

**Northern Ireland's reception model for
Ukrainian refugees: Law Centre NI
proposals to strengthen protections
August 2022**



Northern Ireland’s reception model for Ukrainian refugees: proposals to strengthen protections (Version 2:0)



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Summary

At the time of writing, Ukraine has experienced 150 days of war. The Ukraine Scheme has been in place since early March. While Law Centre NI has a number of concerns about the Ukraine Scheme as a matter of UK policy, we acknowledge the work of the NI Executive, the Ukraine Refugee Operational Support Team and all Ukraine Assistance Centres (UAC) partners in its humanitarian response to people fleeing from Ukraine. The immediate establishment of dedicated UACs across the region at pace is tribute to effective cross-sectoral working. We also acknowledge the extraordinary generosity shown by the NI public who have opened their homes to Ukrainian refugees.

This paper is intended to contribute to the learning to date and assist the UKR Operational Planning Group and policy teams with regards the *implementation* of the Ukraine Scheme in Northern Ireland. Drawing on our experience at the Centres, **we identify a number of areas where we consider that the NI response is falling short of international human rights standards.** Those standards include: the UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, the UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination, UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence and the Council of Europe Convention on action against Trafficking in Human Beings. We propose a number of measures that would strengthen the NI reception response for Ukrainian refugees.

Summary of recommendations

The Law Centre recommends that:

1. an extra step is inserted into the UAC safeguarding process to risk assess for situations of harm;
2. the presence of risk factors would trigger more intensive vetting, enhanced scrutiny and monitoring of the living arrangements and, where relevant, priority for rematching;
3. a flexible short-term support service is developed to ensure that assistance can be rapidly deployed to provide appropriate follow up support where necessary;
4. a pathway is developed for a direct referral from a UAC into specialist gender-sensitive support services where necessary;
5. TEO resources the development of gender-sensitive community-based programmes that are specifically aimed at helping Ukrainian women to understand their Istanbul Convention rights in NI;
6. measures are adopted to ensure that Ukrainians who are working in the Seasonal Worker sector are aware and can avail of the Ukraine Extension Scheme;
7. all reports of poor working practices are referred to the relevant statutory agencies;
8. all Ukraine Scheme visa holders can access the £200 Payment;
9. *ad hoc* financial resources are available for use at the UACs to meet essential immediate costs;
10. TEO develops targeted communications to inform Ukrainian refugees of how they can access on-going support.

Introduction

1. Although the UK Government has chosen not to recognise persons fleeing Ukraine as refugees, the Law Centre considers most Ukrainians to be refugees under international law. Accordingly, Ukrainian refugees are rights holders and the UK Government and the NI Executive are duty bearers who are accountable in law.
2. The Law Centre is aware that discussions continue to take place within government and Councils about the NI Ukraine response including 'wrap around' and 'aftercare' support. Unfortunately, the Law Centre has been unable to attend all the operational meetings. Overall, the Law Centre's view is that the UAC model is working well; indeed, we **would wish to see this type of service extended to other asylum seekers and refugees in NI**. There is a strong commitment to partnership working at the UAC and a willingness to identify and respond to the many challenges and problems that have been inherent in the Ukraine Scheme. We acknowledge that lead officials are committed to continuous development and regularly seek feedback from partners. We welcome this and, in this vein, we trust that this paper provides constructive feedback that contributes to the evolving response.
3. The adoption of the Ukraine Assistance Centres Safeguarding Policy (July 2022) and subsequent training is a welcome development and makes a clear commitment to *preventing* harm and providing an *effective* response.
4. The Law Centre has a long history of providing legal advice, representation, policy advocacy and training services on immigration law, specifically in areas of forced migration. As members of the NI Refugee Resettlement Consortium, we continue to play a role in supporting Syrian refugees settled through the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement scheme. We are well placed to comment on the effectiveness of reception conditions for Ukrainian refugees.
5. Below we set out six issues and ten recommendations to enhance the reception service for Ukraine nationals arriving in NI.

International human rights standards: duty to identify and protect

6. The UNHCR advises that reception arrangements for asylum seekers and refugees must respect the dignity of individuals and should abide by international human rights law and standards. When developing adequate reception conditions for asylum seekers and refugees, States Parties must *identify* categories of persons with specific needs and then *adapt* the reception response accordingly.¹

¹ UN Refugee Agency, 'A guide to international refugee protection and building state asylum systems: a handbook for parliamentarians' (2017), see Chapter 5. See also: Conclusion on reception of asylum seekers in the context of individual asylum systems, No. 93 (LIII), UNHCR Executive Committee, 2002; Global consultations on international protection/Third track: Reception of asylum-seekers, including standards of treatment, in the

7. There are particular duties on States to *identify* and then *protect* persons who are deemed to be in situations of vulnerability. For example, the Council of Europe Trafficking Convention provides:

Council of Europe Trafficking Convention, Article 10

Each Party shall provide its competent authorities with persons who are trained and qualified in preventing and combating trafficking in human beings, in identifying and helping victims, including children, and shall ensure that the different authorities collaborate with each other as well as with relevant support organisations, so that victims can be identified in a procedure duly taking into account the special situation of women and child victims [...]

