



Open Report on behalf of Glen Garrod, Executive Director - Adult Care & Community Wellbeing

Report to:	Public Protection & Community Scrutiny Committee
Date:	08 November 2022
Subject:	Briefing paper - Lincolnshire's Ukraine response

Summary:

This report provides assurance on the progress of arrangements established by Lincolnshire County Council, Lincolnshire's District Councils, and multi-agency partners to deliver the government requirements in relation to the Ukraine humanitarian crisis.

Actions Required:

The Public Protection and Communities Scrutiny Committee is invited to review and comment on the contents of this report and provide feedback on activities undertaken to date.

1. Background

In March 2022, in response to the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, the government launched the Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme, Homes for Ukraine (HfU); offering a route of entry to those who may have someone here willing to provide them with a home (sponsors). In April 2022, a paper was shared with the committee to confirm the emergency arrangements and structures established by partners, in response to government requirements.

This briefing provides an update on the HfU Scheme in the following areas:

- a) Latest data and the progress of Lincolnshire's delivery of Phase 1 (0-6 months)
- b) Planning and the establishment of arrangements for Lincolnshire's response to Phase 2 (6-12 months)

The government have delegated several responsibilities to Councils in relation to the HfU scheme, including:

- Accommodation suitability checks

- Suitability checks on sponsors and household members
- Initiating DBS checks on sponsor and 16+ household members
- Post arrival welfare checks
- Administration of £200 interim guest payments
- Administration of optional £350 monthly sponsor payments
- Rematching guests to new hosts following sponsorship breakdowns or safeguarding concerns
- Community integration and wrap around support including (but not limited to) access to education, support to access benefits and/or employment, access to English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), support service referrals, etc.
- Homelessness assistance

Phase 1 (April – September 2022)

Since the last briefing in April, Lincolnshire has continued to welcome Ukrainian guests joining their hosts around the county. The arrival rate has slowed in comparison to April/May. Lincolnshire County Council (LCC) were notified of an average of 50 new guests in July and August 2022. As of 1st October, over 900 HfU guests have arrived and stayed within the county.

Anticipated arrival numbers fluctuate as some circumstances change following visa applications. However, we are currently anticipating just over 1300 arrivals in total based on applications to date.

Lincolnshire has the 17th highest number of HfU visa applications nationally and 2nd in the region. The LCC HfU Team continue to be actively involved in fortnightly calls with the Strategic Migration Partnership hosted within East Midlands Councils.

Resettlement partners have continued to engage in delivering the workstreams overseen by the Ukraine Coordination Group chaired by Samantha Neal, Assistant Director, Prevention and Early Intervention, LCC and through the pre-existing Resettlement Partnership chaired by Phil Roberts, Assistant Chief Executive at North Kesteven District Council (NKDC).

Since the last update, we have successfully developed and mobilised several partnership projects and processes to ensure Lincolnshire meets the requirements of the scheme.

Accommodation, suitability & welfare checks

LCC instructs District Council Single Point of Contacts (SPOCs) when a new accommodation offer requires inspection. A performance framework quickly identifies any capacity issues or delays. To date very few accommodation offers have been deemed unsuitable.

LCC initiate DBS and local record checks. If suitability checks identify a potential cause for concern, further information is gathered, and the case is considered by a dedicated multi-agency safeguarding panel.

When a sponsor confirms the arrival of their guest, Lincolnshire Fire & Rescue officers visit to ensure the guests are safe and well, provide fire safety advice, share translated information signposting guests to local services, including safeguarding information and details for the Wellbeing Service as a contact for advice and/or support. This visit also validates the sponsor's claim of the monthly thank you payment.

Guest/sponsor payments

As soon as guests arrive, they are invited by email to apply for their £200 interim payment. Interim payments are promptly paid through a Charis voucher that can be cashed in a PayPoint shop. District Councils verify the applications. Wellbeing Lincs administer the vouchers.

Sponsor 'thank you' payments are administered by the relevant District Council. A countywide approach is in place underpinned by a HfU payments process that all Districts housing and finance leads are sighted on.

We made a local decision to contribute toward the costs of school uniforms following feedback from hosts and guests that this was a strain on their finances. Ukrainian parents can claim additional Charis vouchers towards the cost of school uniforms once the school confirms enrolment to LCC.

Free school meal funding is also provided to schools to enable all HfU children to instantly access free school meals when they enrol.

Wrap-around support

Sponsors are expected to provide a basic level of support to welcome their guests, helping them to register with a GP, access local and public services and open a bank account. Information for sponsors and guests is available through the gov.uk website, on LCC website and on a Ukraine section on Connect to Support Lincolnshire.

In addition, a dedicated Wellbeing Service through Wellbeing Lincs is in place to provide advice, guidance, and signpost to other services.

LCC Inclusion and Attendance Team are contacting sponsors where it is identified that an arrived school age child is not yet in school.

LCC Early Years are contacting all HfU families with a pre-school age child and proactively inviting them to the nearest Children's Centre for a welcome visit undertaken by an Early Years Practitioner.

