos, I spent time at Banana House (a project of Help Refugees) and Mazí School (a project of Still I Rise). In Athens I visited three organisations -- SolidarityNow headquarters, Open School of Immigrants and Sunday School for Migrants. From Thessaloniki, I travelled to Kavala to visit Northern Lights Aid. At each site, I interviewed field staff, volunteers and language learners.

Ireland



I spent two weeks in Ireland travelling to ten Fáilte Isteach groups – each with different approaches. I was guided by FI programme director Liam Carey who accompanied me to six of the sites. I attended a volunteer training session with FI development officer Claire Dalton in Dún Laoghaire. In each location, I carried out interviews with volunteers and learners.

LOCATIONS AND FINDINGS

Situation in GREECE

The closure of the 'Balkan route' to Europe and the EU-Turkey Agreement in March 2016 transformed Greece from a 'transit' country to a nation hosting a growing population of newcomers. Alongside ongoing financial pressures, the integration of newly-arrived asylum seekers and refugees is one of the biggest challenges that Greek society faces.

In 2019, an average of 200 asylum seekers arrived daily in Greece. Of the 74,613 asylum seekers fleeing here in 2019, 80 percent landed on one of the islands, including Samos where I undertook my Fellowship. Up to 100,000 asylum seekers from Turkey are expected to arrive in 2020.

Greece has become a 'holding pen' for people seeking asylum, with thousands stuck in detention centres on the islands. After risking their lives to escape, asylum seekers are forced into dangerously overcrowded camps with little or no shelter, food, sanitation, medical care, dignity or hope. During the asylum process, they may be transferred to slightly better conditions on the mainland, but that will likely be where they stay. It is illegal to travel to another EU country despite the fact that many wish to reunite with family elsewhere in Europe. From 2019, the new government has enacted even more stringent asylum laws which have seen the evictions hundreds of vulnerable families from camps, and thousands of refugees being sent back out to sea in 2020.

On the ground on SAMOS

"The situation regarding the reception and the living conditions of asylum seekers ... in Samos is out of control and diminishes every concept of human dignity."

Greek National Commission for Human Rights, 2019



SAMOS 'jungle'

At its closest point, the tiny island of Samos lies barely two kilometres off the coast of Turkey. This makes it a favoured destination for people smugglers who heedlessly overfill rubber dinghies with men, women and children desperate enough to take the risk. Once they reach the shores of the island, they are faced with a barricade of denied human rights.

They have risked their lives to flee war and persecution, only to find the hell that exists on Samos where more than 6,500 (and counting) struggle to survive in a transit camp for 648. Thousands of makeshift tents and shelters crowd the hills surrounding the camp, spilling down into Samos town, also known as Vathy. Tension, violence, hunger and disease are a feature of daily life in this camp where the average waiting time is six months, with peaks of two years. This is the hidden humanitarian crisis haunting camps across Europe.

A network of volunteer-led NGOs attempt to fill the huge gap in basic services on Samos. They collaborate to provide tents, food, water, medical care, education and support. As part of my Fellowship, I joined Samos Volunteers to assist with English courses and meeting basic needs on this tormented island. If frontline volunteers can deliver English classes amid this inhumane chaos, then language learning can take place anywhere. The classes, along with other courses, activities and humanitarian services are delivered by a team of international volunteers working together in response to the refugee crisis.

Samos Volunteers: Tools for the job for volunteers

“Offering empowerment through language is exciting and crucial in our daily work.”
Sarah Soliman, SV volunteer



An independent NGO, Samos Volunteers (SV) draws people from across the world to work together on behalf of people caught in one of history's worst humanitarian crises. While there, I shared duties with volunteers from America, Italy, Denmark, The Netherlands, the UK, Ireland, Germany as well as local volunteers from the camp who fled to Samos from Syria, Afghanistan and other war-torn nations.

By offering educational classes and recreational activities, SV aims to combat boredom, reduce isolation, and instil a sense of normality and dignity to the lives of those trapped on the island. Down the road from the camp, SV's Alpha Centre provides some 100 classes a week, with a focus on practical language skills. Most classes are in English, but Greek, French and German lessons are also available along with music, sewing, IT and fitness. Classes give people a daily routine amongst the chaos and uncertainty of the camp, and the exasperating asylum process. They gain skills to take with them when they eventually leave, particularly the language of their new host country.

Alpha Centre, where I volunteered, is an important information point to signpost people to medical and legal help, and vital services offered by other NGOs. It is also a space where people can drink tea, play board games, charge their phones and rest. A Women's Space is located in the basement. On Saturdays, Alpha is open for women and children only.

Around the corner from Alpha, SV's laundry station is the only place people in the camp can get their clothes washed and dried. With these projects, SV supports asylum seekers during this step along their traumatic journeys. SV relies entirely on the time and determination of volunteers. Teams of three-to-five volunteers work five shifts a day, for six days a week, to welcome hundreds of people to the centre. Some 4,000 cups of tea are served each week, evidence of the numbers welcomed by the Alpha Centre.

Findings: Samos Volunteers



a volunteer handbook and a Code of Conduct, a summary of policies, standards of behaviour, rights and responsibilities that apply to volunteers.

2. A comprehensive induction including training is essential to prepare volunteers for job responsibilities, sensitise them to the situation on Samos, and make them feel valued and part of a team.

3. Despite good intentions, untrained volunteers can cause harm to the very people they are trying to help. When working with vulnerable and traumatised people, it is possible to form unhealthy reliance or ties, unintentionally raise expectations and spur trauma. People who have lost so much already cannot afford to be let down by volunteers.

4. Safeguarding guidelines and accompanying training is mandatory for the benefit of both asylum seekers and volunteers. Safeguarding guidelines are measures to protect the health, well-being and human rights of individuals.

5. Ongoing training offers an opportunity to update volunteers, allow them to share their experiences and ask questions. SV provided mandatory additional training on topics like positive relationships, first aid and other relevant subjects. The entire team meets weekly for announcements, feedback and presentations on topical issues.

6. SV asks volunteers to manage their expectations about what can be achieved: "We cannot 'save' anyone or change the situation people face - but the small things we do make a big difference to people's lives. However it often feels like not enough - it is important to be aware that we cannot do everything we would want to do, but showing our support and respect still means a lot."

7. Addressing the well-being of volunteers in traumatic environments is important. Volunteers should understand what to do and who to contact if they are distressed or struggling. An SV field officer charged with well-being meets regularly with volunteers to monitor their welfare. When a volunteer is preparing to return home, a final meeting is held where contacts and resources are provided to mitigate any potential stress that could follow. It is also important for volunteers in the UK to know that they can get support for distress that can arise from working closely with people who have suffered trauma and intense hardship.

1. A stringent recruitment process pays off in talented and motivated volunteers ready to 'hit the ground running.' SV sets out requirements (minimum commitment time, minimum age, necessary skills) and expectations (six-day work week, etc) so that potential volunteers are fully aware of the commitment they will undertake. Working with SV is not 'voluntourism'. Roles and responsibilities are detailed in

Banana House/Action for Education: Welcome in every language

“I love Banana House because I can learn languages and there are good teachers. We are happy in Banana House because we can make friends.” Nabil, 19*



You can't miss Banana House. Swathed in swirling tropical colours – turquoise, lemon, orange and lime – this former kindergarten in the heart of Samos town is a haven for young adults from the camp to learn English and Greek. Prohibited from attending the local schools, they come to Banana House for classes, showers, meals, recreational activities and friendship.