8. This duty is incorporated within the NI Modern Slavery & Human Trafficking Strategy, which refers to the need for a *proactive* and coordinated approach to identifying situations of exploitation.²
9. Further, the UK is signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities which requires States to take all necessary measures to ensure the protection and safety of people with disabilities in situations of risk. This includes during humanitarian emergencies. In response to the Ukraine invasion the Convention's governing Committee issued the following statement.

Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities statement:

Refugees and internally displaced people with disabilities, and people with disabilities in refugee-like situations, need to be provided with support tailored to their individual requirements at border crossing, reception and accommodation facilities and to be provided with relocation assistance.³

10. The large majority of Ukrainians presenting in NI are female. The Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility (GBV AoR) describes the Ukraine conflict as a 'profoundly gendered and intersectional crisis'.⁴ International law places specific duties on the UK Government / NI Executive to recognise and address the particular vulnerabilities faced by women who have experienced displacement.
11. In July 2022, both Ukraine and the UK ratified the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence ("Istanbul

context of individual asylum systems, UNHCR, 2001' UNHCR annotated comments to Directive 2013/33/EU of the European Parliament and Council of 26 June 2013 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection (recast), UNHCR, 2015.

²Department of Justice, 'NI Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Strategy 2021-22' Available [here](#).

³Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, statement of 11 April 2022. Accessible [here](#).

⁴Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility, 'Secondary Data Review' 27 April 2022. Available [here](#).

Convention"). This is a significant achievement and means that both countries agree to be bound to its provisions. Article 22 provides for specialist support services:

Istanbul Convention, Article 22

Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to provide or arrange for, in an adequate geographical distribution, immediate, short-and long-term specialist support services to any victim subjected to any of the acts of violence covered by the scope of this Convention.

Parties shall provide or arrange for specialist women's support services to all women victims of violence and their children.

12. The need to adopt a gender-sensitive response in evolving refugee contexts is also articulated by UN Treaty monitoring bodies:

Extract from the UN Committee of the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, General Recommendation on the gender-related dimensions of refugee status⁵

Paragraph 14: [...]The Committee recognizes that displacement arising from armed conflict, gender-related persecution and other serious human rights violations that affect women compounds existing challenges to the elimination of discrimination against women. It also recognizes the persistence of other forms of exploitation concomitant with displacement, such as trafficking for purposes of sexual or labour exploitation, slavery and servitude. The Committee therefore reiterates the obligation of States parties to treat women with dignity and to **respect, protect and fulfil their rights under the Convention at each stage of the displacement cycle⁶**, as well as in the enjoyment of durable solutions, including integration and/or resettlement in receiving States and/or voluntary repatriation to their State of origin.

Paragraph 24: The receiving State has a responsibility towards women granted asylum status when it comes to helping them to, among other things, **find proper accommodation, training and/or job opportunities, providing legal, medical, psychosocial support for victims of trauma and offering language classes and other measures facilitating their integration [...]**

⁵ UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), *General recommendation No. 32 on the gender-related dimensions of refugee status, asylum, nationality and statelessness of women*, 5 November 2014, CEDAW/C/GC/32, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/54620fb54.html> [accessed 14 July 2022]

⁶ The word "displacement" in the present general recommendation refers to those persons who have fled and crossed their country's borders.

Extract from the UNHCR's Executive Committee of the High Commission's Programme, Conclusion on reception of asylum-seekers⁷

Gender sensitivity should be reflected in reception arrangements [...] They should take into account the specific needs of victims of sexual abuse and exploitation, of trauma and torture or ill-treatment and of other particularly vulnerable groups of women and girls [...]

13. In addition, the NI Ukraine response should seek to identify and meet the needs of other persons who may be at risk or face particular barriers in accessing support. This includes, for example, poorly educated or illiterate Ukrainians (including persons from protected minorities such as the Roma community⁸); LGBTQIA+ Ukrainian refugees who are often at heightened risk of exclusion, exploitation, violence and abuse, and encounter distinct protection risks because of their real or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and/or sex characteristics;⁹ and older people who may be experiencing particular difficulties due to chronic health conditions, infirmity and lack of digital literacy.¹⁰ These categories clearly engage international standards and also fall under domestic legislation e.g. s.75 equality duties.

Law Centre concerns

14. The Law Centre is concerned that the NI reception model does not always effectively identify specific needs or provide a sufficiently tailored response to meet such needs. Specifically, we are concerned that:

- there is no dedicated process to screen situations for risk of harm;
- there is not always sufficient awareness among statutory agencies as to the extent of the needs of Ukrainian refugees or the barriers they face in accessing public services;
- statutory services may not always be sufficiently flexible to meet needs;
- there is no structure to provide on-going support where required; and
- the NI response is not sufficiently gender-sensitive.