LCC Children's Health are utilising the arrival data to ensure applicable children are accessing universal services from Health Visiting Teams.

Lincolnshire Voluntary Engagement Team (LVET) have been commissioned to co-ordinate community-based wrap-around support. LVET, Voluntary Community Sector (VCS),

Wellbeing Service, Community Foundation, Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and LCC are developing and maintaining access to ESOL, support to access benefits, employment, etc.

A Ukraine Project Officer, employed by UpBeat Communities is working with community groups to identify gaps, share best practice and increase community capacity.

LCC also commissioned UpBeat Communities to deliver a series of six in-person and two virtual training sessions / workshops for existing sponsors and prospective hosts to support them in understanding how to host well and deal with difficulties that may arise.

DWP are coordinating outreach events, the first of which was held on 27th July in Lincoln, the second has been arranged for 2nd November in Grantham. These will continue to be rolled out countywide, to support access to employment for the Ukraine cohort.

Lincolnshire Community Foundation have fund-raised for and launched the Ukraine Welcome Fund. This offers access to small grants to purchase specific items. Over 50% of applicants have asked for support to purchase push-bikes as a means of transport around local areas. To enable greater numbers to be supported, owing to the positive impact this independence may have on hosting arrangements, HfU grant funding is being utilised to top-up the donated amount to ensure the grants can still be accessed by those in need.

LCC are mobilising a light touch application and monitoring process to enable Community Groups who are supporting guests and hosts to apply for small grants. This mirrors the covid community group support arrangements. HfU funding will be utilised to enable and sustain the sector through the winter and into 2023.

Communications

NKDC are hosting a dedicated part-time Communications Officer, funded through the HfU grant, who is engaging with colleagues across all workstreams. This is enabling us to share a fortnightly HfU e-newsletter which responds to sponsor/guest questions and feedback, and partner information.

Arrangement breakdowns and Rematching

Where hosting arrangements break down, guests are eligible for LA homelessness support. A HfU breakdown process, codesigned by LCC, District Councils and Wellbeing Lincs, is in place and monitored via operational multiagency team meetings.

When it is determined that it is unviable or unsafe for the sponsorship to continue or because of failed checks and an inability to place the guest as planned, councils must support the guests in finding another host. Around 12% of arrangements have broken down or the circumstances changed, within the first 6 months.

Rematching is coordinated by the LCC HfU Team working with the Wellbeing Service and District Council Homeless Teams. We are using the Expression of Interest (EOI) data, local

connections through other hosts and dedicated communications encouraging more Lincolnshire hosts to come forward to identify alternative arrangements. This work is resource heavy. Experience to date is that a single rematch on average equates to more than 20 hours of work across several organisations.

Phase 2 (October – March 2023)

On 5 August 2022, detailed guidance was issued on options where sponsorships end after 6 months.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/welcome-a-guide-for-ukrainians-arriving-in-the-uk/your-living-arrangements-4-to-6-months-after-moving-to-the-uk>

- Guests and hosts are encouraged to discuss their future plans after four months. The best option in most cases is to remain in their current arrangement where possible.
- Guidance is given around the end of sponsorship pre-6 months (owing to breakdown, failed host checks, or safeguarding concerns), prioritising contact with Local Authorities (LA) in first instance. This aligns with our existing processes.
- Contingency options are to rematch themselves with a new host, (either independently, via Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE), or with support of employer or current host), to request rematching support from LA, or to seek private rental arrangements.
- Guidance around renting privately is signposted, including online calculators for Housing Benefit / Universal Credit, available online in Ukrainian/Russian.
- Information around relocating out of the area is provided, encouraging contact with LAs around arranging housing checks, transfer of funding, etc. Caveats around school place availability are highlighted.
- Reminder of need to obtain British Residency Permit (BRP) to extend stay to 3 years is included, alongside information around finding work, ESOL, and financial support.
- The final fallback option is to contact LA for further support.

Additional guidance for LAs and for sponsors was added to existing guidance. A suite of national links offering further support for sponsors was also made available.

The focus for the HfU partnership organisations and for sponsors/guests is shifting from managing arrivals and the initial settling in period, to 'what happens next'. The first cohort of 94 sponsors who received their guests in April reached the minimum term of 6 months in October; another 135 reach this point in November, and 72 more in December.

Nationally there is considerable emerging risk to homelessness services, arising from pressures around the private rented sector, affordable housing demand from other resettlement schemes, and full (mandatory) asylum dispersal, etc.

To try and identify the level of local risk, on a rolling programme of work, LCC's HfU Team is contacting all hosts whose guests arrived 4 months previously to 'check in', gather

information, offer advice and RAG rate the arrangement based on its sustainability (at the time of the telephone call). Phone calls have also enabled advice/guidance/signposting to be given that may prevent arrangements from becoming unstable and/or breaking down. It is clear that the hosting experience differs significantly from one arrangement to another.