At Banana House, as with other centres, it is vital to combine opportunities for learning with services to meet basic needs for food, hygiene, well-being and companionship. The centre is run by a team of 10 international volunteers and 30 volunteers from the refugee camp. They share responsibility for teaching, cooking, management and student welfare.

Hugged by the banana tree fronds that provided its name, the house has three classrooms, a kitchen, a chill-out room, showers and a large garden. In no less than a dozen languages, 'welcome' is painted in a rainbow of colours above the door in the entrance hall. Team photos of the staff decorate one hall wall; a Banana News bulletin board flanks the other.

Banana House is open Monday to Friday for 18-23 year olds and welcomes some 180 students a day. On Sundays, sessions for under-18s and women and girls are offered.

*Name changed to protect identity.

Findings: Banana House/Action for Education

1. In desperate circumstances, centres offering language lessons have a vital role to play in helping to meet the basic needs for food, advice, support and links to other crucial services. This applies in refugee camps and in all language centres reaching out to vulnerable people, including in the UK. This type of support creates a sense of community, encourages attendance and makes it easier for students to be able to focus on studies. Already challenging, learning a new language when you are hungry, homeless, distraught, isolated and/or depressed – can be overwhelming.

2. Although informal language learning can take place wherever there is space – on the ground, under a tent, in a basement or cafe -- bright welcoming premises like Banana House create an exciting and encouraging environment for learning. This is the case for all places of learning, but especially important for students living in challenging conditions.

Mazí/Still I Rise: Learning together against the odds

“If we treated refugees like humans, they would give everything they could, because we gave them a second chance.” Giulia Cicoli, Advocacy and Programme Director

Mazí is an informal school programme for boys and girls 11 to 17 living amid the horror of the camp. In Greek, mazí means together, the word around which the school revolves.



Everyone works together – students, teachers, volunteers, supporters -- to ensure educational opportunities to refugees who have no access to schooling. At the bottom of the camp's tent-strewn hills, Mazí opens its doors Monday to Friday for classes, and Saturdays for free-time activities. School starts at

8.45 am and ends at 6 pm. Students attend English, Greek, history, geography, current affairs, maths and biology classes. They can also choose from courses in computer science, art, carpentry, music, dance, photography, theatre, fitness and meditation. Breakfast and lunch are served. Mazí welcomes 150 boys and girls from the many ethnic groups trapped in the camp. In just two years, the school has created a replicable model that alleviates the trauma and deprivation suffered by students and gives them a chance to succeed in the future. Waiting lists for the school are tragically long.

Findings: Mazí/Still I Rise

1. There is no limit to what can be achieved even in the direst circumstances. On the rim of one of Europe's most shocking refugee camps, Mazí is bringing education and hope to 150 young people thanks to those – including volunteers -- who created the school.
2. Involving students in the running of their school gives them a voice as well as a sense of responsibility and pride. When everyone associated with the school works together, it can make good management even better.
3. Set the bar high. Establish very clear rules about what is acceptable and what is not so that all members of the school community can understand and follow them.

PROFILE

Giulia Cicoli, Still I Rise/ Mazí **She Came for a Year and Committed a Lifetime**



"Every day I read news of Syrians, destroyed by the war, who continued to arrive on the Greek islands and then remained blocked for years. Dead at sea, desperate mothers, children with nothing. How could I stand and watch all of this while nobody really did anything? And then, after two masters' degrees and seven years of work in corporate training in Milan, I made my decision: I left everything - home, boyfriend and work. At first, I thought I was only staying for a year, teaching

English and sorting clothes to distribute in the refugee camp. I didn't know then that this would become my life. After a few months on Samos I met two other volunteers like me, Nicolò and Sarah. Together we decided we would help the most vulnerable. Refugee children in hotspots in Greece do not have access to school. There was no organization that looked after boys aged 12 to 17, many of whom come here alone. So we founded Still I Rise, our NGO, and opened Mazí.

Mazí is the place where our students can go back to living their age. The goal is to restore the rights of every child. I came to Samos because I wanted to help more unfortunate people than me; never would I have imagined learning so much from them and from the incredible colleagues I have been lucky to work with these years."



English class at Blue Refugee Center, THESSALONIKI

On the ground in THESSALONIKI

Thessaloniki has a centuries-old history of providing refuge to those fleeing conflict and persecution. The Greeks refer to this port city in northern Greece as the 'Mother of Migration.' Today Thessaloniki hosts asylum seekers and refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Turkey, as well as Asian and African countries in seven camps. In Greece as a whole, asylum seekers and refugees number some 115,600, with around 16,000 in Thessaloniki and the surrounding area.

Some refugees use Thessaloniki as a transit city where they stay while preparing to attempt to travel to other European countries. Others see Thessaloniki as a permanent home and seek to integrate into Greek society.

To address the needs of the growing population staying on the Greek mainland, NGOs like SolidarityNow and its Blue Refugee Center offer services including Greek and English language courses. For those striving to move on to other European locations, lessons in German and French are available.

Thessaloniki Solidarity Center: Multi-services for multi needs

"In the end, the final destination -- communications and living -- comes from language." Domniki Georgopoulou, Education Coordinator of Northern Greece



The Thessaloniki Solidarity Center is a hub providing educational opportunities, healthcare and social support services, employment and legal aid to disadvantaged groups who live in and around this coastal city. Services are free and available to all those in need. The centre's main focus is on poverty alleviation and social

integration for those most affected by the crises facing Greece – the economic downfall and the influx of newcomers. It specialises in integration measures, such as educational programmes and employment assistance, that strengthen communication and build cohesion among Greek nationals, asylum seekers and refugees.

"We want to offer language that is useful on a day to day basis," says Domniki Georgopoulou. "We tie language lessons to the communications goals of the students." Language teaching in SolidarityNow centres and refugee camps is practical with visits to local sites to introduce 'real life' situations that their beneficiaries will likely encounter.

Findings: Thessaloniki Solidarity Center

1. Students should be involved in determining how they learn.
2. Practical language that students can use in daily life is essential.

Blue Refugee Center: A hub of hope and learning

“Language opens the door to a new world.” Yusef*, student advanced English



People from 41 countries attend the Blue Refugee Center which opened in Thessaloniki in 2016 as part of SolidarityNow's work in Northern Greece. There they can access education and employment programmes, attend social and recreation events, and exchange information and experiences. The

Blue Refugee Center provides legal, social and psychological support, care for mothers, and child-friendly spaces.

The centre's information hub offers links and referrals to services such as legal advice, document translation, computer and Skype access, and a peer to peer helpline. Interpreters of Urdu, Farsi, Kurdish, Arabic, French and Turkish are available for translation.

Starting as a walk-in location open to all, the centre soon found it necessary to introduce registration and an appointments system to reduce over-crowding (250 people a day), diffuse tensions and ensure individuals got the services they needed. One hundred people a day now use the centre, one-third of them are women. The reception area offers computer stations; and movies are shown on a large screen surrounded by sofas to make waiting less tiresome. After school, around 60-70 children enjoy activities at the centre.