15. At Annex 1 we have listed a number of case studies that reflect the Law Centre's involvement in particular UAC cases. These particular case studies capture valuable learning, highlighting examples of where the collective response did not deliver

⁷ Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme, *Conclusion on reception of asylum-seekers in the context of individual asylum systems No. 93 (LIII) - 2002*, 8 October 2002, No. 93 (LIII), available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3dafdd344.html> [accessed 19 July 2022]

⁸ European Parliamentary Research Service, '[Russia's war on Ukraine: The situation of Roma people fleeing Ukraine \(europa.eu\)](#)' May 2022.

⁹ UNHCR and others, 'Protection of LGBTIQ+ people in the context of the response in Ukraine' May 2022. Available [here](#).

¹⁰ Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, UN Population Fund, WHO and HelpAge International, 'Joint statement on the situation of older persons in Ukraine' June 2022. Available [here](#).

effective, dignified and appropriate reception conditions as required by the international human rights standards.

16. On occasion we have noted an apparent lack of understanding on the part of statutory agencies as to the extent of the Ukrainians' needs, their vulnerabilities and the risk of harm that could arise if the response is not prompt or comprehensive, or if there is insufficient follow-up. This has resulted in the voluntary and community sector organisations having to intervene – including by providing emergency financial support. By and large, Ukrainian refugees have an entitlement to statutory support; that charitable funds are necessary is indicative of problems in accessing and/or gaps in mainstream support.
17. Many Ukrainians who present at the UACs are struggling with various aspects of their reception and need a bit of extra support if they are to successfully integrate into NI. Reasons for struggling are numerous but include situations where the Ukrainian refugee does not appear to be taking the information in (perhaps due to feeling overwhelmed, history of trauma or the presence of a learning disability, etc), s/he seems to lack the skills to complete the next steps; s/he seems to be particularly isolated; the sponsor is unable or unwilling to provide much support, etc. Such situations may not warrant a full safeguarding response, however, further support or follow-up is necessary in order to prevent the risk of harm, abuse or neglect arising.
18. Unlike under the Syrian VPR resettlement scheme where each family was appointed a keyworker on arrival, there is no provision under the Ukraine Scheme for support beyond the UAC. Some Ukrainians, particularly those who are educated and have a good grasp of the English language, are clearly able to make their own way. For other Ukrainians, their hosts deliver many of the functions of a keyworker (although of course this in itself may be problematic due to the muddying of the UK's human rights responsibilities and the risk of creating dependency and/or potential safeguarding risks). It is often the case that teenage children have a better grasp of English and technology than their parents. In the absence of a support service, this has inevitably resulted in children having to shoulder responsibility for administrative tasks e.g. making visa applications, applying for the £200 Payment or doing the paperwork to open bank accounts. It must be remembered that these children have fled war and many are already old beyond their years; we should not be pushing them into roles of caregivers. To do so is inconsistent with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which refers to children engaging in 'activities appropriate to the age of the child.'¹¹

Issue 1: Identifying risk of harm

¹¹UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989, Article 31.

19. The UAC Safeguarding Policy directs UAC staff to *report* and *refer* issues including relationship breakdown, modern slavery and human trafficking, homelessness and other safeguarding issues. However, the Law Centre is concerned that these issues may not always be *identified* in the first place. A proactive and co-ordinated approach within the Centres is needed to the risk of indicators of harm being missed and to fulfil the human rights duties outlined above. Accordingly, we recommend that each situation is screened and risk assessed when Ukraine nationals first present at the Centres.

20. Situations should be screened for 'external' harms and for personal characteristics / life circumstances that may make the Ukrainian more susceptible to harm:

a) External harms

21. The types of issues that should be screened for include, but are not limited to, the following potential 'red flag' situations:

- The host, rather than the Ukrainian refugee, seems to be in control i.e. s/he is carrying the passports, has access to all the Home Office emails, etc;
- Where someone presents themselves as a friend or interpreter and seeks to sit in during conversations at the UACs;
- The host has sponsored several refugees;
- The refugee has unexplained injuries;
- The refugee is living in HMO accommodation and/or sharing with unknown adults; this is a particular concern when the refugee is female and the other adults are male or where there are children involved;
- The refugee is already working for the sponsor or receiving cash-in-hand payments;
- The refugee has been asked to pay rent or utility bills and is anxious about their ability to do this;
- The refugee seems wary of their sponsor or uncomfortable or unhappy about an aspect of their visa or hosting situation – especially where s/he is reluctant to provide details, etc.

b) Personal characteristics / life circumstances

22. The existence of the following personal characteristics or life circumstances *may* make it difficult for the Ukrainian to take the necessary steps to protect themselves and family members from harm:

- Age including elderly people and/or children who are in NI without their parent or legal guardian
- Physical or sensory disability
- Special educational needs
- Severe physical illness, mental illness or impairment

- Substance misuse
- History of torture, trauma including domestic abuse
- Homelessness
- Digital illiteracy
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Complete lack of English language skills
- Lack of skills to complete the steps
- Socio-economic factors including isolation
- Environmental living conditions including that the sponsor is unable or unwilling to provide much support

23. **Recommendation:** that an extra step is inserted into the UAC safeguarding process to risk assess for situations of harm.

