

**Public
Key Decision - No**

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Title/Subject Matter: Homes for Ukraine Scheme

Meeting/Date: Overview & Scrutiny (Customer and Partnerships)
– 6TH April 2023

Executive Portfolio: Community & Health (COUNCILLOR B PITT)

Report by: Community Development Officer (C HUDSON)

Ward(s) affected: All

Executive Summary:

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel is invited to comment on the work that has been undertaken to implement the Homes for Ukraine Scheme following the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, in February last year.

Homes for Ukraine is a government scheme that was introduced in March 2022 to offer accommodation to those wishing to flee the war. A scheme never seen before, asked UK residents to open their homes to individuals and families from Ukraine for a minimum of 6 months. In return, they were offered a monthly 'thank you' payment. District Councils were given responsibility for overseeing the scheme whilst supporting both sponsors and guests. One year on, the Overview and Scrutiny Panel is asked to review the contents of the report and consider if and how often they would like to receive further updates on the scheme.

RECOMMENDATION:

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel is invited to comment on the development of Warm Spaces in response to the cost-of-living crisis. A presentation will be made to the Panel at the meeting and a report has been produced with further information.

1.0 BACKGROUND

- 1.1 Following the invasion of Ukraine by Russia on 24th February 2022, the UK government set up a new scheme asking UK citizens to open their homes to those living in Ukraine before 1st January 2022 to stay with them for a minimum of 6 months. On Monday 14th March the Government opened the register for potential sponsors to register their interest and the visa application process opened on 18th March, this scheme became known as the Homes for Ukraine scheme.
- 1.2 Anyone wanting to host Ukrainian guests had the responsibility of finding that person or persons themselves either through existing contacts, associations with organisations such as RESET or OPORA or through social media. When a decision was made to host, one of the parties applied for the visa. A check of the Police National Computer (PNC) by the home office was then carried out on the host and if clear, approval issued and the application processed.
- 1.3 Foundry was rolled out by DLUCH (Department for Levelling up, Communities and Housing) to manage and store the application and arrival data as well as marking completion of the safeguarding checks by each council. Local Authorities were given responsibility for overseeing the application process which was established as:
 1. Visa application received through Foundry.
 2. Email sent to sponsor with link to apply for appropriate DBS check for all adults over 16 living in or regularly visiting the property.
 3. Property is checked by a member of the Community Protection and Enforcement or Environmental Health Team to ensure it is safe and suitable.
 4. Arrival information emailed to Sponsor explaining steps to be taken when guest arrives (in early days this was done via fortnightly teams meeting).
 5. On guests' arrival, facilitate the delivery of £200 subsistence payment to each person.
 6. Within 10 days of arrival, visit property and complete welfare check which included confirmation of receipt of £200, information and support with applying for Universal Credit, Child benefit, registering with GP, applying for school places, securing their BRP's and answering any questions and concerns. Take the bank details of the sponsor in order to start paying their monthly 'thank you' payment of £350 and again answer any questions they have.
 7. Signpost to the online welcome information pack that was put together as a priority before any guests arrived with information on the local area. This was published in English as well as Ukrainian and Russian.

1.4 In Huntingdonshire, we welcomed guests from the end of March 2022 and to date we have had **376** arrivals across **256** Accommodations. Most families consist of mother and children or single ladies, however there are a small number of men. Two new babies have been born and twins arrived in February.

2.0 SUPPORTING OUR GUESTS AND THEIR HOSTS

2.1 After the first few weeks of the scheme, it was apparent that the two essential things needed by guests on arrival to the UK were:

- a) ESOL classes
- b) Employment opportunities

2.2 Being able to offer these as soon as possible meant that guests could integrate faster, secure a variety of employment opportunities as many guests had good jobs in Ukraine however the lack of written or spoken English meant getting an equally well paid job in the UK was difficult. Ultimately this is what would be necessary to enable guests to become independent in the timescales set out by the government (6-12 months living with a sponsor).