Centre English teacher Mohamed 'Mo' Ali Abu Marsa knows first-hand what it's like to be an asylum-seeker. Fleeing from Gaza City in Palestine, Mo landed at the Nea Kavala refugee camp, not far from the Macedonian border in Greece. While awaiting asylum, he taught English in the camp. Although his English is fluent, Mo had to learn Greek. "There is no doubt that language is the best way to integrate into society," he says.

Mo later moved to Thessaloniki and joined the SolidarityNow team. I worked with him during my two weeks at the centre. His first aim is to help students achieve a language level that will allow them to build relations with local people. He designs lessons that introduce Greek culture, values and way of life. While I was there topics included Greek food and recipes; and dishes from his students' home countries. Every two weeks, Mo takes his classes on field trips to museums, markets, galleries and landmarks so they can become acquainted with Thessaloniki. "I want students to have a relationship with their city," he says.

Even if they plan to stay in Greece, centre students told me they are keen to learn English, the 'international language', to improve their chances for employment. While many at the centre live in Thessaloniki, some students travel on up to three buses in two-hour journeys just to attend lessons.

*Name changed to protect identity

Findings: Blue Refugee Center

1. All students deserve high quality language learning, even in difficult environments.
2. Where there is a huge demand for language classes and other services, which is often the case, it can be necessary to introduce a registration system to reduce over-crowding. Turning people away until the next registration is hard for coordinators and deeply disappointing to those who wish to access services, but sadly it is sometimes essential.
3. Field trips to introduce students to local landmarks and cultural offerings are important learning tools in the path to integration.
4. Refugees and people seeking asylum face many challenges that sometimes make it hard for them to focus in the classroom. Sensitivity and judgement is needed to determine how and when to engage students that are clearly stressed.

On the ground in KAVALA



About 100 miles west along the coast from Thessaloniki, the picturesque seaport of Kavala is a commercial centre known for its tourism and fishing. Just outside the centre, the Perigialo refugee camp houses asylum seekers mainly from Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq. While I was there in November 2019, the camp population doubled to almost 1,000 when families were transferred in from transit camps across Greece.

Northern Lights Aid: Cultivating goodwill at the heart of the community

“I didn’t agree with the way Europe was handling this crisis. You have to do what you believe is right.”

Alexandra Zosso, programme manager



An harbour draped with a banner of colourful hand-sewn flags welcomes visitors to the Northern Lights Aid (NLA) community garden outside the premises of this Norwegian Greek-based NGO that serves the Perigialo refugee camp. Twenty-nine different plants, vegetables and herbs grow on this former overgrown, rubbish-strewn wasteland. But the garden created from scratch by NLA volunteers and those it serves is nurturing more than flowers and shrubs – it is cultivating community integration. Open to all, the garden invites interaction between local people and camp residents who come to relax, picnic and play amid its roses, vegetable patches, floral borders and bird baths. There is a barbecue and a picnic table too.

“The garden has created good feelings and good will,” says NLA programme manager Alex Zosso. Garden parties and afternoon teas are held here to welcome local people and introduce them to NLA and its participants. By connecting with the community, Alex has created a ‘network of helping’ among businesses, officials and neighbours.

Walking distance from the Perigiali camp, NLA provides daily English classes, a mother and baby programme, and a free clothing and shoe store open to anyone who needs it. During 2019, NLA received over 1,000 people, providing them with supplies, education, respite and emotional support. It could not be done without a team of international volunteers – about 50 a year – and volunteers from Perigiali camp to run the programmes.

Anna Dirks, NLA volunteer teaching coordinator from London, works hard to make her English lessons fun. Apart from being “a valuable tool for their future,” the classes are an escape from the camp and their situation, she says. The average class size is 27. Managing the different abilities of the students can be tricky, Anna says. “But the people make it worth it. I love the feeling I get at the end of the lesson when I see all of their smiles,” says Anna.

Findings: Northern Lights Aid



Alex Zosso in the community garden
KAVALA

1. Community initiatives -- like NLA's open garden and events -- unite asylum seekers and local people. The community garden paints a positive image of NLA and the people it serves, builds goodwill and opens opportunities for people to come together in a safe and beautiful space.

2. Programme manager Alex maps the different actors' in the area – businesses, neighbours, local officials –and keeps in touch with them to create a

network of helping and goodwill. She meets with the mayor of Kavala once a year and has regular interactions with police, hospitals, social services and churches to see how they can help each other. Donations to NLA that are not relevant to its needs are shared out to others who can use them – local schools, the Scouts, other organisations. For example, when NLA receives donations of blankets, those not suitable are given to the local animal shelter to be made into beds for dogs and cats. Reciprocity is a powerful tool.

On the ground in ATHENS



One of the world's oldest cities, Athens is the largest in Greece and the site of its capital. Challenged by a relentless recession, Athens also struggles with a constant influx of asylum seekers. The port of Piraeus, second largest in the world, is a major destination for people fleeing war and persecution. Three refugee camps are situated in outlying areas and dozens of NGOs assisting asylum seekers and

refugees are based in Athens. The three organisations I visited are located in the city centre (SolidarityNow), the port of Piraeus (Open School of Immigrants) and Kolonos in northwest Athens (Sunday School for Migrants).

SolidarityNow: Collaboration and partnerships for change

“The numbers of asylum seekers keep rising, the only difference is that the European news media doesn't cover it anymore.”

Marianna Kallipoliti, Grants and Volunteer Manager



SolidarityNow (SN) founded in 2013, works across Greece in urban and rural settings, and in 14 refugee camps, to support the most vulnerable populations. Collaborating with more than 70 organisations, including humanitarian agencies (UNHCR, UNICEF, CARE International) and public bodies, SN implements a range of programmes

including educational and social inclusion, accommodation, and access to employment. Three centres – one in Athens and two in Thessaloniki (see pages 17-19) – offer services responding to the ongoing refugee crisis, providing access to basic health services and food aid, defending human rights and freedoms, and supporting the integration of minorities and vulnerable groups.

Findings: SolidarityNow

1. Working in partnership with other organisations, humanitarian agencies and civil society allows SN to reach the broadest range of beneficiaries, especially vulnerable populations. Collaboration has enabled SN to assist over 300,000 beneficiaries, provide 24,000 free services, and support 10,000 non-formal education activities – in six years.
2. SN values and actively recruits volunteers for its programmes -- from Greece and internationally -- to achieve its goals.
3. Volunteers must take into account cultural differences to avoid misunderstandings.

Open School of Immigrants: R is for Rights

“We believe education is a human right. Documents don't matter.”

Nikos Agapakis, founder



The Open School of Immigrants aims to:

1. meet the need for immigrants to learn Greek
2. provide legal support
3. address issues of racial violence
4. contribute to a better coexistence between Greeks and migrants through mutual learning and acceptance of differences.

Launched in 2015 by humanitarian teachers, the school has been run by volunteers from the start. The protection of human rights underpins its work, with a focus on rights to education, health and employment. Volunteers promote integration through language and technology classes and cultural activities to acquaint newcomers with the history and art of Greece.

Forty-five classes in nine languages – Greek at all levels, English, Spanish, French, German, Italian, Turkish, Arabic and Urdu – are offered by forty-five teachers on Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays. With such a range of languages, local Greek people are welcome to join the classes. The school stands with immigrants against racism and prejudice, and helps them become equal members of Greek society.

It is not just about learning the ABCs, says Nikos Agapakis. “It is their school and they take responsibility for it. They feel comfortable here,” he says.



