



Ireland

“Fáilte Isteach”: Seniors welcoming migrants through inclusive English classes

Jean-Luc Janot, AEIDL (22/04/2016)

Fáilte Isteach (“Welcome in”) is a community-based project involving predominantly older volunteers, who welcome migrants and refugees to Ireland through conversational English classes. The project provides necessary language training for new migrants in a student-centred, welcoming and inclusive environment, while also involving older volunteers and recognising their skills and contribution to the community.



The project was established by [Third Age](#) in Summerhill, Co Meath, in October 2006, in response to the observed language difficulties experienced by immigrants and refugees as they attempted to integrate into the local community.

Third Age, a national voluntary organisation, responds to the opportunities and challenges of ageing in Ireland. It aims to demonstrate the value of older people remaining engaged and contributing in their own community for as long as possible. It achieves this through three national programmes: [Senior Help Line](#) (a confidential listening service for older people); [Sage](#) (support and advocacy services to older people wherever ageing poses a challenge); and Fáilte Isteach, as well as a range of other local initiatives. The philosophy of social inclusion underpins all the programmes.

Fáilte Isteach offers an innovative, practical, cost-effective, local solution to a national challenge through supporting local organisations and individuals across Ireland to organise conversational English classes in their local community.

The project aims to establish a network of Fáilte Isteach groups in communities throughout Ireland. These groups involve older volunteer tutors and help to promote greater integration and achieve a new sense of community spirit, by forging new friendships and facilitating learning among different cultures.

All of the necessary teaching material is provided to new groups and on-going support, refresher training and updated resources are available. Many retired teachers get involved in the project but Fáilte Isteach welcomes all of those who are interested in participating. Volunteers do not need to have prior teaching experience as training is provided.

The classes are student-centred and tailored to meet the participants' needs, many of whom experience difficulties integrating into Irish society, a challenge which is exasperated by a lack of English. "However, improved language skills, better comprehension, better communication skills, more confidence and self-esteem have resulted in improvements in both the working and social lives of our students", says Mary Nally, the founder of Fáilte Isteach. "Other benefits include improved social skills, increased networks and social contacts, better employment prospects, and increased participation in community life. Fáilte Isteach, through the commitment of its volunteers, is helping to build better, stronger, and more inclusive communities, where people feel they have a right to belong and to play an active role in the life of the community."



Fáilte Isteach, now in its tenth year, has grown from a local, rural project to a national initiative with a presence in 24 counties and 92 groups nationwide. Each week over 900 volunteers welcome approximately 2,700 migrants to their community and deliver over 60,000 hours of free tuition annually. The project is funded by both the [Iris O'Brien Foundation](#) and the Irish Department of Justice (through the Office for the Promotion of Migrant Integration).

Fáilte Isteach, from its inception, has promoted the involvement of older volunteers and has benefited greatly from this decision. Firstly, there is a value in involving older people as tutors in a cross-cultural project because of the personal qualities of patience, wisdom and understanding that many of them bring. Secondly, many older people have a wealth of life experience and their own lifelong learning. Thirdly, older people offer insights into Irish traditional values, customs and

ways of life. Older people are invariably respected members in their own community and their presence brings a credibility and value to the project.

“We have seen the lasting and sustained change that Fáilte Isteach has brought already to 92 communities spread across urban, suburban and rural Ireland”, says Mary Nally. “The model works in different locations because it is meeting a real need in a flexible and dynamic and student-centred way. Fáilte Isteach is contributing in its own way to a caring society, which values diversity and sees migrants as a positive force. The project taps into the goodness and generosity of our host population and at the same time offers a service of real need and value to our migrant population. The Fáilte Isteach project offers a positive, lasting and sustainable step on the path to building a stronger, better and more inclusive Irish society.”

“We are acutely aware of the current unfolding refugee crisis in Europe and have been proactive in offering our support to those working in this area by proposing the experience and expertise of Fáilte Isteach as part of the strategy to deal with this terrible situation”, says Ariana Ball, Fáilte Isteach Manager. “Our experience, through the ten years of the project, is that Ireland is full of people of compassion, consideration and humanity, and our volunteers are the living embodiment of this – the current crisis is showcasing these traits on a much wider scale.”

More information: <http://www.thirdageireland.ie/failte-isteach> (Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/thirdagefailteisteach>)

International recognition for an integration model

Fáilte Isteach has been recognised as a model of best practice as shown by the many awards it has received since its creation:

- Winner of the 2015 European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) Civil Society Prize: ‘Combating Poverty’.
- Recognised by Social Entrepreneurs Ireland, Ashoka Ireland and the Arthur Guinness Fund for providing an innovative and creative solution to a social challenge.
- Awarded a European Language Label in October 2013, an annual award coordinated by the European Commission and given to those who have identified innovative ways of teaching and learning languages.
- Selected by the Department of Integration in November 2012 to meet with former US Congressman, Mr. Bruce Morrison, who was visiting Ireland to give his views on Ireland’s approach to immigration and integration issues.
- Recognised by the ‘Diverse Ireland Awards’ in December 2012. The Diverse Ireland Awards were established by the Integration Centre to raise awareness of the positive advancements around integration in Ireland.
- Named as an [example of best practice](#) on the European Web Site on Integration.

(Sources: **Mary Nally** et **Ariana Ball**, *Fáilte Isteach*)

(Photos: **Fáilte Isteach**)