

# Life in the UAE for new Irish emigrants

Crosscare Migrant Project - March 2019



Government of Ireland  
Emigrant Support Programme



An tAire Gairneoire agus Trádála  
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

## Report: Life in the UAE for new Irish emigrants

### Background

This report is based on the findings of a group discussion focused on new Irish migration to the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The discussion was hosted by Crosscare Migrant Project in partnership with the Embassy of Ireland (Abu Dhabi, UAE) on November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2018.

Crosscare Migrant Project ([migrantproject.ie](http://migrantproject.ie)) is a Dublin based non-profit organisation funded by the Emigrant Support Programme of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to provide a direct information & advocacy service to intending and returning Irish emigrants.

Participants were invited via social media to take attend the 1-hour group discussion facilitated by Sarah Owen, Irish Abroad Networking Officer with Crosscare Migrant Project, and the Embassy of Ireland in Abu Dhabi. On the day, they were asked a series of questions relating to their own emigration and life in the UAE, and what advice they had for anyone considering a move to the UAE.

Signed consent was received from all participants and for research purposes this discussion was recorded and transcribed to form the basis of this report and inform the future development of pre-departure information resources for prospective emigrants by Crosscare Migrant Project.

### Aim

To gather information on the experiences of new Irish emigrants to the UAE to help future generations of Irish emigrants make an informed decision about possible emigration to this region. Secondly, to offer participants the opportunity to meet with other Irish emigrants and share experiences of life in the UAE.

## Findings

### Participants

There were eleven group discussion attendees, including the group facilitator, Sarah Owen of Crosscare Migrant Project, and Louise Wilson, 2<sup>nd</sup> Secretary at the Embassy of Ireland in Abu Dhabi. There were a total of **9 participants**, made up of **6 women and 3 men**. Of this group **4 were teachers**, 2 were in corporate relocation services, 1 was a secondary school psychologist, 1 worked for Irish consular services, and 1 was about to give up a job in HR to become a full-time stay at home mother and part-time entertainer. The **majority (5) had been in the UAE for 2 years or less**. Only 2 had spent over 5 years in the UAE (6 and 8 years respectively), while the other two had each spent 3.5 and 5 years there.

At least 4 of the participants had experience of **living abroad** before moving to the UAE, with the **United Kingdom, Australia, and Qatar** mentioned as previous destination countries. 2 participants mentioned that they were **parents**.

### Teachers

Of the 5 teachers, all had been **teaching for at least 1 year prior to emigrating** to the UAE. This was mostly in Ireland though one person did mention working in the United Kingdom. One also said that he had been teaching for 10 years before moving to the UAE mainly as a result of the **cost of renting in Dublin**, as well as to save and experience a change of culture and climate.

Most agreed that **schools look for teaching experience**, saying it is harder to find work without this now, whereas **in the past it was possible to be recruited straight after graduation**. One of the other participants remarked that he knew someone who secured a teaching job in the UAE, **despite having no qualifications**. A number of the teachers seemed surprised at this, though they mostly agreed that **demand for teachers is still high**. One of the other participants also noted that in comparison to teachers from elsewhere, *'Irish teachers do have the **best reputation**'*.

Louise Wilson of the Embassy of Ireland in the UAE confirmed that of the estimated **ten thousand Irish in the UAE**, approximately **one third are teachers**.

## Life in the UAE

### Surprises

Participants were asked what they thought was the **biggest surprise associated to living the UAE**. Four topics emerged from the group discussion.

- *'Don't believe what you read'*  
One participant mentioned that there is a **disconnect between the information available and what life is actually like** in the UAE. A second participant said she had expected the lifestyle to be *'strict and very conservative'* but found that this was not really the case when she started living here. A third remarked that although **things are relaxed**, it is **not advisable to break the rules**.
- *'Stay under the radar'*  
A number of participants who had been in the UAE for over 2 years (including one who had been there for 8 years) remarked that **bending the rules is not unusual** in the UAE, however getting caught **breaking the law can lead to serious consequences**. One went on to say that in their experience there is a **presumption of guilt** rather than innocence, unless a UAE citizen could vouch for a person's good character. Another mentioned that **living with someone without being married or being intoxicated** could result in difficulties.
- *'You have to get an alcohol licence'*  
One of the relocation specialists highlighted the need for an alcohol licence as a resident, giving the example of a **person hosting a party being liable** if party-goers were intoxicated. Another participant mentioned that this is especially important in the event of being in a car accident and happen to have **alcohol in your vehicle**, even if you have not been drinking.
- *'There is no language barrier'*  
None of the participants said that they spoke Arabic, although one had started a course as part of her relocation package. All agreed that they could get by with just English. One participant stated that he was surprised at the American influence in the UAE, which includes the shops and the types of cars people drive.