“We help students to maintain their dignity and self-esteem in the face of difficulties. We do not wish them to feel for a moment that they live in a hostile and inhospitable country.”

Open School of Immigrants, PIRAEUS

Findings: Open School of Immigrants

1. Human rights -- not compassion and pity – underpin the work at Open School for Immigrants. A rights-based approach is employed for all services on offer.
2. Host country culture is incorporated in language learning through visits and cultural activities to introduce students to Greek history and art.
3. By offering a range of languages, local Greek people are welcome to come and learn together with immigrants which helps to foster community cohesion.

Sunday School for Migrants: S is for Solidarity

‘No human is illegal.’ Athena Skampa, founding volunteer



The Sunday School for Migrants was launched in 2003 when immigrant and Greek volunteers united to offer free Greek language lessons to help newcomers settle. Since its establishment, the school has

been actively involved in Expel Racism, a social movement challenging discrimination and xenophobia, and protecting the rights of all asylum seekers, refugees and migrants. Expel Racism advocates: asylums for all refugees, legalisation of all immigrants, equal social and political rights for all, free movement for refugees, and the dissolution of fascist gangs.

The school is financially independent, relying entirely on contributions from supporters. Volunteers are teachers, university students and ‘all those who wish to uphold the rights of migrants and refugees’. Language classes in Greek (mainly), English, German and Spanish are held on Sundays. The school also provides legal support.



Athena Skampa

Athena Skampa has been a volunteer from the start. “We help our students to integrate with the Greek community. We have parties, meetings and a lot of activities around the school,” she says. Every year an Anti-Racist Festival with food, music, theatre and dancing is hosted by the school. The theme for 2019 was “Life without compromises, solidarity without exceptions”.

“Solidarity is critical,” Athena explains from the main classroom where five language classes are taking place simultaneously. Three neighbouring classrooms are also packed with students reading aloud, reciting and conversing in a boisterous symphony of learning.

Recruiting volunteers is not difficult, Athena says. “We don’t do anything special. It’s magical. They just come because they care.” Three volunteer teachers are assigned to each class. Students represent a range of ages and countries including Albania, Africa, Syria, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Turkey. At least 6,000 students have been served by some 700 volunteers since the Sunday School for Migrants was opened 17 years ago.



Sunday School for Migrants, ATHENS

Athanasia Tsaroucha volunteers as an administrator looking after enrolment. “We are all equal. There is a real connection with the people here. The hardest part is when they come to register and our classes are already full. Often we don’t have enough space, but we have a waiting list.”

Newcomers learn about the Sunday School mainly through ‘word of mouth.’ To protect them from potential racist incidents, the location of the school is not publicised.

Findings: Sunday School for Migrants

1. Language learning programmes can play a part in campaigns against racism and prejudice towards refugees fuelled by the hostile environments found in European countries.
2. A mix of nationalities and ages in classes benefits students because they can learn from each other and build bridges across cultures and generations.
3. Independent volunteer-run organisations for refugees and asylum seekers can be sustainable. The Sunday School for Migrants has been operating for 17 years.

PROFILE

Massoud*, Open School of Immigrants At Home in Athens after Fleeing Pakistan

"If you have a voice, they can hear you. If you have the language, you are one of them."



Massoud was just 16 when his parents paid smugglers to take him to Europe to escape the violence in his community in Pakistan. For many perilous days he fled overland across Pakistan, Iran and Turkey into Greece. Today at 32, he is at home in Athens working as an interpreter for UNHCR. But he remembers the treacherous journey as if it just happened. The smugglers promised Massoud's family that they would look after him; but he found himself

traversing fields and mountains on foot in the cold and dark with 25 others, often without food or water. "You have to do whatever the agents say. You have to hide your money, but they find it anyway," he says.

"I felt death in front of me many times," he says. "There are many risks when you are being smuggled, especially when crossing borders." At last they arrived in coastal city of Thessaloniki in northern Greece where Massoud fled from the traffickers and took a bus to Athens.

"When I got here, I just wanted to learn Greek," he says of his arrival in the nation's capital city. Within three years, he was fluent, thanks to the Open School of Immigrants. In fact, he is so fluent that he is often mistaken for a Greek national. Massoud's command of his host country's language sees him teaching Greek to refugees who risked their lives to come to Athens just like he did. He is helping them on their journey to integration from the same school where he started his. Massoud also teaches languages in prisons.

"It took time for me to stand on my own two feet. If you know the language it is the first tool you can use to you can claim your rights. You can share your personal problems and get support. The school helped me a lot," he says.

"If you have a voice, they can hear you. If you have the language, you are one of them."

*Name changed to protect identity.

Situation in IRELAND

“Language is recognised as the essential step towards successful integration of migrants and their families, ensuring they can reap the benefits of living in Ireland.”

David Stanton T.D. Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality with special responsibility for Equality, Immigration and Integration

There is a saying in Irish ‘céad míle fáilte’ which means "one hundred thousand welcomes", or "you are welcome, a thousand times, wherever you come from, whosoever you be." Ireland welcomed 88,600 immigrants in the year ending April 2019, according to latest the Population and Migration Estimates report from the Central Statistics Office (CSO). More than 500,000 non-Irish nationals from 200 different nations now live in Ireland. It was once named one of the world's best places to be an immigrant. Though inflows decreased after the recession of 2007-2009, they remain relatively high.

Migrant integration is seen as a key part of Ireland's renewal and as an underlying principle of Irish society. Ireland has a single national policy framework on integration to support migrants to participate fully in Irish life. The Office for the Promotion of Migrant Integration (OPMI), based in the Department of Justice and Equality, has a mandate to develop, lead and coordinate migrant integration policy across all government departments, agencies and services.

Acquisition of the English language is identified as a key need for integration in a country where one in 10 people speak a language other than Irish or English at home, according to CSO figures. Across Ireland, English language classes are delivered by government agencies (Education and Training Boards) private providers and NGOs like Fáilte Isteach, the focus of my Fellowship travels in Ireland. There is a call to invest more resources in language training for adults to advance prospects for employment and social interaction.

Ireland introduced an integration programme in 2015 for those arriving in the country through the EU relocation or resettlement schemes and accepted under the Irish Refugee Protection Programme which includes: language courses, civic education (cultural orientation) and vocational training. The programme also provides: accommodation in Emergency Reception and Orientation Centres known as direct provision, and housing once refugee status is confirmed; free childcare wherever possible to allow adults to attend the ‘Language and Orientation’ programme; a card entitling beneficiaries to free medical care in public hospitals as well as an assigned doctor, an assigned resettlement worker and an intercultural support worker.

Fáilte Isteach: Extending the hand of friendship through conversational English

“The volunteers benefit from a sense of value and making a contribution. The students benefit from improved language skills ... and a network and support group in their new home. And the community as a whole benefits from the improved level of integration that results.”

European Web Site on Integration, European Commission

Fáilte Isteach (Welcome In) is a community-based project involving older volunteers welcoming migrants through conversational English classes. It is at the forefront of improving integration in Ireland by

extending the hands of friendship and goodwill through free, practical and welcoming language classes.

