

The UK's Homes for Ukraine scheme: a model for the future?

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Tens of thousands of people in the UK have opened their homes to Ukrainians. An examination of this historic welcome offers important insights for future schemes aimed at helping refugee groups and vulnerable people.

After the invasion of Ukraine, the UK was at the forefront of countries providing military, diplomatic and humanitarian assistance to the Ukrainian people. There was a simultaneous groundswell of solidarity from tens of thousands of UK citizens offering to provide sanctuary in their homes and communities. In response to this, a new government support scheme, Homes for Ukraine (HFU), was developed and launched 18 days after the start of the war. Apart from this scheme, there was a family scheme, which allowed Ukrainian families who had settled in the UK before the war to sponsor their families to come to the UK.¹

The scheme enabled British people to commit to hosting Ukrainians for a minimum of six months, for which they would receive up to

£500 a month for hosting a family.² At the time of writing, it has enabled 127,600 Ukrainians, predominantly women and children, to come to the UK.³ While this scheme reflects a longstanding British tradition of providing sanctuary and asylum to those in need, it also represents an innovative and highly effective shift in approach. Ministers and civil servants across various British government departments joined forces with each other and with civil society to collaboratively deliver a scheme that has not only served Ukrainians well but has also enabled major savings and better outcomes compared with alternative refugee accommodation options.

Sanctuary Foundation conducted a large-scale survey with Whitestone Insight to



Gifts brought by Ukrainian refugees for their hosts in the UK. Credit: John Bowen

understand the experiences of 1,920 Ukrainian refugees hosted through the Homes for Ukraine scheme. There is much to be gleaned for future crisis response from examining the scheme in depth.

Successes

A number of strengths in the scheme have contributed to its enormous success.

Response from civil society: HFU mobilised unprecedented numbers of people to respond with compassion and hospitality. Not since the Second World War has there been such a large-scale civilian hosting programme. (For context: the Kindertransport of 1938-39 saw approximately 10,000 children from Europe hosted by families in the UK to escape the Holocaust.)

Most HFU hosts had no involvement with refugees before. The surge in hospitality was offered despite a national cost-of-living crisis and the additional struggles many people face due to the economic and social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. It also took place at a time when the government was endeavouring to introduce controversial initiatives to refuse the right to claim asylum for spontaneous arrivals and to initiate their removal to Rwanda. These

factors make the scale of the HFU hosting programme even more remarkable.

Social capital and integration: Unlike many other asylum seekers and refugees who have struggled to integrate into British society, those moving to the UK with HFU have fared very well. Living in people's homes enabled strong friendships to be formed and accelerated refugees' language acquisition and cultural understanding. It also allowed many British citizens to have first-hand experience of the challenges and rewards of supporting refugees. Many hosts have become both highly motivated and highly innovative in their refugee support.

In addition to the individual household relationships, large numbers of community groups were formed, often called Ukrainian hubs or welcome hubs. These hubs catalysed collective support and action, from organising social events to providing transport, furniture and childcare. Most evolved organically, spearheaded by volunteers with no support – financial or otherwise – from central or local government. These hubs were often able to rally support from local businesses and charities.

Visa approval: The government's decision to allow and empower civil society to conduct matching between sponsors and guests was initially met with fear, scepticism and delays. However, government staff worked collaboratively with civil society to help accelerate the process and address any glitches. The resulting speed and scale of the visa roll-out are unprecedented in UK history.

The visa programme initially took five weeks from application to approval but it is now not unusual for a decision to be made within days. This efficiency is due in large part to a surge of capacity in the Home Office and a willingness to rethink existing practices. It is a significant improvement on the process for Syrian refugee sponsorship which took some 12-18 months.

Allowing informal matching, mostly by social media, ensured HFU took off very quickly and gathered momentum. The vast majority of hosts were deemed suitable, were welcoming and have continued to offer a safe haven to their matched refugee families.

Value for money and better outcomes: Compared with the Afghan resettlement scheme, HFU was far better value for money. Housing 10,000 Afghan refugees in hotels cost around £438 million per year (£120 per night per refugee). Housing 117,100 Ukrainians in this way would have cost £5.12 billion a year. A conservative estimate puts HFU hosting cost (£500 a month per family) at £702 million a year, therefore saving around £4.4 billion a year.

HFU also produced better outcomes, such as stronger integration. The Afghan families were left in hotels for over 18 months, unable to settle in work, school and communities. Many became socially isolated, targets of far-right aggression and at risk of becoming institutionalised. This has had some serious financial, political, social, educational and emotional knock-on effects. The sharp contrast should inform future policy- and decision-making.

Collaboration: From the earliest point possible there was excellent open communication between government and civil society. This led to collaboration across different government departments, between senior civil servants and

with a range of NGOs, groups and organisations including those initially sceptical or even openly hostile to the scheme. HFU has been run by a truly collaborative cross-government entity, with strong ties to local government, which has enabled its relative success.

Challenges

Despite the triumph of HFU, there were challenges (some of which persist).

Matching: The matching process is not straightforward. Experienced organisations were overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the response when they had to rapidly scale up and develop a digital matching mechanism. Digital agencies and localised groups coped better. Most matches, however, were done through social media.⁴

Safeguarding: Local authorities rapidly created safeguarding and mandatory welfare-checking mechanisms that ruled out many inappropriate hosts before they received refugees. However, a few incidents still arose, casting a shadow over the scheme. The continuing safeguarding of hosts and guests remains vitally important, especially as Ukrainians move to longer-term accommodation options with less support.

