

APPG for London

Minutes of the meeting held on Monday 23 May 2022

Parliamentarians in attendance:

Fleur Anderson MP
Ruth Cadbury MP
Florence Eshalomi MP
Sir Bob Neill MP (chairing)
Catherine West MP

Speakers:

Eva Barnsley, Principal Policy and Project Officer, London Councils
Mark Billings, Head of Housing Options, Homelessness & Standards, Hillingdon Council
Maria Iglesias, Head of Operations & Business Development, Praxis
Laura Osborne, Director of Corporate Affairs, London First
Carly Whyborn, Head of Services, Reset Communities and Refugees

Also in attendance:

Officers from the Secretariat at London Councils
Bethan Lant, Training, Development & Advocacy Manager, Praxis
John McKenna, Public Affairs Manager, London First
Sam Robins, Senior Parliamentary Assistant to Bob Neill MP
Nabeel Sheraz, Adviser to David Simmonds MP

1) Eva Barnsley, Principal Policy and Project Officer, London Councils

- Eva gave an overview of the three Ukraine visa schemes: Family visa scheme, Homes for Ukraine and Ukrainian extension scheme.
- She explained the responsibilities of local authorities from receiving refugees, to safeguarding and accommodation checks, to more recently, rematching Ukrainians with sponsors.
- She raised issues around homelessness presentations and unaccompanied minors (who are not technically eligible for Homes for Ukraine).
- She explained how London Councils has been regularly meeting with London boroughs, government colleagues (mostly from DLUHC) and other partners to discuss key issues and potential solutions to supporting Ukrainian arrivals
- Five key asks from London boroughs:

- Clarity on whether there will be alignment between visa routes.
- Improved data sharing and collaboration – No data currently shared on Family visa arrivals. Limited information on how and when families will arrive in the UK. Limited data on health needs. Data quality issues on Foundry (the Homes for Ukraine data portal).
- More guidance on new rematching process when/if sponsorship arrangement breaks down.
- Clarity of legal status of unaccompanied minors and legal framework for assessing status/needs.
- Government to work with local authorities to help secure housing for Ukrainians after six-month period ends. If not a clear policy/housing fund – we could see homelessness presentations.

2) Mark Billings, Head of Housing Options, Homelessness and Standards, London Borough of Hillingdon

- Mark gave an update on Hillingdon’s role as a port of entry. Their long-standing relationship with Heathrow has helped. Heathrow are seeing 100 Ukrainian arrivals a day. Most refugees are coming into Terminal 5 but Luton, Stansted are also receiving arrivals. At Heathrow there is a permanent onsite social work team, as well as signposting and direct interventions, though the latter have been required on very few occasions. Majority of Ukrainians arrive safely and travel on safely. There have been a couple of occasions of missing sponsors, but Hillingdon have only had to accommodate 3 households to date.
- Hillingdon have had 155 sponsor requests so far – 44 households have arrived with 126 people including 45 children. 26 properties have been rejected with reasons including severe overcrowding, lack of landlord permission and disrepair.
- Mark highlighted that council teams have been acting as one to ensure placements are safe. In Hillingdon, properties are inspected before and after families arrive. HR, Counter Fraud and Customer Services teams are also involved.
- Hillingdon works with Trinity Homeless which provide floating homelessness support, as well as other support such as getting NI numbers. There have been 35 homelessness presentations so far with 21 going into temporary accommodation. Majority of these are breakdown of Family visa scheme placements with no space for new families. They have 350 additional sponsors on rematching system – Inspection of properties and safeguarding checks are needed beforehand. They will be able to use the rematching route as an alternative to the homelessness route, but only for those that have arrived under the Homes for Ukraine visa route.
- Mark highlighted that Hillingdon has a close working relationship with DLUHC, London Councils, GLA and other sub regional and pan London partners. They also speak to other ports of entry to share support/learning.