Positively, 81% of 200 hosts contacted to date are indicating that they will continue to offer accommodation beyond the 6 months initial period. This compares well to some other authorities.

That said, 16% of guest groups (of the surveyed hosts to date) may require alternative accommodation within the county.

Lincolnshire Host Expression of Interest (EOI) survey

LCC have developed and shared a local survey to 2970 Lincolnshire residents who expressed an interest in hosting via the national system at the outset of the scheme but were yet to match with a Ukrainian guest. Of these, 1037 responded and 371 indicated they remain willing to host Ukrainian guests.

Many EOI hosts are offering accommodation in rural areas which may present issues in accessing employment, schools and other services. These challenges related to more isolated settings can contribute to arrangements breaking down. That said, some rural arrangements are flourishing so we are not wholly discounting these offers.

LCC is working on establishing a 'ready homes' list from the EOI responses which will capture the offers considered most suitable to meet needs. We will work with DC housing officers to initiate accommodation inspections and DBS checks on these hosts in advance, so they are ready to go in the event of a rematch requirement. This may avoid individuals/families having to go into temporary, emergency accommodation for extended periods.

Managing expectations and communicating key messages

To compliment the national 4–6-month guidance, we are communicating key local messages directly to hosts and guests to manage expectations and ensure that they are aware of the options available.

1. Where possible, continue in the existing arrangement.
2. Where the existing arrangement cannot continue, find a new host in or out of Lincolnshire (with LA support if required).
3. Where a guest is considering independent accommodation, they can look to rent private accommodation in or out of Lincolnshire (more advice on renting is in the detailed guidance).
4. If it safe and they wish to, the guests can return to the Ukraine (which some guests are choosing to do).

We are aware of over 60 Ukrainian guest groups who have already successfully moved on into independent accommodation without requiring local authority support.

Mitigating homelessness

We have agreed partnership protocols in place where there is risk of homelessness owing to either crisis (immediate sponsorship breakdown) or a planned end of arrangement (where the host has confirmed they cannot accommodate their guests beyond their initial commitment and the guests cannot secure alternative accommodation).

Where the guest does not have sufficient resource to resolve their own housing issue, and a suitable alternative host cannot be identified, the national fall-back is emergency, temporary accommodation to be provided by the local Housing Authority. Any associated homelessness costs are being covered by the HfU grant.

In addition, District Council Housing Teams can support through Housing Options appointments and a Personal Housing Plan. Aligned to business-as-usual Homelessness duties, a financial support package is available to prevent guests at risk of homelessness going into, or to support them out of emergency, temporary accommodation. Subject to eligibility and affordability assessments this may include help with deposits and rent in advance payments to aid access into the private rental market.

Recognising the potential additional pressure on housing teams, the HfU grant has been used to fund x3 additional Homelessness Officers (covering the county and working closely with LCC's HfU Team and Wellbeing Lincs) for the next 12 months.

Where guests are placed in emergency, temporary accommodation or moving-on into independent accommodation, floating housing related support will be available, if necessary, for the most vulnerable.

We have begun engagement with private sector landlords and housing providers to alert them to the number of Ukrainian guests that have moved into the county, share any detail surrounding the barriers being reported by guests trying to access the market and capture offers of available accommodation. It is early stages, but this work will progress over the next few months.

We have recently learnt that some councils across the country have taken decisions to offer increased payments above the £350 optional host thank you payments. Some are offering temporary increases over the winter months; some are offering one-off additional payments. Some are offering flat-rate increases, whilst others are offering a sliding scale of payment increases based on the number of guests. Other councils are offering no increase. It is a mixed and unequal picture.

We have asked the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities for urgent clarification of any national plans. In parallel we have convened a meeting to discuss arrangements with colleagues across the East Midlands region. We are considering

options for increased payments over the winter and will continue to communicate key messages to hosts as this work develops.

2. Conclusion

This report provides an overview of delivery to date and sets out our ongoing arrangements. We have recently asked LCC’s Internal Audit Team to undertake a review to ensure the partnership processes we have in place continue to provide assurance that the government requirements are being fully met in Lincolnshire. To date this review has not identified any gaps or concerns.

3. Consultation

a) Risks and Impact Analysis

A full risk register is being maintained by the Ukraine Refugee Coordination Group.

4. Background Papers

The following background papers as defined in the Local Government Act 1972 were relied upon in the writing of this report.

Document title	Where the document can be viewed
Guidance - Apply for a visa under the Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme (Homes for Ukraine)	https://www.gov.uk/guidance/apply-for-a-visa-under-the-ukraine-sponsorship-scheme
Homes for Ukraine - Guidance for councils	https://www.gov.uk/guidance/homes-for-ukraine-guidance-for-councils
Homes for Ukraine – Sponsor guidance	https://www.gov.uk/guidance/homes-for-ukraine-sponsor-guidance
Homes for Ukraine – 4-6 month guidance for guests	Your living arrangements 4 to 6 months after moving to the UK - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

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