### For Women

Participants were asked if there was anything about **being an Irish woman in the UAE** that people should know. One of the female participants responded by saying, *'you have to be careful'*, more so than in Ireland and said she had a number of friends who had gotten into trouble and had **nowhere to go for help**. The participant did not expand on what trouble this was.

The same participant advised against **getting a taxi on your own as a woman** and that it is **not as safe as it seems**. Another said that she had been locked in a taxi during the day, as the driver wanted her number. Three other female participants said that they often caught taxis, including while intoxicated, and that their experience had been *'overwhelmingly positive'*. **Cultural**

**respect** was also mentioned, especially in relation to clothing with one participant stating, *'you won't get in trouble, but you might get eyes drawn on you'*.

## Challenges

Throughout the discussion, participants spoke of some of the challenges they faced as part of their lives in the UAE. The following four areas stood out:

- **High cost of living**  
Participants noted that life in the UAE is expensive, especially for families who must pay **school fees** with one parent stating, *'family life is very very very difficult out here because of forking out 40 to 50, 000 Dirhams<sup>1</sup> per child for school'*. Another remarked that **social life is expensive**, especially in reference to people who are single.
- **Debt can be a problem**  
Several participants talked about how it was **easy to fall into debt** in the UAE, saying that in some cases they felt obliged to get a **credit card** and that both the **credit limits and interest rates are much higher** than in Ireland. Loans were also mentioned, and a number of participants spoke of people getting into difficulty due to debt and a lack of awareness that *'if you've a loan here or if you've any debts here you cannot leave until they're paid off'*.
- **Challenges at work**  
Another said that patience was required when working with **non-Irish co-workers** and that this could be challenging. Although participants had agreed that language was generally not a barrier, one participant spoke of the **risk of isolation** when working with non-English speakers, especially if a person didn't have access to a personal network of support.

Participants acknowledged that working in the private sector was different to working in schools, and that **things are changing**. One participant noted, *'now you're told what we were told 8 years ago when we left Ireland, 'you're lucky to have a job''*. Two participants spoke of how it could be expensive and lengthy to take a **labour case** against an employer.

While participants generally acknowledged that salaries were high by comparison, one of the parents mentioned that long working hours came at a **high cost to family life**, stating that there is a risk that children will *'grow up with a nanny'* unless one parent does not work full-time.

Two participants (one male, one female) mentioned that they had accompanied their partners as a *'trailing spouse'* when they were offered a job in the UAE. In both cases it took them **between 3 and 5 months to find work**, with one of them resorting to taking on a job in a **different sector**.

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<sup>1</sup> Approximately €9,500 to €12,000 in Euros (correct as of March 2019)

- Lack of mental health related support

**Isolation and depression** were mentioned by a number of female participants as key challenges. One spoke of becoming isolated and depressed as a **stay at home parent** to a young baby. Another associated social isolation to **coming to the UAE without employment** to accompany her partner. A number of the teachers spoke of having a support network thanks to being relocated as part of a larger group of teachers, while acknowledging that this was not the case for many others.

Two of the participants were representatives of Darkness into Light Abu Dhabi, and they spoke about the criminalization of **suicide** in the UAE acting as a barrier to support. One said *'you hear stories of people getting caught and stuff like that, it makes it very **very difficult for people to even say 'oh can I ask somebody for help? Who will I ask?'***. The other emphasized that some emigrants have *'left home because of some sort of baggage'* and that the **stress associated with emigration** *'can exacerbate the condition that that person has and then when they feel that there's no accessible affordable support there's that build up that can be very dangerous'*. There was also some discussion between participants about **access to medication and mental health care**. In particular, the **cost associated to this** if it was not covered by health insurance, and their **employer being made aware if they did avail of this** via their health insurance.

## Benefits

In terms of benefits, participants were asked about the one most positive thing about living in the UAE, and what keeps them there. They mentioned two general areas:

- No taxation

Participants spoke of the lack of taxation as the **main benefit of living in the UAE**, affording them the **ability to save**.