24. This risk assessment step would take place after the initial welcome and registration and before the Ukrainian begins their journey around the UAC. This risk assessment could potentially be delivered in different ways however it should take place in a private location away from the sponsor. Ideally, the assessment should be a semi-structured conversation; however, even a tick-box exercise would be an improvement on current practice. The person who conducts this assessment needs to be highly skilled and able to quickly build a rapport and elicit sensitive information. S/he should have experience of providing face-to-face services and of working with persons who have suffered trauma and/or refugee displacement. S/he should have a thorough understanding of safeguarding, the nuances of coercion and a good awareness of available support services.

25. The Law Centre has a long history of providing advice to persons who have experienced trauma and we understand that disclosure is often a long and carefully-managed *process*. Therefore, while it would be naïve to think that a single risk assessment would identify *all* risk factors, we feel strongly that it is incumbent on the UAC model to try.

26. If any of the above risk factors are identified then it should trigger more intensive vetting, enhanced scrutiny and monitoring of the living arrangements. Where relevant, this might also trigger priority for rematching. The extent of this enhanced scrutiny would depend on the facts of the case. For example, enhanced scrutiny may entail the scheduling of additional home visit(s) over a duration of weeks / months.

27. **Recommendation:** that the presence of risk factors should trigger more intensive vetting, enhanced scrutiny and monitoring of the living arrangements.

Issue 2: Effective follow-up support

28. The presence of any risk factors would also trigger a referral into a UAC follow-up support service. This support would be offered on the basis of consent.
29. There are potentially different ways that this recommendation could be operationalised e.g. by a duty social worker, a NIHE floating support worker or a 'keyworker'. This service should be available to all applicants of the Ukraine Scheme (e.g. Family, Homes for Ukraine or Ukraine Extension Scheme). It should also be available to Ukrainians who only have a UK Entry Stamp, asylum seekers, and Ukrainians with other types of immigration status (or none). The support worker would be tasked with activities including:
- a. Coordinating with support providers to ensure that any initial needs are identified and met e.g. obtaining emergency cash support, buying food/clothing, organising phone credit, helping set up a bank account, etc;
 - b. Ensuring that any temporary accommodation is appropriate and meets needs;
 - c. Providing practical assistance with essential next steps e.g. opening a bank account;
 - d. Organising follow-up appointments and facilitating transport if necessary e.g. appointments at JBO, Drumkeen House, ensuring that interpreters are sourced, etc;
 - e. Encouraging the Ukrainian to access and stay connected to local and regional support services;
 - f. Assessing needs and making appropriate referrals e.g. to Gateway teams, local support organisations and advice providers, etc;
 - g. Being alert to risks / situations of potential harm and responding accordingly;
 - h. Facilitating case reviews / feedback for UAC partners with the view to improving the accessibility of public services to Ukrainian refugees.
30. **Recommendation:** that a flexible short-term support service is developed that can be rapidly deployed to provide appropriate follow-up support where necessary.

Issue 3: Specialist gender-specific support

31. As outlined above, the Ukraine conflict is 'profoundly gendered'. It is wholly unsurprising that a number of very concerning situations have already emerged in Northern Ireland that illustrate the potential for exploitation or abuse of women and girls.
32. Within our proposal for support service, we make a particular case for a referral pathway into specialist gender-sensitive support services for Ukrainian women. This service would be:
- a. Available where there is (or may have) been harm including domestic abuse, exploitation, human trafficking or gender-based harms including war crimes of a sexual nature;
 - b. Delivered through a trauma-informed approach;

