

**APPENDIX A – UKRAINE RESPONSE**  
**REPORT OF THE CO-ORDINATING OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**  
**TASK AND FINISH GROUP**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY – FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

**APPROACH TO REVIEW**

Following a report to the 27<sup>th</sup> January 2023 Overview and Coordinating Scrutiny Committee, it was agreed that a small cross-party task and finish group, chaired by Councillor Bore, would be established to look into the issues raised at the Committee in more detail. It was evident at the meeting that more time was needed to explore the range and complexity of the programme.

The Task and Finish group convened in February 2023 and over the course of a month has held four detailed evidence sessions where it has invited council officers, Ukrainian guests, hosts and community organisations to talk through their experience and also to answer questions from the Group. This has been in addition to reviewing detailed written information.

The Task and Finish group has considered all the evidence provided and this has been used to form the basis of recommendations set out below, which is accompanied by a more detailed evidence report.

Throughout all the evidence sessions and the wider contextual information, the unprecedented nature, scale, and new elements of the Ukrainian crisis has clearly stood out. The Homes for Ukraine scheme is a totally new way of supporting refugees (guests), who are placed in the homes of volunteers (hosts). This has created entirely new needs for support. The Council alongside the city has been reacting to a constantly changing and uncertain landscape, as national government progressively develops the policy and requirements for local authorities.

The generosity of hosts, guests and community organisations has also stood out very clearly and the Task and Finish group were overwhelmed with the support and kindness offered by so many, particularly at a time when many residents are feeling their own hardships with the cost of living. There are (as of 28 March 2023) 334 host families in Birmingham in the Homes for Ukraine programme and 779 guests. This makes Birmingham the largest Homes for Ukraine programme among all the Core Cities.

Whilst the scale and complexity of the response has proved challenging for all involved, it has generated some truly innovative and new approaches to supporting resettlement. The Task and Finish group welcomes the more recent engagement and collaboration between the Council, the voluntary & community sector, the private sector, our residents, and Ukrainian guests, which should be used as a future blueprint for work of a similar nature.

## OVERARCHING RECOMMENDATION AND SUMMARY CRITIQUE

### 1. BACKGROUND

#### Context

- 1.1. In March 2022, at the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Birmingham City Council stood up an emergency response to deliver the reception, housing, and clinical treatment of a group of medical evacuees comprising Ukrainian child cancer patients and their families.
- 1.2. Within a month the emergency response was stood down and internal governance arrangements were established in the Council to support the arrival of larger numbers of Ukrainian families following the announcement by the government of the Homes for Ukraine Scheme. This enabled visa route access into the UK for those fleeing the war, to live with family members or residents in the city that agreed to sponsor them.
- 1.3. Alongside the internal governance, an external forum was established, 'Engage for Ukraine', to bring community organisations and partners within the city together to discuss what was happening on the ground with Ukrainian arrivals and emerging issues.

#### Critique

- 1.4. The information and evidence gathered indicates:
- 1.5. The Council clearly intended to engage with local community groups on the Ukraine response and set up an initial forum, 'Engage for Ukraine' in April 2022. However, at this point there was already a lot of work being done by local community groups so the Council's response would have benefited from earlier engagement which may have helped to further shape the understanding of what was needed and how these requirements could be best met.
- 1.6. Ukrainian arrivals were being quickly supported by a range of large and small community groups and organisations, some of which were un-constituted. Whilst Birmingham Voluntary Service Council (BVSC) was providing a means to engage with the sector, the Council should not have relied on this to such an extent. Not all groups would have been represented through this forum, and particularly with the Ukrainian response where there were also individuals working to provide support. This is not a criticism of BVSC, but it highlights the importance of the Council engaging directly with residents and community organisations.
- 1.7. In some parts of the Council there are good links to the voluntary and community sector. There needs to be a clearer or more established process which enables officers to understand how they can tap into these existing arrangements. The Council should also consider how it utilises the role of Councillors in identifying and involving local assets (individuals, groups, and

organisations). Since the start of the Ukraine crisis the Council has established a Public Participation Team, which now provides significantly increased capacity for such engagement, and supports the much better level of current engagement with hosts and guests.

### **Recommendations**

- i. The Council should have invested more time early in the programme in discovering and pro-actively engaging with community and voluntary sector groups and citizens. Whilst Birmingham Voluntary Service Council was involved in some of this outreach work, the Council should not solely outsource community engagement work of this kind.
- ii. The Council should consider, where appropriate, the role of Councillors in helping to proactively identify and engage with local community groups that may already be delivering or supporting the given area.
- iii. The Council should have more robustly considered how it utilised its learning from the Covid 19 pandemic response. Whilst some of the emergency structures were used early on in the Ukraine response, there was not sufficient learning from the Covid work in terms of community and partner engagement.
- iv. The convening role of Council was underestimated.