The project was developed in October 2006 in response to the observed difficulties that newcomers without English experienced in integrating into communities. Without English, managing everyday activities is a challenge. Fáilte Isteach (FI) classes are tailored to meet participants' needs through free English sessions to improve language skills and get help with practical exercises like form filling, writing CVs and drafting letters. Help is also offered for managing other day-to-day tasks such as making appointments, shopping, banking and generally interacting with the community. The focus is on an informal, relaxed approach to learning that brings people together – including the most marginalised in society – to integrate into life in Ireland.

Now in its 14th year, FI has grown from a rural project to a national initiative present in 104 communities, with 132 groups nationwide, including six in direct provision centres where people seeking asylum are housed while their claims for refugee status are processed. Some 1,200 FI volunteers deliver over 96,000 hours of free tuition annually to some 3,200 immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees. Fáilte Isteach is run on a meagre budget of €100,000 by two employees, one is part-time. Programme manager Liam Carey estimates that the nation gets a return on investment of €4 million.

Tutored entirely by volunteers, FI groups welcome participants to their communities, identify needs through conversation and focus primarily on fluency and building confidence. The classes also recognise the sometimes overlooked skills and potential of older volunteers from Third Age Ireland who make Fáilte Isteach a reality. The median age of volunteer coordinators is 56; the oldest volunteer is 87, according to Liam Carey.

Local organisations and individuals across Ireland wishing to set up and coordinate conversational English classes are supported by the project. All of the necessary training and teaching material is provided to establish a group. Ongoing support, refresher training and updated resources are available to FI groups nationwide.

Fáilte Isteach aims to:

- provide the necessary language skills to migrants in a student-centred, welcoming and inclusive manner.
- establish a network of Fáilte Isteach groups in communities throughout Ireland.
- involve older volunteer tutors and recognise their skills, expertise and contribution to the community.
- promote greater integration and achieve a new sense of community spirit, by forging new friendships and facilitating learning among and about different cultures.

Fáilte Isteach has received a number of awards including:
The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) Civil Society Prize (2015)
Lifelong Learning Award (2016)
Social Entrepreneurs Awards (2007 and 2008)
European Web Site on Integration listing of good practice organisations.

Three of the 10 Fáilte Isteach groups I visited are highlighted here: University College Dublin, Galway and Portlaoise.

On the ground in **DUBLIN**

In the last 15 years, Ireland has become more ethnically diverse, nowhere more than in its capital city. The foreign-born population represents 20 percent of the Dublin Region's total population. Since

2014, Dublin has been a City of Sanctuary, part of a movement to build a culture of safety and hospitality for refugees and asylum seekers. The city hosts 27 Fáilte Isteach groups in community centres, schools, libraries, and a university.

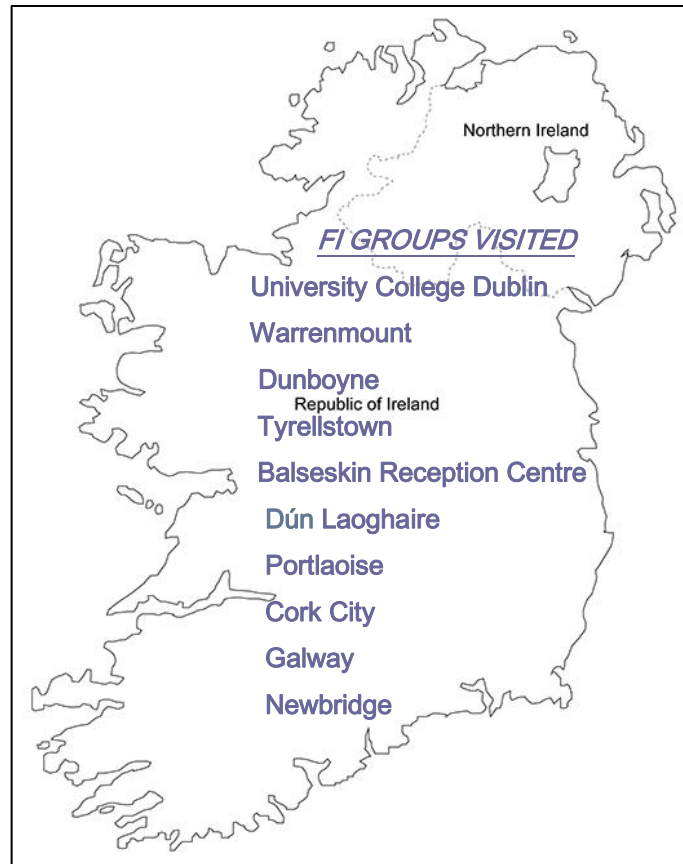
University College Dublin: Students are the teachers here

"In a world where millions face forced migration, we are faced with a choice; to help or to ignore the situation. We have been known worldwide as a nation who takes humanitarian action... We have been welcomed into countries as migrants when times were tough in Ireland. It is now time to extend our Céad Míle Fáilte (a thousand welcomes) to those most in need."

FáilteRefugees student-led campaign

Every Monday night in the Innovation Academy on the campus of University College Dublin (UCD), student volunteers interrupt their studies to provide conversational English classes to newcomers from countries all over the world. They are associated with FáilteRefugees, a student campaign to make Ireland a welcome place for refugees. For two hours a week, UCD students share their language skills as members of the 35-strong Fáilte Isteach group on campus.

"It was the student's idea to start this group in 2016," says Holly Dignan of UCD's community engagement unit. "It's been going strong ever since." She sees it as a win-win for the volunteers and their pupils.



“There are so many positives for the UCD students. They become more culturally aware and more attentive to the situations in other countries,” says Holly. “They meet people outside of their bubbles, outside of their regular groups. They don’t see barriers between themselves and immigrants.”



Holly Dignan, me and Liam Carey,
UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

Says one UCD volunteer: “It’s amazing what you can learn about different cultures. Now we are more aware of the different nationalities around us.”

FI learner Maria immigrated to Dublin from Spain. “We learn English in an organic way, the everyday language,” she says. “I feel more connected to society when I am familiar with the lingo – colloquial phrases. They are the fun things that you don’t find in a textbook,” she says. “Talking in groups really improves our language.”

Food is important to both sets of students who might otherwise go without a meal. UCD’s student union provides a picnic of sandwiches, fruit and cookies mid-way into the lesson. It creates a time to eat, relax and socialise together.

Although finding time away from coursework can be a challenge, it also a break from intense everyday studies say the volunteers. “We have to be disciplined,” a UCD volunteer said. “I am usually so focussed on my studies, but here we learn about different things. It gets your brain ticking in a different way.”

Holly helps them translate their volunteer experience onto their CVs – time management, informal teaching, teamwork, creative thinking and networking. “The students they feel like they are doing something worthwhile; giving something back,” she says.

UCD is a University of Sanctuary; it welcomes asylum seekers and refugees into the university community through scholarships and programmes that foster a culture of inclusion for all. Other Universities of Sanctuary in Ireland are University College Cork, University of Limerick, Dublin City University, Athlone Institute of Technology and National University of Ireland (see page 30).

Findings: University College Dublin

1. A campus Fáilte Isteach group is a win-win for student volunteers and the people who come to learn English. Students gain life skills like time management and cultural awareness; and asylum seekers, refugees and migrant learn contemporary, relevant English.
2. Food and drink is a nice addition to group sessions for students and learners who might otherwise miss a meal or go hungry. Aside from the nutrition, it is also a good way to connect.

PROFILE

Maria, Dunboyne Fáilte Isteach **Lessons in language and friendship**

“These classes have made my life, really improved my life.”

