

Notes from meeting at Sheffield Cathedral about Ukraine 11.05.22.

The meeting provided a helpful review of what was happening in Sheffield. There are around 100 Ukrainians now in the city but a total of 1000 + families have volunteered to host and the visa processing may be moving a little faster now.

Important to note that there are two programmes – the family programme, which works faster but has absolutely no case support in any way and no information is passed to the City Council. There are no checks. The hosts programme where the City Council is informed, does accommodation and DBS checks, and provides financial and other support. The government has provided around £1000 to the Council to cover ALL costs for this, including the need for education etc. In addition, the hosts get £350 per month and the refugees can sign on for Universal credit (waiting time is 5 weeks of course). Because of some knowledge of the shortcomings in the Family scheme, SCC is running a hardship service and trying to ensure that the scheme is safe.

With the scheme as it stands, there are already difficulties. First schooling – there are insufficient places in general and particularly in the areas where most of the hosts are located (S10, S11, S8, S7 and some S6). The education department know this is an issue and are working with Academies to see where there can be support. There are also some issues about the ages of starting school (7 in Ukraine) and completion of secondary education (17 in Ukraine). So ironing out these variations is proving complicated.

There are clear pathways for registering health, banking, and signing on for benefits. Dronfield Rotary club has made Sim cards available and there are cards for travel on buses – for trams, it is just necessary to show a passport.

City of Sanctuary has already recruited and trained 4 Ukrainian volunteers. (Wherever possible direct work with refugees and asylum seekers is undertaken by people from the same ethnic origin). There is a considerable delay in getting mental health support. The SPRING project, that supports the integration of refugees and assists pathways to employment, is already gearing up to work with Ukrainians.

Many of those arriving have good English and many are highly qualified. The NHS is keen to recruit qualified staff; SCC social work have indicated willingness to provide training for social workers who have qualified in Ukraine (I trained some of them there and can check on qualifications). There are dentists and experienced managers. There are also some gifted artists.

The Ukrainian Saturday hub and clothes swap will, from 28 May, be at St Mary's as will a number of other services. St Pauls Norton Lees have a weekly Wednesday hub, now increasingly busy, and St Marks Broomhill is running a monthly support meeting for hosts.

HOWEVER there are some major problems. The privatised, do-it-yourself approach to matching hosts with refugees has been something of a disaster for many refugees. While a number of placements have broken down through incompatibility, rather more have broken down for safeguarding reasons, largely due to single men making offers to single women that are highly inappropriate. The delay in processing visa applications, as well as the volume of work, means that many local authorities have been unable to check accommodation/DBS in advance of the arrival of refugees.

As a result there is now an emerging crisis whereby additional hosts are urgently required. The government has fallen back on churches for support and nationally and locally, this will be undertaken jointly by Methodist, Anglican, and Salvation Army churches. There is room for more! One of the suggested actions is a monthly meal invitation enabling Ukrainians to meet together and hosts to have a break. There is also scope for English teaching, particularly with younger children. And in time, it will be important to provide more support to hosts. The optimistic plan for people to return as soon as possible may be manageable for many from Kyiv, but it is hopeless for people coming from Mariupol and many other cities. So it is likely that people will be staying for a period more like 3 years.

It should be noted that government spokespeople have said that Ukrainians entering the UK from Ireland, or by boat, will be liable for deportation to Rwanda, should that appalling idea ever become practice.

And finally, it has to be said that the shock for many of the hosts at the challenges faced by their guests are in only a small way different from the experience of almost all refugees, so perhaps this is proving to be a wakeup call to the realities of the hostile environment.

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