- c. Tailored to the individual's circumstances but may include refuge accommodation, specialist services for persons who have been raped or sexually assaulted, including treatment for sexually-transmitted infections and referrals to other health services;
 - d. Play an important role in advocating for and coordinating access to other support services and ensuring that they are gender-sensitive, appropriate and effective.
33. **Recommendation:** that a pathway is developed for a direct referral from a UAC into specialist gender-sensitive support services where there are concerns of vulnerability. All UAC staff should be trained in the pathway.¹²
34. At times, we have identified what we consider to be an alarming 'acceptance' as to the 'inevitability' of domestic abuse. We are aware that domestic violence is prevalent in Ukraine. A report published in 2019 by the Organisation for Security & Co-operation in Europe found that two-thirds (67%) of women had experienced psychological, physical or sexual violence since the age of 15. Domestic violence is deemed a 'common occurrence' for 64% of the women surveyed.¹³ The risk of violence against women significantly increases in times of conflict and 'multiple forms of gender-based harms are being reported in Ukraine, with particularly high insecurity and risk for women and girls on the move'.¹⁴
35. The Istanbul Convention recognises the need for awareness-raising measures as a means to encourage victims of gender-based harms to view themselves as rights-holders and to seek help. Accordingly, the Convention requires States to develop and resource programmes designed to address gender-based harms. In order to discharge these duties, the TEO should resource the development of programmes that will help Ukrainian women to recognise all forms of domestic abuse and to know what support is available. The Law Centre considers that such programmes are most effective if provided in community settings that facilitate links with local women's groups and networks
36. **Recommendation:** that TEO resources the development of community-based programmes that are specifically aimed at helping Ukrainian women (and other refugees) to understand their Istanbul Convention rights in NI.

Issue 4: Proactive support for seasonal workers

37. The Law Centre has a particular and ongoing concern about some of the conditions faced by Ukrainians who initially arrived in NI on a Seasonal Worker visa and/or have arrived to work in this sector. The risk of exploitation in this sector is particularly

¹² See Istanbul Convention Arts 10 & 15

¹³ Organisation for Security & Co-operation in Europe, 'OSCE led survey on violence against women: Ukraine' (OSCE, 2019). Available [here](#).

¹⁴ Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility, 'Secondary Data Review' 27 April 2022. Available [here](#).

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acute (and indeed previously documented¹⁵) as is the risk of poor quality and overcrowded living conditions. Ukrainians who came to NI to work as a Seasonal Worker can now switch into the Ukraine Extension Scheme, thus affording the option of changing employment.

38. The Home Office will know which sponsors are permitted to recruit workers under the Seasonal Agricultural Scheme (SAWS) and it should be possible to identify the NI operators.
39. The Law Centre acknowledges that some SAWs sponsors have gone to considerable efforts to assist their workers and their dependents to secure their status in NI.
40. **Recommendation:** that a concerted effort is made to contact Ukrainians who are working in the Seasonal Worker sector with the view to ensure that they are aware of and can avail of the Ukraine Extension Scheme. We also recommend that accounts of poor working practices are investigated by appropriate agencies.
41. If granted leave under the Ukraine Extension Scheme, Ukrainians are granted three years digital status under the Ukraine Scheme i.e. the resulting visa is exactly the same for applicants to the Ukraine Extension Scheme as it is for those under Homes for Ukraine and the Family route. We therefore consider it irrational that the £200 Payment is not available to all Ukrainians granted status under the Ukraine Scheme. Seasonal employment provides a low income and the workers may struggle to meet the costs associated with moving employment (as it is likely to involve finding new accommodation including securing a deposit for private rental). The £200 Payment could ease this process were it available.
42. The Law Centre acknowledges and commends TEO for extending access to the £200 Payment to Ukraine Scheme (Family) applicants. We understand that access is restricted to Ukraine Scheme (Homes for Ukraine) applicants only in GB.
43. **Recommendation:** that all Ukraine Scheme visa holders can access the £200 Payment.

Issue 5: *ad hoc* financial resources

44. There have been a small number of occasions where lack of immediate cash provision at the centre has thwarted an effective response. For example, it is unclear which agency can pay for taxis for urgent matters. The Law Centre has also identified a number of Ukrainians who are not eligible to receive the £200 Payment and who need urgent financial support. For example, they may need cash for food, clothing or phone credit. At present, we are making referrals to the Red Cross Crisis Fund. This

¹⁵ Neil Jarman et al. 'Forced labour in NI' (JRF, 2011)

process is a little cumbersome and it may take a while to get the money out to the person who needs it; it would be much more person-centred if cash could be distributed at the centre.

45. This cash support could potentially be distributed by the Ukraine Refugee Operational Support Team lead or by Red Cross. The purpose of this financial support would be to meet essential immediate costs. It would effectively be a bridging support while other monies are secured e.g. Discretionary Support.
46. **Recommendation:** that *ad hoc* financial resources are available for use at the UACs to meet essential immediate costs. This would be available in cash or in kind (e.g. taxi fares).

Issue 6: General communications

47. A lot of information is now available in the Ukraine section of NI Direct and/or is circulated in the TEO 'Welcome' email. It would be useful to review the effectiveness of this information and ensure that key messages are reiterated – perhaps in different formats and on different platforms. Law Centre has provided the information resources it has developed with statutory and other agencies and these could also be included on NI Direct.
48. **Recommendation:** that TEO develops targeted communications to inform and remind Ukrainian refugees of where they can access help and support (mindful that TEO has a database including email addresses and some telephone numbers).