Maria arrived in Ireland from Romania without a word of English. “All of the English I know came from this class,” she says of the weekly Tuesday evening course in Dunboyne run by Fáilte Isteach. Dunboyne is a rapidly growing commuter town less than 20 kilometres northeast of Dublin. At least 120 nationalities reside here.

She didn’t know a single soul either. Now Maria is driving four to five other students every week to the same Fáilte Isteach class that she credits with her fluency in English. Tonight she squeezed five students into her car to join the lessons.

“There’s a very nice community in here,” says Maria. ‘These classes have made my life, really improved my life,’ she says, proud that she now reads books in English. Grammar isn’t her favourite aspect of language learning, but she but she knows she needs it. The fact that the Fáilte Isteach classes are free is important to Maria. Her advice to other newcomers to Ireland – “come to the classes straight away.”

On the ground in GALWAY: Welcoming refugees in Ireland’s multicultural city



Croi na Gaillimhe Resource Centre

Galway, on Ireland’s west coast, is the country’s fourth largest city and also its most ‘multicultural,’ according to the Central Office of Statistics. Among its residents, 18.6 percent are non-Irish. The pride of the city, the National University of Ireland (NUI), is now a “university of sanctuary” offering a pathway to education for people seeking asylum, refugees and members of the Traveller community (see page 30).

“Galway has the highest number of new arrivals,” said Janet Kehelly, project coordinator at the Croi

na Gaillimhe Resource Centre where Fáilte Isteach classes are held twice a week, along with other activities provided by the Society of St Vincent de Paul. She is proud of Galway’s reputation as a multicultural city.

Every week some 20 to 30 students come for lessons from nearby direct provision housing for people seeking asylum, as well as new arrivals. Nine volunteer tutors are ready to welcome them in the centre’s bright and colourful classroom, including Maura Joyce.

“Many of our students are living in limbo. They come with almost no English. I love to see the progression,” says Maura. Sometimes she ‘turns the tables’ and asks her students to be the teachers to show what they have learned. Along with the lessons, students come to the centre for ‘cups of coffee and friendship,’ she says. “We provide a sense of belonging.”

At a table nearby, volunteer tutor Anna Hick is removing a series of items from a first aid kit – aspirin, plasters, antiseptic cream. “We are at the pharmacy,” she tells the three students from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iran and Poland sitting at her table. They are ready to role play. But first they must identify in English the names of the items from the first aid kit. Then it’s time to prescribe. “Tell me what is ailing you, where does it hurt?” Students take turns complaining of back aches, headaches, fevers and minor ailments and decide what first aid items could help them. Laughter intermingles with broken English as students act out aches and pains.

“We are not a substitute family, but we can be company,” says Anna. “Language learning is not necessarily the most important aspect. Camaraderie is a big part of it. They come for the language and stay for the social side.” Anna once lived abroad and knows how it feels when you can’t speak the language.

Having a mixture of tutors like Maura, Anna and the rest of the team is important, says project coordinator Janet. “Everybody brings something different to the role. The balance of experiences suits the groups.”

Findings: Galway FI

1. Camaraderie counts in language lessons.
2. A mix of tutors with different experiences is good for groups.

National University of Ireland celebrates designation as a University of Sanctuary



Joining staff, students, and university and city officials, I was among the audience when NUI in Galway celebrated its designation as a University of Sanctuary on 21 November, 2019. Announcing eight University of Sanctuary scholarships, President of NUI Galway, Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh, said: “Students who have fled war, persecution, genocide, and many other human rights violations deserve our support. Their resilience should be rewarded.”

University of Sanctuary scholarship recipient Obadiah Niyibizi said: “I met great people... who encouraged me, pushed me and taught me I could achieve anything I put my mind to.”

With the new designation, the university aims to promote meaningful integration, break down barriers to education, and eliminate discrimination in all its forms.

In the UK, there are 15 Universities of Sanctuary with many working towards recognition. In addition, over 70 universities are currently offering some form of scholarship to improve access to Higher Education for forced migrants.

Universities of Sanctuary in the UK: University of Sheffield, University of Edinburgh, University of Warwick, University of Hull, University of Winchester, University of Bradford, York St John University, Cardiff Metropolitan University, University of East Anglia, University of Leicester, University of Exeter, University of St Andrews, University of Manchester, University of Bristol, University of South Wales.

On the ground in PORTLAOISE: County-wide collaboration for newcomers



*Salena Grace and I, FI class break,
PORTLAOISE*

Portlaoise is the fastest growing of the top 20 towns and cities in Ireland. It is the most densely populated town in the Midlands Region. Almost 22 percent of its population are migrants and refugees who have come to build new lives in this commercial centre 58 miles southwest of Dublin. Portlaoise is also the home of Ireland's first Library of Sanctuary which provides a welcome space where newcomers can study, find books in their own language, learn new skills and make new friends.

To meet the language needs of newcomers, Fáilte Isteach offers English classes in a unique collaboration with the Laois Partnership Company (LPC), an association tasked with delivering economic, social and cultural services to small businesses, community groups and individuals across County Laois. Through LPC, Fáilte Isteach teams up with the local Education and Training Board and Respond Social Housing to provide its learning services.

Classes take place on Tuesdays and Wednesdays in the community room at Mill Court, a Respond housing estate on the northern edge of Portlaoise. A dozen local volunteers, mainly retired, are trained and managed by FI coordinator Irene Mulhall. She is paid by the Community Employment Scheme, an example of partnerships in action.

LPC community development officer Salena Grace oversees the FI language project as part of her role to support the integration of new communities. She also manages local volunteering and the Laois Befriending Programme.

"It's a welcoming project," she says of the FI lessons which have been running since 2012. "We draw on the goodwill of local people to be volunteers. They love meeting people from different countries. We share cultures, we share food, but mostly we share conversations," says Salena. She can see students' confidence growing. They enjoy learning and making friends with fellow students of different nationalities.

About 50 students from around the world – Poland, Syria, Uganda, Nigeria, Lithuania – currently participate. They come from the estate, neighbouring communities and a nearby direct provision centre. From here, Salena can signpost students on to other partnership services including employment opportunities. "It's like a one-stop shop," she says.

Managing the different levels of language skills can be a challenge, says FI coordinator Irene. "You have to be ready to think on your feet."

Like all FI classes, levels range from elementary to advanced. Here too the welcoming social aspect is almost as important as the language learning. Hands-on practical lessons on how to navigate everyday activities are most appreciated. During my visit, I sat in on an intermediate class where a dentist from Syria and her husband who is an engineer, were working with their volunteer tutor Donna to fill in forms for opening a bank account as practice for the 'real thing.'

Findings: Portlaoise Fáilte Isteach

1. Being part of a partnership can bring shared resources, funds, a cross-fertilisation of ideas and further opportunities for asylum seekers, refugees and migrants. FI students can be 'sign-posted' to other services provided by the partnership.
2. Practical exercises like filling in forms to open a bank account, organising medical and other appointments by telephone, and writing CVs and letters, equip newcomers with the 'tools for the job' to become a part of their communities.

PROFILE

Michael O'Daiscoll, Cork City Fáilte Isteach **Open the conversation**

"I love the fact that our input is so appreciated."