2.3 On 7th April we held our first support meeting for sponsors. It was an opportunity to discuss with them the process they would go through before receiving their guests, what they might expect in the early days and the support being offered by the District Council. Over the months the content and frequency of the meetings changed. The meetings were held every 2 weeks in the early months but are now less frequent, being held every 6 weeks or when needed. The meetings are now focussed on a topic that people can choose to attend if they feel it is of interest. We still host new sponsor sessions but also sessions based around Rematching, moving on, finding work and more. There is always an opportunity to ask questions at the end too.

2.4 Not all sponsor/ guest relationships have been successful and when there is a relationship breakdown, it is the Council's responsibility to carefully manage the situation. In the case of needing a rematch we look at a number of factors such as if the child is settled in a school and where the parent works and we try to rematch with someone as close as possible. This is not always possible due to the low numbers of active EOI's (expression of interest sponsors) being in the correct place.

2.5 There have been issues around placing guests in a village or town with little or no public transport as it makes finding employment very difficult, however as you might imagine, generally speaking the properties with more than one room available are often in the more remote areas and not in the town centres. We match as sensitively as possible taking into account the circumstances of the guest(s)

3.0 MONTH BY MONTH OVERVIEW OF ACTIVITY

3.1 MARCH 2022

- 3 arrivals
- Our first guests arrived on 29th March 2022, a mother and child with the mother-in-law too.
- First checks and welfare visits completed and reflections made by those completing them on how to improve moving forward.

APRIL 2022

- 62 arrivals.
- We held our first Host Support meeting on Teams. All sponsors were invited to attend.
- We decided that we wanted to offer our guests an opportunity to come together and make friends and connections so along with a small group of volunteers and the kindness of Buckden Towers providing free space to meet every week, we were able to start to develop a meeting opportunity that included a meal. The reason for this was to allow the sponsor families to have one day a week to have dinner on their own and to have a little breathing space. All food was donated by local companies including the local Butchers, Tesco, Artisan Bakers and Waitrose. Anne Furbank another local business offered to wash and press all donated clothing items as well as making a very generous donation themselves. The first event was held on 26th April 2022 and still continues now with support from most of the businesses that were involved from the beginning.
- A more localised group was set up in St Neots at Loves Farm Community House, which included an English class followed by lunch and support to look for employment.

MAY 2022

- 65 arrivals
- 4th May BBC Look East news coverage was filmed at the towers to shine a light on what brought people here and how sponsors were coping. It was a positive piece and showed how the community had come together to give their support.
- 7th May Wensleydale Dental practise ran a free clinic for Ukrainian guests to come by appointment for a free check up with the promise of free further treatment if it was needed. 32 people attended.
- Offers from Molbys for free haircuts for men any day after 4pm or on Monday night by appointment for ladies (still ongoing), GMC Pool offered a pool party each Monday evening for 6 weeks, Kimbolton pool offered free use of the pool via tickets which were available during Welfare visits.
- A pizza night at Buckden Towers with 40 pizzas supplied by Pizza Express.

- A 'welcome hub ' was set up with the support of sponsors in Ramsey offering the people in Ramsey and surrounding area the chance to meet fortnightly and also included a monthly sponsor met up.

JUNE 2022

- 61 arrivals
- 7th June the team At Buckden Towers along with the District Council, Hotel Chocolat and Anne Furbank organised a family picnic with a live band for all guests and sponsor families to attend.
- Issues identified in that the guests had packed and arrived with only winter clothing and as the weather was warming they had nothing to wear. Through the free shop we were able to source flip flops, light summer clothing and socks/underwear that was also in need to give out on a Tuesday evening.
- Barracudas got in touch to offer employment to two guests to help with the summer scheme where all Ukrainian children would be offered the opportunity to attend a summer camp free of charge. We suggested some ladies with the correct qualifications and experience and they were given work throughout the summer and beyond.

JULY 2022

- 27 arrivals
- We partnered with CRRC (Cambridge Refugee resettlement Campaign) and Laptops for Learning to give all Ukrainian guests the opportunity to receive a free laptop, tablet or phone by applying through the link sent to their sponsors. The ability to get online was not only important to keep in touch with family back home but to access online learning platforms for language lessons – something vitally important to be able to secure employment and to communicate.
- As a county we worked with Stagecoach to offer 10 day travel passes to each Ukrainian guest that arrived. Stagecoach covered half of the cost and Government funding was used to fund the other half, recognising that access to public transport was essential.