Conclusion

49. Implementing these recommendations would bring a number of benefits to the individual Ukrainian refugees and to their dependents. In addition:
 - a. It would assist the TEO and other departments to meet their human rights obligations in delivering a reception response that actively seeks to identify and respond to harms;
 - b. While some financial resource is needed, there is a clear spend-to-save argument: it is in nobody's interests to have a cohort of Ukrainians who are unable to navigate the various processes and who drop out of the support services;
 - c. The existence of such support services would mitigate concerns that vulnerable Ukrainians may be falling through gaps in support;
 - d. The provision of such services would be consistent with the broad objectives outlined in the forthcoming Refugee Integration Strategy and Gender Equality and Violence Against Women & Girls strategies as well as DoJ's Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Strategy.

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50. We trust these insights from our learning to date and these recommendations are helpful in continuing to shape the ongoing delivery of support to Ukrainian refugees. The Law Centre understands that the UK Government has provided limited resources to the NI Executive and that these resources are primarily tied to the Homes for Ukraine Scheme. Nonetheless, these budgeting issues do not remove the duties placed on the NI Executive by international law.

Annex 1: case studies

These case studies reflect the Law Centre's involvement in particular cases. We acknowledge that our input is limited to particular issues and therefore this might not fully reflect the circumstances in each case.

We wish to be clear that in setting out these case studies, our intention is not to criticise any particular agency. Rather, we seek to use these case studies as a learning opportunity and to reflect on 'how things might have been different' had the above recommendations been in place.

Case study 1

A group of 11 family members comprising two linked families presented at a UAC. They had not previously applied for a visa and so had no entitlement to statutory support. The NIHE quickly arranged temporary accommodation in two houses. The Law Centre liaised with UAC partners and Drumkeen House for the family to obtain UK Entry Stamps the following day. The logistics proved difficult and the Red Cross deployed an ambulance to assist.

Ten days later the Red Cross contacted the Law Centre about this same extended family. The families were reportedly living in near destitute conditions: they had no income and, while different agencies provided food parcels, there was no money on the electricity/gas meter. Neighbours and community support hubs had stepped in to provide help.

The Law Centre and Red Cross worked together to ensure that the family came back to the UAC to receive £30 per person in Red Cross emergency hardship support. The Red Cross also provided SIM cards, including Wi-Fi data and phone credit along with a basic phone, to enable communication with public services and contact with family elsewhere.

The Law Centre noted that in the mother's plastic carrier bag containing letters was an appointment slip for UC at her local Jobs & Benefit Office. The woman had not attended as she could not read the letter and did not know how to get it to it. The first Universal Credit payment was scheduled for 14 August i.e. almost seven weeks after the families first presented at the UAC on 27 June. An Advance Payment was made one week prior.

Observations: These families are not under the Homes for Ukraine scheme which means that there are no scheduled home visits. Despite having entitlement to statutory support, these two families remained largely reliant on charitable support for a 6-week period.

What could have been different?

- The risk assessment would have identified that family is from the Roma community and therefore *may* have particular support needs that are characteristic to this marginalised minority (for example, experience of discrimination and associated lack of trust in statutory agencies; possible illiteracy; digital illiteracy, etc).
- The provision of immediate financial resources from the UAC could have arranged taxis (to Drumkeen House) and would have provided some short-term cash to address the apparent destitution;
- A flexible short-term support worker would have:
 - Coordinated and liaised with support providers to ensure that the families' initial needs were identified and met e.g. open bank account, access phone credit, facilitate transport, and avoid duplication, etc.
 - Make appropriate referrals e.g. to the EA Roma specialist worker.
 - Immediately identified that the families did not attend appointments (e.g. when the family did not turn up for their UC appointment) and make alternative arrangements;
 - Ensured that social security applications were made and paid promptly e.g. Advance Payment and Discretionary Support;
 - Generally helped the family to understand and engage with the various processes.

Case study 2

A young woman attended a UAC on several occasions. She had no visa and was somewhat vague about her circumstances. On two occasions she was accompanied by a man purporting to be a friend but who declined to provide details. Eventually she disclosed to Law Centre and NI Housing Executive that she was very fearful in her home environment and described a situation of escalating domestic abuse. While she became very upset, she was adamant that she did not want to speak to the PSNI. Arrangements were made for her to be moved into temporary accommodation. A taxi took the woman directly from the UAC to accommodation in a different town. The woman arrived at her new address but did not know how to get into the property and did not know who to ring for help (in any event she does not speak English). She had limited cash and few personal items.

The Law Centre made hasty arrangements for a Red Cross caseworker to check on her welfare. By then it was early evening and the caseworker found her standing on the street not knowing where she was or what to do. Having been alerted by the Red Cross, the Law Centre contacted the out-of-hours NIHE service, which very quickly arranged for someone to attend the property. Ultimately, the woman chose to return to the abusive household.