3) Maria Iglesias, Head of Operations & Business Development, Praxis

- Praxis is a charity based in East London who support 2000 refugees a year mainly through immigration advice. They have been working with local authorities in East London to help with Ukrainian arrivals such as information events, as well as training and information sharing for councils.
- Maria highlighted the lack of support for people navigating the different schemes including some Ukrainians applying to the Homes for Ukraine scheme after arriving in the UK. She raised concerns about the Family visa scheme such as local authorities not knowing who is arriving under this and when, and councils not being covered for costs such as school admissions.
- She also raised concerns about the passport stamp which proves Ukrainians can get access to employment and highlighted a particular case of a post office not accepting this as proof of entitlement. Issues like this create anxiety for already traumatised people - and there is a lack of trauma support for arrivals.
- Key asks: Home Office to share information on arrivals with local authorities. Family visa scheme should come with same financial package as Homes for Ukraine. Biometric passports to be given to arrivals as soon as possible.
- Maria concluded by saying that however imperfect, the schemes show willingness to help and should be extended to everyone who is seeking asylum. She raised the difference in approach between different groups of refugees/asylum seekers.

4) Laura Osborne, Director of Corporate Affairs, London First

- London First has been focused on how the business community can support the refugee effort. This has included helping to pair businesses with charities, such as through the Refugee Employment Network, to try to fill employment gaps.
- Different businesses are able to give different levels of support according to their size. London First has a pledge scheme for London businesses for the next iteration of the Homes for Ukraine of the scheme, including employment and accommodation offers. London First welcomes being connected to any community groups across the city. You can see a list of all of the businesses who have pledged so far here: https://www.londonfirst.co.uk/campaigns/business-support-for-ukraine?utm_source=web&utm_medium=front&utm_campaign=ukr&utm_id=ukr
- London First are also working with DLUHC on Direct Sponsorship Scheme. Jobs will be very important for next iteration.

5) Carly Whyborn, Head of Services, Reset Communities and Refugees

- Reset was known previously for community sponsorship and helping refugees to settle into life across the UK. There are 65 community sponsorship groups in London.
- Reset are now working on the Homes for Ukraine scheme – Matching services over the last 8 weeks. Most refugees who want to be sponsored want to come to London as there is a perception there is work here. There are fewer sponsors in London and

there are more sponsors than refugees at the moment but there will be growing need if the war continues.

- Carly raised that sponsorship is hard as people are welcoming strangers into their homes, but the best welcome is something we can do collectively. Everyone who offers to be a sponsor through Reset's platform must come to a webinar and every refugee is given a minimum of two matches; their approach puts the refugee at the centre of the matching process. They also ask that refugees and sponsors meet online to start building a relationship.
- Carly raised they are hearing a lot of stories of sponsorship breakdown. Rematching is already going on informally. It's very important that authorities catch up with it and make sure it is safer.
- She raised issues around sponsors not knowing the difference between the Homes for Ukraine and Family schemes, and discovering they are not eligible for the payment.

6) Q&A and Discussion

Points raised included:

- £350 monthly 'thank you' payment will be received a month in arrears.
- Haringey Connected Communities was raised as a good example of helping with some difficult cases. There are versions of this across different boroughs.
- A number of local authorities have learning to share on how to best support and integrate the arrivals because of the support they have provided Afghan evacuees over the last nine months.
- Some businesses are seeing that employees/sponsors need to take time off work to support people they are sponsoring.
- Need for better information sharing as neither the local authority nor the Home Office know when a refugee is arriving from the data the Home Office are collecting
- Some people have found getting work quite difficult so a central point of information would make it easier. Laura raised that there was an early disconnect with jobs, but this is improving. The preference from business is to be a part of sponsorship partnerships. Some regions are setting up jobs boards, but the preference is for one national jobs board.
- Issues were raised around temporary accommodation. The majority of homelessness presentations are from those on the Family visa. Ukrainian families also don't need to accept sponsorship if they are already in temporary accommodation. There is pressure on public services from this crisis on top of others.
- The rematching process will be a big challenge for local authorities over the next few weeks. There's also a need to prepare potential sponsors that refugees could arrive at any moment if there is a breakdown in relationships. This means that safeguarding and property checks need to be done at pace.
- Issues of potential exploitation of Ukrainian arrivals and risk of them accepting work that could lead to modern slavery situations were also raised.

- The number of Afghan refugees and asylum seekers still in hotels from previous crises and the challenges resulting from that, such as the impact that moving hotel can have on school journeys and work.
- The pressure on public services from this crisis on top of others, with many staff doing this work on top of their usual jobs.
- Impact of the asylum dispersal policy consultation.

The meeting was brought to a close.