AUGUST 2022

- 30 arrivals
- On 22 August, Home-start Cambridgeshire donated 50 brand new pairs of school and play shoes for our Ukrainian children. They also donated children's games, toys and baby items that were gratefully received.
- Godmanchester and Huntingdon Twinning Association organised a welcome event including, tea, cake and a tour of the town centre including the Cromwell Museum.
- Huntingdon Rotary Club organised an afternoon tea for all guests at Huntingdon Methodist church. It was very well attended, and we were able to get photos with the Ukrainian flag flying outside Pathfinder House to celebrate Ukrainian Independence Day which was that very day, 24th August 2022.

SEPTEMBER 2022

- 23 arrivals
- St Ives Rotary Club began a fortnightly friendship meeting of local guests at the Corn Exchange in the town centre. It was a buffet and cuppa event with plenty of opportunities to meet others and to ask questions. The 'free shop' attended allowing guests to pick up donated items such as clothing, toiletries and children's items.

OCTOBER 2022

- 10 arrivals
- The Mormon church donated over 100 almost new winter coats for children to help lessen the financial burden of purchasing them coming into the colder weather. They were made available at the social events in Buckden and St Ives along with other donated items.

NOVEMBER 2022

- 24 arrivals
- From the 1st November and in response to the increase in the cost of living, the decision was made to uplift sponsor payments. Rather than a blanket amount per accommodation we decided to pay an additional £50 per guest per month. This meant a sponsor with one guest would receive £400 and one with 4 guests would receive £550.

DECEMBER 2022

- 10 arrivals
- Guests were able to celebrate a traditional Christmas in the UK with their sponsor families.
- A Christmas event was held at Buckden Towers that included food, music and a live nativity.
- There was also a children's Christmas party held at the Black Bull in Godmanchester where donations from a number of community members meant that we were able to offer arts and crafts, face painting, fun games and a £10 note for every child and mother to buy something nice with.

JANUARY 2023

- On the 7th January it was Orthodox Ukrainian Christmas day. It was potentially a very sad and distressing time for our guests as it was the first time most had been without their husbands, parents, friends and away from their homeland so we wanted to make it as special as possible. It was open to Guests and their sponsor families allowing them to share in the traditions of their homeland. There were traditional Ukrainian crafts and the Ukrainian Ladies choir singing traditional carols. Everyone brought a plate so there were

traditional Ukrainian dishes like Kutia and also British food like sausage rolls enjoyed by everyone.

4.0 KEY IMPACTS/ RISKS

- 4.1 With the one-year anniversary of the start of the war on 24th February having now passed and no signs of an end in sight, the scheme continues with guests still arriving every week.
- 4.2 For most guests, the prospect of remaining in the UK permanently is looking likely so we need to help them settle, find meaningful long term job opportunities, provide further ESOL learning, integrate them into the community and help to positively support and develop the relationships.
- 4.3 The number one issue affecting those that have been here for 6+ months now is the inability to find affordable housing and then to secure a tenancy. To try to address this we have recruited a housing support worker whose sole responsibility will be to find property, negotiate with landlords and letting agents, build relationships and work on behalf of our Ukrainian guests to find places to live independently.
- 4.4 It is unclear whether Government funding to support those arriving from Ukraine will continue and if it is to cease, when this will be. A reduction or the removal of this funding is likely to impact the District Council's ability to support both guests and sponsors as well as reduce the number of residents being able to offer accommodation.

5.0 SUMMARY

- 5.1 So far 58 Families/individuals have moved from their original sponsors. Of these, 17 have found their own independently rented property with the first being secured on 27th May 2022. 14 guests have gone back to Ukraine and 12 guests have been rematched.
- 5.2 There are currently 15 families looking to rent privately, and we are looking to rematch 4 families for varying reasons.