Observations: It took repeat visits to the UAC over a course of 6 weeks before this young woman disclosed the domestic abuse, which then prompted a statutory response.

What could have been different?

- A risk assessment may have identified the domestic abuse from the outset; a swift intervention may have prevented the escalation of abuse;
- A prompt referral into a specialist gender-sensitive support services may have:
 - Encouraged a full disclosure of the abuse and potentially a PSNI response;
 - Helped the woman understand her accommodation options;
 - Supported the woman to make safe choices;
 - Continued to keep in contact with the woman after she returned to the abusive household;
 - Advocated to ensure that any support services are informed by a gender-sensitive response.
- In the long-term, the development of gender-sensitive community-based programmes would help empower this woman to understand and realise her Istanbul Convention rights.

Case study 3

A woman and her teenage daughter attended a UAC. She informed the Law Centre that she had been working on a mushroom farm since her arrival in Northern Ireland, despite the fact that she had no visa. The pair were living in shared accommodation. The woman explained that she obtained a hand injury while working however was not forthcoming with any information about how she had sustained this injury (the HSC Trust staff member swiftly organised a referral to A&E which revealed multiple fractures). UAC partners suspected labour exploitation however the woman declined to speak to the PSNI trafficking team. The woman also declined to accept an immediate offer of temporary accommodation for several reasons, including because she was worried about what would happen to her Ukrainian colleagues if she did not return from the UAC.

Observations: It is positive that factors were identified at the woman's first visit to the UAC, which prompted an effective initial response. However, as far as Law Centre is aware, there was very little in the way of follow-up or effective investigation of her situation.

It took a number of weeks before the woman was re-matched with a new Homes for Ukraine sponsor, during which time the woman and her teenage daughter remained in unsuitable accommodation. We understand that her sponsor/employer continues to be the sponsor for a number of other Ukrainians.

What could have been different?

- A risk assessment would have identified the risk factors which would have resulted in a much more intensive vetting, enhanced scrutiny and monitoring;
- Systematic record keeping would enable the UKR Refugee Support Team to identify patterns in poor working practices, ensure that they referred to the relevant statutory agencies and potentially result in particular sponsors/employers being barred in acting as sponsors in the future;
- A prompt referral into a specialist gender-sensitive support services may have:
 - Encouraged a full disclosure of the alleged poor working conditions and thus could have prompted a response by the appropriate labour regulatory bodies;
 - Helped the woman to understand her accommodation options;
 - Advocated to ensure that any support services were informed by a gender-sensitive response.
 - Advocated for priority re-matching.
- In the long-term, the development of gender-sensitive community-based programmes would help empower this woman to understand and realise her Istanbul Convention rights.

Case study 4

A Ukrainian woman and her young son attended the UAC with their Homes for Ukraine sponsors who are in their 80s. The woman and the sponsors had tried to submit a visa application, however, they had been unable to complete it. The Ukrainian woman does not speak any English and seemed to be overwhelmed by the amount of information she was receiving. The hosting arrangements seemed to be working well and the sponsors were doing all they could to help. However, the sponsors were both quite baffled by all the online application processes and simply did not have the technical skills to assist (this is not surprising given their age). They all live in a fairly rural area and neither the sponsors nor the Ukrainians seemed to be aware of any relevant support services in the area or indeed of other Ukrainians.

Observations: Technical skills are needed to complete a number of the Ukraine-scheme related processes e.g. to apply for the visa, book biometrics, apply for Universal Credit and the £200. Without technical skills (on either the part of the Ukrainian or sponsor), it is very difficult to proceed.

What could have been different?

- A risk assessment would have identified a number of barriers to the Ukrainians' successful integration e.g. her lack of English skills and comprehension, the sponsors' inability to provide assistance, isolation and/or lack of support network.
- The allocation of a flexible short-term support worker would have:
 - Supported the family in making the relevant online applications;
 - Provided guidance in managing online accounts;
 - Linked the family into relevant support services;
 - Checked in on a regular basis to ensure that the family and sponsor were managing.
- This is an example of where a small amount of follow-up support would have made a considerable difference.

Case study 5

A Ukrainian couple attended the UAC with their young children on 22 July 2022. They had applied to the Ukraine Scheme (Family route) and were staying with extended family. Unfortunately, it transpired that the Ukrainian family were being treated very badly. Worryingly, they described having incurred considerable debts to the sister-in-law, who was charging them for making the visa applications, for their rent, etc. The couple did not have the financial means to pay these charges and so it had been agreed that the man would work for a company connected to the (host) family who would receive all the man's wages. Further, the couple had been told that they were here illegally and therefore would not be able to work elsewhere. The couple declined an offer to speak to the PSNI. By this time, it was getting late at the UAC and there was little time to discuss options.

The NIHE made an offer of temporary accommodation later that same afternoon, however unfortunately the family refused it. The Law Centre subsequently got in touch with the family to encourage them to accept homelessness assistance. On 5th August, the couple notified the Law Centre that they had accepted an offer of accommodation.

