

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the UK implemented 'Homes for Ukraine' as a Hosting-based reception scheme for those fleeing the war. Romy Wood, Hosting Coordinator at Housing Justice Cymru, explains the programme in the following article, pointing out the flaws, risks and discrimination that come with it.

'HOMES FOR UKRAINE' IN THE UK



By **Romy Wood**, Hosting Coordinator, Housing Justice Cymru

'Hosting' has been happening for a very long time in the UK, both formally and – of course – informally. 'Hosting' is a term used in the refugee and asylum sector for a household offering shelter to a destitute person with fragile immigration status. It is a benevolent act; volunteer hosts are not paid, and their guests are not expected to work in return for shelter. There are organisations of different types and scales all over the UK which run Hosting programmes accommodating people from many different countries across the world. Over the last year, Housing Justice Cymru and its partners have been working on building the Hosting community in Wales. Hosting organisations accommodate people who have no recourse to public funds (NRPF) – no eligibility for local authority accommodation, no right to rent, no permission to work and no benefits. When the Prime Minister first used the word 'hosting' in connection with the migration scheme for displaced people from Ukraine, Hosting organisations received a wave of enquiries from the public and the media.

However, what became 'Homes for Ukraine' is not the same as these Hosting projects. The fundamental difference is that it is limited to people from Ukraine. Hosting charities would not discriminate on the basis of nationality. In terms of the financial arrangements involved, there are stark differences between existing projects and 'Homes for Ukraine'. On the scheme, hosts are offered a payment of £350 per month and Ukrainian guests have permission to work and are eligible for Universal Credit. The £350 does not affect any single person's council tax discount or benefits. Some existing Hosting projects offer hosts expenses or a standard payment towards expenses, but not on the scale of £350 per month. There are hosts who forego their single person's council tax discount because their local authority does not recognise the accommodation solution they are providing. And guests with NRPF manage on payments from charities, not Universal Credit or wages.

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Homes for Ukraine is a UK-wide scheme. Its inception was chaotic, with the government in Westminster making announcements faster than it could consider logistics. It was suggested that members of the public in the UK and people fleeing Ukraine could find each other on social media. The former would then sponsor a visa for the latter, a convoluted process involving uploading documents and completing lengthy forms. Ukrainian refugees were explicitly told by the UK government not to come without a visa, and it should be noted that this requirement circumvents the UK asylum system and does not uphold the United Nations Refugee convention. Homes for Ukraine is a managed migration scheme as well as a hosting scheme. The lack of infrastructure created a space for human trafficking and exploitation, with people advertising themselves online without knowing for sure who they were connecting with. There are chilling reports of trafficking on the borders of Ukraine, and coming to the UK should be a way to escape that, but anyone can set up or abuse a matching portal. UNHCR and organisations from the refugee sector called on the UK government to put safeguards in place to mitigate the risks of online matching, and the UK government then changed its messaging to suggest that charities would match people. Charities of all descriptions received requests from people in and around Ukraine to find them sponsors and homes and requests from frustrated would-be hosts to find them refugees. This went on for two weeks before the government announced an endorsed matching scheme. On [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk) as of 1st July 2022, the frequently asked questions list still includes this sidestep:

“I don’t know the person I’m sponsoring – we met on Facebook – should I give them my passport details?”

Whether to share your personal information is always your decision. But if you have concerns about sharing personal details, you may prefer to fill out the visa application form on behalf of the individuals you are sponsoring. To do this, you will need to ask them for their information.”

The Welsh and Scottish governments have built their own structures around the scheme. To achieve a balance between speed and caution, they became ‘super-sponsors’. People fleeing Ukraine can name the Welsh or Scottish Government as their sponsor and come to a Welcome Centre or Welcome Hub, where they receive initial support and a careful matching with a host or other accommodation provision. Housing Justice Cymru is working with the Welsh Government to put in place a support system for the hosts to help make placements robust and sustainable. Homes for Ukraine hosts are asked to provide accommodation for at least six months, which is a long time to share a bathroom, kitchen and living space. It is not something to take on lightly and everyone involved will benefit from professional guidance as well as the community support networks which have sprung up across the UK.



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There are various scenarios in which someone from Ukraine could become homeless in the UK. Firstly, there are people who arrive to find straight away that their match was entirely unsuitable, inappropriate or abusive. Secondly, breakdowns in relationships with sponsor-hosts are occurring, with individuals and families presenting as homeless to local authorities. Thirdly, there are people who were sponsored by family members on family visas rather than Homes for Ukraine visas, where the family member is unable or unwilling to accommodate them. And then there are people who were already in the UK before the war began, for example on seasonal worker visas. In 2021, by far the largest group of seasonal workers in the UK was Ukrainians, at 19,920. An extension scheme allows them to stay beyond their original visa date, but the conditions attached put them in a vulnerable position, and they cannot apply for Homes for Ukraine visas from within the UK. There is an additional scenario in which someone from Ukraine makes their way to the UK without a visa and claims asylum. The Home Office requires asylum seekers to prove that they are destitute if they need accommodation, and this is not always straightforward. A Ukrainian asylum seeker arriving outside of the routes that the government in Westminster labels ‘safe and legal’ has no access to benefits or local authority housing.

Assuming that most Homes for Ukraine placements last for six months, there is nonetheless a housing crisis building as we head towards autumn and winter when many of these will come to an end. There will be a lot of people in need of local authority housing or private rental properties, possibly in areas of the country where there is already a lack of availability. What the consequences for Hosting projects will be remains to be seen. Maybe there will be a wider understanding of Hosting, maybe organisations will have less of an uphill battle in supporting their hosts and guests. At Housing Justice Cymru, we hope that, when the dust settles, it will result in a normalisation and demystification of Hosting. We hope to see more hosts coming forward to offer people seeking sanctuary from many different countries a safe and secure place to sleep.