- Quality of life

The **opportunities** offered by the UAE were acknowledged by participants, especially in terms of **life experience**. One participant likened it to the *'**original definition of the American dream**'* where *'you can start with nothing and build your way up'*. The same participant felt that in the UAE it is possible to **change sector more easily** than in Ireland. Another spoke about how being in the UAE had been a **good experience**.

Several others spoke of how there is a **good social life** in the UAE. Simultaneously, the parents in the group highlighted that it was a **great place for children** to grow up as a result of the **standard of education** and the **greater exposure** to sports, arts and more. One said, *'my daughter is obsessed with gymnastics, and her goal in life is to become an Olympic gymnast ...she wouldn't have got that in Ireland! She's in school here and one of her teachers is an Olympic gymnast, you know.'*

## Advice for new Irish emigrants

Participants were asked how they prepared for the move to the UAE and what key advice they would share with other intending emigrants. They listed the following practical advice:

- *'Download Skype'*  
In reference to the fact it is **not possible to make video calls, or regular calls using Whatsapp, Skype or Facetime** while using a UAE sim card or VPN, one participant advised doing this prior to moving.
- *'Get involved with a group'*  
Several participants spoke of the importance of having a **support network** and how joining a group could help with this. The **GAA, Darkness into Light, Abu Dhabi Mums group**, and even the **Irish Business Network** were all suggested as options. One female participant said, *'girls who've never played football in their life will play just to meet people'*. She continued by saying *'you're meeting Irish people, people who are going through the same thing as you are... it's an outlet for everything really'*.
- *'Unless you have a job, don't come out here'*  
A good number of the participants stressed the **importance of securing employment prior to emigrating** to the UAE, so as to **avoid delays** in finding work, **complications with visas** and a **high cost of living**. One of the participants who had found work after arriving in the UAE advised new arrivals to **use a reputable recruitment agency**, and **be open to changing sector**. Two others advised new emigrants to **be realistic**, *'you've got to base your plan on what is in front of you'*, and to **manage expectations**, *'at the very minimum, if you have no job, expect to be waiting at least 6 months'*. Participants agreed that it was prudent to have **savings**, even when coming over with a job. One participant noted that certain times of the year can be slow, due to a variety of reasons, including **Ramadan**.
- *'Don't get into debt the minute you get out here'*  
Several participants warned that banks offer **loans**, and **credit cards** almost as soon as a person arrives in the UAE. They noted that *'people don't read the fine print'* and said, in reference to credit cards *'at home we would have an APR of 18%. Here it's 18% a month!'*.

## Life after the UAE

When it came to their life after the UAE, most participants spoke of either going elsewhere or returning to Ireland.

### Other options

Some of the participants spoke of **going elsewhere** after their time in the UAE, citing **Australia**, **Canada**, and even **Costa Rica** as possible options.

Other than one female participant, most had **no immediate plans to return to Ireland**. The majority said that they were **seeing how things went**, a position best summed up by another female participant who stated, *'I'm playing it year by year'*.

### Returning to Ireland

Participants cited several reasons for a possible return to Ireland in the future. For **families**, the **cost of living in the UAE** was cited as a push factor. Several also spoke of returning so that their children could attend **secondary school** in Ireland, and in so doing avoid higher fees **for third level education** in Ireland. One participant mentioned that in some cases families split with part of the family remaining abroad, while the children return to study in Ireland. However, participants also mentioned that **child care costs in Ireland** would act as a deterrent to return.

One participant said that her **father's health** would bring her back to Ireland. Another said the **tax situation** the main reason people choose to stay in the UAE and that *'if you made it a level playing field with other tax paying countries, I'd say there'd be max exodus'*.

## Conclusion

Despite a small sample size, the group discussion proved to be a very informative way of **exploring some of the challenges, and benefits of life in the UAE** for Irish emigrants. Participants also had the opportunity to share **practical advice for other intending emigrants** and help them make the move in a planned way.

Some key themes emerged, particularly in terms of the importance of **support networks**, and access to **mental health support**. A sharp **distinction between the situation for people with children and people without** also became clear during the course of the discussion.

While only a short amount of time was dedicated to the topic of returning to Ireland, participants made clear that **most of them did not intend to return in the near future**, raising questions as to whether they would **stay in the UAE or emigrate elsewhere**.

We thank all the participants for being involved in the discussion and sharing their experiences as part of it. We also extend special thanks to Ms. Louise Wilson and all at the Embassy of Ireland in the UAE, without whom this discussion would not have taken place.