



AVAIL

Amplifying the Voices of
Asylum Seekers and Refugees
for Integration and Life Skills



DELIVERABLE 13: FEEDBACK FROM THE AVAIL BUDDYING ACTIVITIES

Buddying activities were established in Ireland and Latvia as a contribution to the overall objectives of AVAIL. The aim was to promote mutual understanding and social inclusion between host communities and Refugees and Asylum Seekers (RAS). Newly arrived RAS in both countries were offered a volunteer 'buddy' or 'buddies' who provided practical guidance, cultural and linguistic interpretation and opened doors to local networking. Members of local communities offered to provide support in language learning, familiarisation with procedures and cultural orientation.

In Ireland, members of the public also provided this support by welcoming single refugees into their families for a period of 12-18 months or until they were ready to move into independent living. A video about the Irish buddying is available [here](#).

In Latvia, local buddies together with RAS families/individuals attended cultural events (theatre, cinema, concerts, museums, etc.) which they couldn't have afforded to do on their own. Events were also organised at a children's leisure centre where local buddies shared cuisine and culture from Latvia and RAS' countries of origin. A video about the Latvian buddying is available [here](#).



Buddy Pair, Dublin, Ireland

In both countries buddies and local community members spoke quite freely about their learning, positive outcomes and some limitations of the buddying experience.

Settling/Belonging/Knowledge

In Ireland, host buddies played a key role in helping RAS settle in after moving from the isolation of reception centres:



Buddy Pair, Wexford, Ireland

"It's really isolating when you hear their experiences in reception centres. It's like living in a field with nobody"

"It's a big challenge to start life from scratch. They gave me everything, gave me family life. They made me feel at home. My buddy gave me mother love"
(RAS Buddy, Ireland)

"I'm getting to know the country, getting help from other people" (RAS Buddy Ireland)



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Some RAS were self-starters

"He was very proactive. He literally got on his bike and went around with this CV"
(Host Buddy, Ireland).

In Latvia, where RAS entitlements and opportunities to mingle with wider society were very limited, buddying was key to developing local knowledge.

"It was thanks to the Red Cross and this programme that we were able to attend these events due to the financing available. It was a unique experience for my family to have the chance to visit cultural events and dine outside the house. Being in this difficult situation those moments were like 'time out' for me and my family" (RAS Buddy, Latvia)

"We wouldn't have been able to get our children acquainted with Latvia by ourselves. Essentially without this programme we would never have left the refugee centre" (RAS Buddy, Latvia)

Cross-cultural transfer

As activities evolved when buddies and RAS felt more confident in each other's company, participants spoke openly about the commonalities of different ethnicities and how they could learn from each other.



Buddy Pair, Riga, Latvia

"When you meet people face to face you realise that each person has his or her own story and that can never be generalised. It doesn't matter if the person is Latvian, Russian or from Syria, everyone should be happy"
(Community Buddy, Latvia)

"The programme was very interesting for me, it allowed me to better understand what people from other ethnic groups feel and think about us and such everyday things as traditional cuisine and matters of raising children"
(Community Buddy, Latvia)

"You begin to understand what it's like coming from a culture to a place you didn't expect to be or plan to be. It opens your eyes a little bit to relaxing your own cultural and other assumptions and trying to be more tuned in to their context and way of viewing the world". (Host Buddy, Ireland)

"It just opened my eyes so much more politically and culturally. I learned so much more about Islamic culture and Syria, that I would never had the opportunity to learn" (Host Buddy, Ireland).

"We didn't know anything about Latvian culture but now we know a lot of things about Latvia and Latvian culture and we can better integrate into society". (RAS Latvia)



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Social Networking and Integration

In Ireland, where Buddy pairings were successful, the hosting families acted as a bridge into Irish society and provided safety nets, fostering access to education and employment.

"The good part I think of this system of hosting is that RAS get social capital from the people they live with, particularly to get to know people".
(Host Buddy Ireland).

"I introduced them to the neighbours. They were a novelty here. I know they were afraid, they were anxious at the beginning. When they saw me and I got to know the neighbours as well they brought them (RAS) in, they'd have coffee with them".
(Host Buddy Ireland)



Buddy Pair, Dublin, Ireland

At the conclusion of project, many Buddies have developed lasting friendships and maintain contact with RAS.

"We often keep in touch, and she contacts me when she needs extra knowledge on a situation she has never been in" (Buddy, Latvia)

"If he stays in Ireland, we will maintain contact. I hope he always knows that we're there, and if anything were to happen we are one of the people he would contact". (Host Buddy, Ireland).

Constraints and Limitations

In Ireland, the majority of host/guest Buddy relationships worked out well. However, differences in ages and expectations were cited as reasons for difficulties in some cases. Some refugees in their 20s and 30s felt they were treated like children.

"I like him and respect him, but he just needs to tell me like a baby, asking me 'where are you going every day?'" (RAS, Ireland)

Other hosts felt that if they had a bit more knowledge of their guest's culture, they may have been better prepared and would have understood the struggles faced by people fleeing conflict, particularly around the issues of trauma and needing their own space.



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"I think you need to know more about Syrian culture, what life was like, to know their customs and how they interact socially" (Host, Ireland)

In Latvia, while buddying activities played an important part in introducing RAS to the wider culture and environment, RAS spoke about the limitations of developing confidence and reducing anxiety.



"I don't think my level of confidence changed because a couple of happy hours did not change the reality and offer different roots of confidence (RAS Latvia)

Buddy with a RAS family, Riga, Latvia

"My stress and anxiety levels have not changed because the ground for my stress and anxiety was not addressed in these events" (RAS, Latvia).

Research Findings

The impact, benefits and challenges of the buddying activities were highlighted in the research, which was embedded with the AVAIL project. In the Buddy projects (Ireland/Latvia), bridging social connections were formed between refugee people seeking asylum and host communities. Host 'buddies' formed safety nets, as well as using their social networks and capital to facilitate access to healthcare and the labour market for refugees and asylum seekers. Transfers of cultural understanding between refugees, people seeking asylum and host communities was also facilitated by the Buddy projects (Latvia and Ireland). In the Buddy Projects (Latvia and Ireland), host society perceptions of refugees and asylum seekers were enhanced after interactions in the project.

The research also highlighted the need for support from Red Cross staff. In Ireland, the role of caseworkers in supporting relationships was repeatedly referenced by both host community members and refugees. Also in Ireland, there was evidence of the negative impacts of insufficient preliminary work with buddies around expectations, cultural awareness and mental health.

The AVAIL Project ran from February 2018 to February 2020. It was co-ordinated by the [British Red Cross](#), partnered with the Italian Red Cross, Irish Red Cross, [Latvian Red Cross](#) and International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

For an overview of all project activities and the research, please visit this [website](#).

For more information about the buddying activities please contact:

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