Finance: Given that the war in Ukraine continues, and with the UK facing a cost-of-living crisis and limited local housing authority capacity, there remains a significant risk of the hosting scheme not being sustainable. Some hosts are terminating their hosting commitments early. An increase in thank-you payments for hosts helped to mitigate this risk but financial pressures continue to present a challenge for some hosts and guests.

Long-term housing: The lack of available social housing and affordable private rental properties for Ukrainians to move into after they leave their hosting arrangements has caused many hosts and guests to ask the government for urgent help for refugees trying to secure appropriate long-term accommodation. There is still huge goodwill from the majority of hosts who are willing to extend their hosting

but a growing number of refugees do not have secure housing.

Support services: Despite the generous funding provided to local government by central government to support refugees, the services available varied considerably from area to area and the burden often landed on hosts and community hubs when it came to meeting the day-to-day support for language acquisition, childcare, mental health, integration and transport.

Mental health: Many of those fleeing war in Ukraine have suffered bereavement and trauma, yet our mental health systems are already at capacity. Most hosts have received no training in hosting, identifying sexual exploitation or trafficking, providing cross-cultural support, dealing with trauma or promoting successful integration. The provision of basic training before and during hosting arrangements – and making such training mandatory – might have helped reduce mental health difficulties.

Employment: Many Ukrainians in the UK left behind well-paid jobs yet have been unable to secure equivalent employment here. Many are taking up entry-level jobs as cleaners and carers, or other jobs for which they are overqualified. While this may be of some help to local communities, and can help the Ukrainians financially and with integration, there is growing frustration over this lack of fulfilment for refugees and the waste of skills which would be valuable to the UK economy. Because many Ukrainian refugees in the UK are women with children, they may face additional difficulties in finding employment that is flexible. They do not have the support networks or financial security to seek help outside school hours or during school holidays. English language difficulties and mental health struggles exacerbate the issue.

What next for Ukrainians in the UK?

Despite these challenges, the vast majority of Ukrainians have experienced a warm welcome in the UK and have achieved unprecedented levels of integration given the timescale and

numbers involved. As the war continues, public sympathy should not be taken for granted, however. Hosts were initially asked to welcome Ukrainian guests for six months but for some this has tripled because of challenges in sourcing longer-term housing. This situation risks losing goodwill, and it is vital that the UK's compassionate, innovative and collaborative approach be extended. There are four interrelated areas of need to be addressed:

Welcome: Ongoing support for hosts and new arrivals is needed. This could include continued initiatives offering practical support and welcome from the public, best-practice sharing between different local government and community groups, and investment by national government in integration.

Welfare: Many Ukrainian refugees face employment, housing and communication challenges, adding to the anxieties they already have about friends and family in Ukraine and their own uncertain future. Investing in the provision of sufficient, appropriate and timely welfare support would benefit the Ukrainians, including the large cohort of traumatised children, and increase their chances of becoming happy and productive members of our society and workforce.

Work: Many Ukrainians in the UK are now feeling exhausted, frustrated or humiliated with their work situation. Implementing measures to support refugees in finding employment that is more aligned with their skills and qualifications is crucial. Accelerating pathways into work through continued ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) support, faster recognition of qualifications and provision of transferable skills workshops would promote greater financial independence and the entry of Ukrainians into the UK workforce, especially in areas where there are shortages.

Worthwhile housing: Affordability and location of housing are key obstacles, with many Ukrainians in the UK struggling to find landlords prepared to take a tenant on benefits. Providing additional incentives may enable

and encourage hosts to continue, or landlords to come forward. Further measures, such as the possibility of demountable (modular, moveable) homes, need to be explored to ensure sufficient housing stock in the long term.

Potential for future initiatives

HFU has been more successful and cost-effective than any other method of refugee hosting used in the past 70 years in the UK. The government's willingness to take risks, act with compassion, collaborate with civil society and optimise processes can and should be redeployed for other refugee groups and vulnerable people.

A best practice guide – documenting the approach used to construct the programme; delineating the roles of central government, local government and community groups; and outlining both the successes and potential for improvement – could provide a step-by-step plan to be rapidly put into action in the event of future crises.

So far, the HFU scheme has not been used for other vulnerable groups. Sanctuary Foundation has called on the government to extend the scheme to include Sudanese refugees, especially those who have family that have settled in the UK already. There does

seem to be a special openness to Ukrainians that is different to other groups. Some attribute this to racism, others to the strategic significance of a war in Europe.

There is evidence to suggest many HFU hosts would be willing to step forward again. By preserving their experience and knowledge in a database, we can optimise the chances of responding in a similarly effective and efficient fashion should the need arise. Meanwhile we should also celebrate. The UK has rolled out a generous and hugely beneficial scheme of which we can all be proud.

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1. Around 53,000 have arrived this way: bit.ly/ukraine-family-scheme
2. gov.uk/register-interest-homes-ukraine
3. Total arrivals of Ukraine Scheme visa-holders in the UK was 180,600 as of 10 July 2023. This included 53,000 arrivals via the Ukraine Family Scheme and 127,600 arrivals via the Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme: bit.ly/ukraine-family-scheme
4. In November 2022 The Office of National Statistics reported: "Over one-third (36%) of those who are currently hosting guests reported meeting their guests directly through social media. Other commonly reported routes included through a formal matching service or organisation (19%), and through an informal local network or organisation (16%)."
bit.ly/experiences-homes-for-ukraine