Michael O'Daiscoll looks forward to Monday mornings. That's when he makes his way to Nano Nago Place in central Cork to join the other Fáilte Isteach tutors and students. 'School' starts at 10.30 a.m. but Michael is always early.

"I love seeing the students improve," he says. Volunteering comes naturally to Michael. "It's a very small effort on my part. It's nice to be able to give," he says. "I get so much out of tutoring, I learn about countries I never knew about. I love the fact that our input is so appreciated."

One of his favourite homework assignments is to ask a student to greet a neighbour. The next assignment is to chat to the neighbour about the weather, Michael explains. "Within four weeks you could be invited for tea. You've just got to open the conversation," he says.

Michael is concerned that citizens of Ireland's second largest city are not welcoming to refugees. "We're all the same. We are all human beings," he says. *Cork City is one of four Fáilte Isteach groups in Cork.*

Findings from other Fáilte Isteach groups:

1. Communicate with your face, hands, smiles – not just with words. Establish trust and be open. (Cork City FI)
2. To break the language barrier, it is important to set up the 'scaffolding' and build on it. (Cork City FI)
3. Noise in the classroom can be distracting, but it can also be seen as positive energy. Some students would be too shy to speak if there was silence. (Warrenton FI)
4. Despite the enormity of needs, value what you are able to contribute. Value what you do as a volunteer. (Cork City FI)

PROFILE

Lisa and Coco, Tyrellstown Fáilte Isteach **Teaching to learn and learning to teach**

"Now I am totally into this country. I feel Sudanese Irish now." Coco



When Lisa Crehan was growing up in Tyrellstown, 13 kilometres northwest of Dublin, it was farmland. Now a townland, it sits beside the capital city's largest industrial estate and close to several corporate headquarters. The population has doubled in 10 years and continues to grow as potential employment draws people from Ireland, other EU countries and around the world. More than 70 nationalities reside in Tyrellstown. It is home to one of Dublin's largest migrant populations.

Like the newcomers to Ireland that Lisa teaches every Wednesday at the Tyrellstown Community Centre, she knows the feeling of isolation. Lisa was a 'stay at home' mother with family nearby, but even so she felt alone.

"What was I complaining about? I have sisters and brothers. I know the system. I speak the language," Lisa says. "They (newcomers) have none of this. The only people they meet are officials who ask them what they want and then close the door. They are sometimes the only faces they see," she says of the cold responses encountered by newcomers. "We (FI volunteers) are often the only people offering a hand of friendship."

Lisa has been a volunteer for six years. "I decided to volunteer to get out of myself," she says. It worked. Now Lisa has given the gift of language to countless new arrivals in her country. One of Lisa's students is following in her footsteps. When Kawthar Elberier, nicknamed Coco (above) arrived in Ireland from Sudan, she didn't have enough confidence to speak English, even though she had learned it at university. "I couldn't buy milk or get change," she explains. A microbiologist, Coco's English vocabulary consisted of laboratory terms. She didn't learn practical English until she joined the FI classes and met Lisa. Two years later, Coco is teaching beginning English lessons.

"Without the language, it was difficult to feel that you belonged. You know you are different – your accent, your background, your religion. Discovering the FI classes made all the difference. "Now I am totally into this country," she says. "I feel Sudanese Irish now." Coco's two children learned English at their local school in Tyrellstown and even sport Irish accents, says their proud mother.

Following the cycle from English student to FI volunteer tutor has been inspirational for Coco. "I have a feeling of paying back. You discover yourself by volunteering." She loves the trust that other people put in her. "It makes you believe in what you are doing."

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSIONS

Greece: Being on the frontline in Greece for my Fellowship brought home the utter magnitude and inhumanity of the refugee crisis. That language classes could carry on amid this devastation was a bright spark in a sea of deprivation. It taught me that there is no limit to what can be achieved even in the most distressing circumstances. It shined a light on the resilience of people who have fled war, persecution and violence -- and revealed the determination of volunteers to step in to act. My Fellowship travels in Greece gave me insight into the plight of refugees that will guide me as I implement my findings.

Ireland: The Fáilte Isteach model of free English lessons delivered by primarily older people can be adapted for use in the UK. With little expenditure, much can be achieved. Both FI volunteers and students benefit from interactions together. Students learn essential English from skilled volunteers in a welcoming environment. Volunteers benefit from a sense of purpose and community involvement. Cultural and generational bridges are built alongside the path to integration.

Common themes:

1. *Response to the crisis.* All volunteers in both Greece and Ireland give freely of their time and talents as their own personal response to the global humanitarian crisis. Volunteers come from all walks of life and from all over the world – what they have in common is empathy, patience, sensitivity, courage, positivity and teamwork skills.

2. *Volunteers are essential; big budgets are not.* We need not set limits on what can be achieved even in the most challenging circumstances. In Greece, volunteers are delivering English lessons amid the inhumane chaos of a refugee camp where learning represents hope and a future. On the other side of Europe, local people gather to welcome refugees and asylum seekers through the gift of language.

Challenges:

The biggest challenge to putting my recommendations into practice at the time of writing this report is the Covid-19 pandemic. It has delayed my plans to launch a pilot project with Islington University of the Third Age and Speak Street. The economic ramifications of the virus also threaten the futures of the voluntary organisations I am working with to enact my findings. However, we are aiming to resume face-to-face learning and support in safe surroundings as soon as possible. The hostile environment faced by refugees in the UK, now further exacerbated by pandemic fears, is another major challenge to overcome.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Understand and honour the rights of asylum seekers and refugees set out in international conventions. Hold the government accountable. Dismantle the hostile environment that fuels prejudice between fellow human beings and make integration a shared responsibility across society. Actions can be taken by individuals, cities, towns and regions, and universities.

Individuals: In the UK's current hostile environment, individuals can put pressure on the government to honour the rights of asylum seekers and refugees by writing to their Members of Parliament and supporting campaigns led by organisations like Refugee Action, The Refugee Council, Help Refugees, Safe Passage and others. Volunteering with refugee groups is another path towards dismantling the hostile environment. Like Fáilte Isteach in Ireland, UK refugee support groups offer opportunities to assist refugees through language learning, befriending, fundraising and liaising with the community. Individuals can check with Volunteer Centres across the UK to find placements with organisations working on behalf of asylum seekers and refugees.

Cities, towns, regions: City of Sanctuary UK aims to build a culture of hospitality for those fleeing war and persecution through a network of groups in cities, towns and regions across the UK that welcome people seeking sanctuary. Wherever refugees go, City of Sanctuary UK* wants them to feel safe and find people who will welcome them.

Universities: A part of the network, Universities of Sanctuary* embrace a culture and a practice of welcome within their institutions. (see page 30)

2. Using the Fáilte Isteach model as a roadmap, capture the interest and skills of members from pre-existing organisations like the University of the Third Age (U3A) to offer free English language lessons in the UK. Groups can also be recruited from universities, churches, civic associations and other sources to launch conversational English classes, or to support UK organisations already running free language courses (like Speak Street and Islington Council for Refugees and Migrants) to expand their volunteer bases and offer better student-volunteer ratios. With a reliable team of volunteers, coordinators are freed up to focus on lesson planning and other organisational tasks. Start with pilot projects in local U3As. A member of the Islington U3A, I will launch a pilot 'Language of Friendship' group with the Islington branch as early as possible, depending on the situation with the Covid-19 virus.