The Law Centre was able to clarify the family's status with the Home Office and explained to the couple that they were in fact here lawfully and could work for any employer.

Observations: In many ways this is a positive example of the work at the UAC because a situation of *debt bondage* may have been averted. This is unlikely to have been picked up otherwise given that there is no process of vetting or home visits under the Ukraine Scheme (Family route).

However, the Law Centre is concerned that despite the risks of harm, there is no agreed follow up / monitoring process to ensure that these do not materialise. So, while the immediate risks seem to have been countered, we will have no way of knowing whether the coercion continues.

What could have been different?

- A risk assessment would have identified the risks as soon as they arrived at the UAC rather than at the end of their visit (which is when they spoke to Law Centre). This would have provided all agencies – especially the NIHE – with more time to respond and to explain the different options to the family
- The allocation of a flexible short-term support worker would have:
 - Helped the family to understand the homelessness process and encourage them to fully engage with the NIHE;
 - Link the couple in with job support and support them in the process of obtaining employment;
 - Continue to check in with the couple to make sure that they are not forced to pay their 'debts' and are not subject to any further coercion or threats;
 - Where relevant, refer to PSNI.

Case study 6

A Ukrainian woman arrived at the UAC who had originally come to Northern Ireland with a Seasonal Worker visa. She thought that her employer applied for a new visa under the Ukraine Extension Scheme, however, she was not sure and did not have any of the usual emails from UKVI.

The woman was living in mixed shared accommodation in a shared room. She described difficult working conditions: long hours, a verbally aggressive supervisor and multiple deductions from her wages that she doesn't understand. The Law Centre invited her to forward us a copy of her terms and conditions of employment, however, she was not sure if she ever received a copy and, in any event, did not get back in touch with us.

The Law Centre explained that she had to continue to meet the requirements of her current visa (i.e. not seek new employment) until her Ukraine Extension Scheme had been approved. If she sought new employment, she would be in breach of her visa, which could have long-term adverse implications on her immigration status. We were not sure that the woman really grasped this information. She spoke very little English and communication was very slow. The interpreter also voiced concerns that the woman's comprehension was poor.

Observations: As there is no vetting or scrutiny under the Seasonal Worker or Ukraine Extension Scheme, there has been no monitoring of her living conditions. Communication was challenging in this instance although we do not know why. It is unlikely that she would be deemed an 'adult in need of protection' i.e. that would necessitate the intervention of Social Services. Nonetheless, it became apparent that this woman needs some support in understanding her visa restrictions and in arranging new employment / accommodation.

What could have been different?

- A proactive approach to contact Ukrainians working in the Seasonal Worker sector would help them understand their rights and reduce their dependency on their employers/sponsors.
- A risk assessment would have captured and recorded the risks, which would have triggered a process of scrutiny and monitoring not normally afforded under the Ukraine Extension Scheme. The risk assessment would also have identified the communication difficulty.
- A flexible short-term support worker would have:
 - Checked that the woman sought assistance from the other UAC partners;
 - Linked the woman into existing support services e.g. to assist with finding a new job, new accommodation and register with a GP;
 - If need be, help the woman apply for Universal Credit and/or housing assistance;
 - Encouraged the woman to make a fuller disclosure of the difficulties she faced in the workplace and ensuring referrals for appropriate assistance;
 - Helped the woman to understand her rights and entitlements.
- The £200 Payment could be very helpful as a deposit for new accommodation.

Case study 7

A Ukrainian man who is resident in Northern Ireland brought his mother and his niece and nephew to the UAC on 4 July. Although the man has lived here for several years, his English is very limited. It transpired that despite the man's attempts to apply, none of the three family members had actually obtained visas. They had been living here since March and had not accessed any public services. As they did not arrive under Homes for Ukraine, there had been no vetting or home visits. The Law Centre was worried about the financial pressures on the uncle and spoke to Gateway Services on 17 July. A social worker visited the family on 1 August and reported no concerns.

The Law Centre advised that three visa applications needed to be made through the Ukraine Scheme (Family route). The grandmother cannot speak English and cannot use a smartphone and so could not verify their documents. Her grandchildren are aged 9 and 14 years. The 14-year-old boy presents as bright and very obliging.

The Law Centre contacted different support organisations to see if they could help with the practicalities of obtaining all the documents required to make an application. Unfortunately, none could.

Observations: As a result of the lack of a follow-up support service, agencies including the Law Centre have relied on a child's input to complete the necessary paperwork.

What could have been different?

- A risk assessment would have identified the need for follow up support due to the fact that the children are here with their grandmother who is unable to navigate all the different processes online.
- A flexible short-term support worker would have:
 - Helped the family complete the different pieces of paperwork;
 - Avoided the child having to take on an adult role.