3. Contribute to the Mayor of London's Strategy for Social Integration by liaising with the Greater London Authority team to strengthen English language learning opportunities in the capital.

4. Don't set limits on what can be achieved. In Greece, language lessons continue against a backdrop of poverty, hunger and hopelessness. In Ireland, what started as one local group offering English conversation has blossomed into 132 groups who reach out to more than 3,200 asylum seekers, refugees and migrants.

* see resources page 37

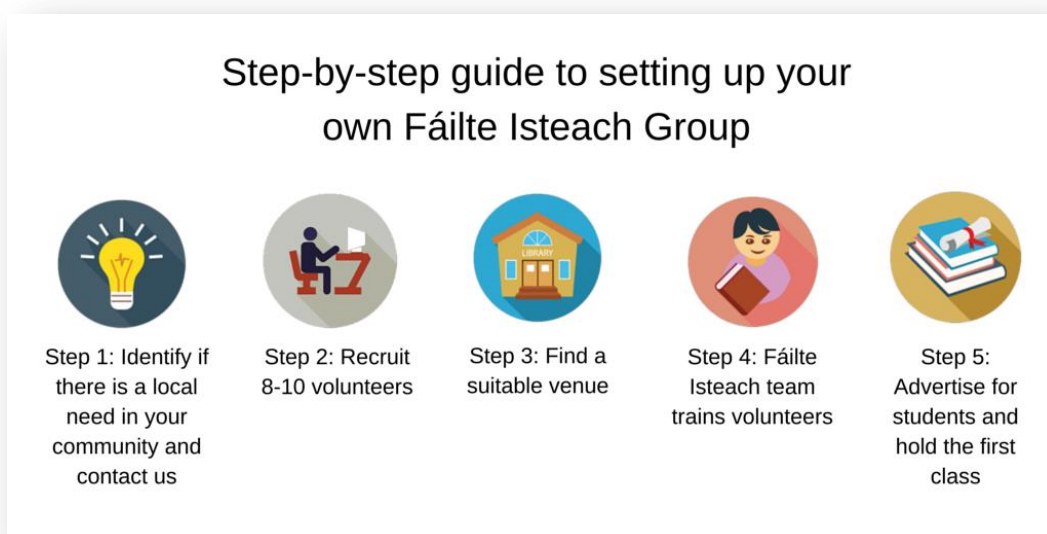
ADVICE

1. *Realise rights.* A rights-based approach to language learning services upholds dignity and equality. Build relationships with students based on equality and reciprocity rather than compassion.
2. *Human resources and management.* Stringent volunteer recruitment, induction and training are vital, including training on safeguarding, and follow-up sessions. Maintain clear rules about what is acceptable and what is not so that all involved understand and follow them. Standards can be outlined in safeguarding guidelines, codes of conduct and statements of values.
3. *Support.* Groups and centres offering language lessons often play a vital role in helping to assist with basic needs like food, medical care and advice on crucial issues like housing. Extra support can create a sense of community, encourage attendance and make it easier for students to focus on studies.
4. *Sensitivity.* Already demanding -- learning a new language when you are hungry, homeless, distraught, isolated -- can become overwhelming. Asylum-seekers and refugees face many challenges that can make it hard to focus on lessons. Sensitivity and judgement is needed to determine how and when to engage students that are clearly stressed. Volunteers should take into account different cultural differences to avoid misunderstandings.
5. *Community connections.* Promote community engagement to bridge cultures and foster integration. Introduce your group through events that bring newcomers and local people together -- festivals, performances, events, sports activities. Seek collaboration with other organisations to enhance opportunities for asylum seekers and refugees. Map the different actors in your area to create a network of goodwill. Interact with local businesses, social services, churches, medical services, police and others to see how you can help each other. Get officials on side with visits to or from local government officials like mayors and council members.
6. *Setting.* Although informal language lessons can take place wherever there is room -- on the ground, under a tent, in a basement or cafe -- warm and welcoming spaces to learn create an encouraging learning environment. This is the case for all places of learning, but especially important for students living in challenging conditions.

RESOURCES

Starting a Fáilte Isteach Group

“All you need is a bit of enthusiasm and a photo copier.” Liam Carey, FI



Courtesy of Fáilte Isteach

www.thirdageireland.ie/failte-isteach

How You Can Help Refugees to learn English *from Refugee Action*

www.refugee-action.org.uk/can-help-refugees-learn-english

Guidelines for safeguarding refugees and asylum seekers *from Welcome Churches and thirtyone:eight*

www.welcomechurches.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/safeguarding-guidance-for-refugees.pdf

Safeguarding Policy Template *from Sponsor Refugees*

https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/newcitizens/pages/2398/attachments/original/1516371764/Safeguarding_Policy_Template_Sponsor_Refugees.pdf?1516371764

City of Sanctuary

<https://cityofsanctuary.org>

City of Sanctuary holds the vision that the UK will be a welcoming place of safety for all and proud to offer sanctuary to people fleeing violence and persecution. In order to realise this vision, City of Sanctuary UK supports a network of groups, which includes villages, towns, cities and regions across the UK.

Universities of Sanctuary

<https://universities.cityofsanctuary.org/>

Mayor of London: ESOL Coordination, Social Integration Team (Migration Team), Communities and Social Policy Unit

www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/communities/migrants-and-refugees/english-speakers-other-languages-esol

OUTCOMES TO DATE

Pilot project: My proposal to launch a pilot project – a Language of Friendship volunteer group -- with the University of the Third Age Islington (iU3A) was approved in Spring 2020 by the executive committee who called it ‘a really innovative idea’. The volunteer group will assist with weekly English lessons in partnership with Speak Street, a pop-up language ‘school’ founded by Churchill Fellow Joanna Bevan. If the pilot is successful, I would like to introduce this initiative to other U3A groups with the aim of rolling it out across the UK. *(timing is dependent on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic).*

Participation in regional consultation: I was invited to participate in a regional ESOL consultation event in January 2020 entitled “How do we ensure there is suitable and effective ESOL for refugees?” I shared my Fellowship findings along with ideas about effective language provision for refugees between the English language sector (funders, commissioners and providers) and the refugee sector (civil society, local authorities and other support agencies).

Speaker: My Fellowship led to an invitation from the Islington Refugee Forum to make a presentation at a Refugee Week celebration 2019. I am also the featured speaker at the 8 October 2020 meeting of Islington’s University of the Third Age.

Delegate: I was able to share my Fellowship findings at the Refugee Solidarity Summit 2020 on 31 January-1 February attended by 800 people with 200 organisations represented. The summit was the first major convening of grassroots solidarity networks, voluntary organisations, activists, volunteers, community organisers and NGOs standing with refugees in the UK and across Europe.

Media coverage: My Fellowship was mentioned in the ‘I Am a Geographer’ column of the June 2020 issue of *Geographical*, the magazine of the Royal Geographical Society, and subsequently in *The Globe*, magazine of the Globetrotters Club. Articles about my Fellowship have also appeared in The Islington Tribune and the Canonbury Society newsletter. My blog, Supporting Refugees in the Covid-19 Outbreak, was published by WCMT on 16 June 2020.

Response to the Covid-19 Outbreak: I was able to use Fellowship learning and contacts to adapt services for refugees and asylum seekers in London. We shared resources and ideas on how to adjust our usual face-to-face services in the UK, Greece and Ireland, to provide remote and online support.