## **2. Engagement with PwC & the Refugee Resettlement Solution (database)**

### **Context**

- 2.1. In March 2022, PwC approached a number of local authorities to offer six weeks pro bono work to support the Ukraine response. This was an offer as part of their corporate social responsibility given the scale and significance of the Ukraine crisis.
- 2.2. Birmingham City Council agreed to this support and asked for help in capturing information about those arriving and those supporting Ukrainian guests. As the tool developed, it became increasingly important in capturing data and managing the response to arrivals and the Council undertook a direct award to PwC to extend the development so there could be a single tool to maintain the response.

### **Critique**

- 2.3. The information and evidence gathered indicates:
- 2.4. There was no expectation the pro bono work for PwC would lead to a new contract. Officers led the discussions with PwC for subsequent work after seeing the benefits of the system that had been developed.

- 2.5. In any scenario where the Council wants to offer a contract to a supplier after a period of pro bono work, it should consider whether the work is needed and whether this can be provided by someone else. In this case, whilst this formed part of the Council's considerations, the pace at which the Ukraine response was moving and the length of time it would have taken to go through a procurement process would have meant significant delays.
- 2.6. The justification for awarding PwC the contract is clear, although concerns have been raised around the necessity of the database contracted, and there was some rigour attached to the consideration of this through the contract waiver procedure<sup>1</sup>.
- 2.7. However, unlike the case of Cabinet decisions, the rationale for these decisions ultimately are not easily understood by the public and it may help the Council going forward if this is more transparent so everyone can see why a decision has been made.
- 2.8. The Council now has much greater capability to develop dashboards and data management systems, which should allow greater internal development of similar systems in future rather than more expensive outsourcing.
- 2.9. During the award of the contract to PwC, the delivery landscape of the Ukraine response was changing, with the introduction of Refugee Action as the Council's provider. Whilst the Council wanted to confer the benefits of the system onto Refugee Action, this added additional administrative pressures on an organisation trying to mobilise in a fast-paced environment.

## **Recommendations**

- v. It should always be clear that any pro-bono work for the council is done with no expectation of future paid work; pro-bono work should always meet clearly identified needs; and the council should always consider any advantage conferred on a partner by carrying out such work in order to avoid unfairness. Pro-bono work should not normally lead to single-tender contracts with the provider.
- vi. There needs to be greater transparency of the 'waiver' procedure so where decisions are taken to go outside the process, everyone understands why such decisions have been made.
- vii. When the council develops data systems, it should consider inter-operability with its key providers and partners and seek to avoid creating additional work or costs for them, with a special awareness of data protection requirements.

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<sup>1</sup> The Contract Waiver is defined in the Council's Constitution and sets out the procedure to be undertaken to consider whether a Waiver is granted to set aside a requirement or requirements as set out in the procurement rules.

[https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/info/50068/how\\_the\\_council\\_works/283/the\\_city\\_council\\_s\\_constitution](https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/info/50068/how_the_council_works/283/the_city_council_s_constitution)

### 3. Award of Refugee Action Contract

#### Context

- 3.1. While a crisis-led response was rapidly mobilised within the Council to respond to the Homes for Ukraine scheme, it relied heavily on existing resources (staff across multiple council directorates) undertaking additional work within their full-time roles. This was becoming unsustainable given the large numbers that were arriving and expected to arrive in Birmingham.
- 3.2. On the 26 April 2022 Cabinet were asked to approve a proposal to undertake a single tender negotiation with Refugee Action, to deliver resettlement support for sponsors and Ukrainian guests. Refugee Action were the council's only contracted provider of refugee resettlement support at that time, delivering support under the Afghan and Syrian resettlement schemes.

#### Critique

- 3.3. The information and evidence gathered indicates:
- 3.4. Due to the urgency of the crisis, the Council awarded a single contract to Refugee Action for a large and novel resettlement programme. Acknowledging the constraints of procurement options at that time, officers included a requirement for Refugee Action to subcontract elements of provision to increase flexibility and capacity to deliver at the pace and scale required.
- 3.5. It is recognised that the Council were constrained during this period by the need to respond quickly to have a service in place for the volume of arrivals into the city which limited procurement options available to commissioners. This necessitated the council having to work with an existing contracted provider.
- 3.6. However, given the unique and unprecedented nature of the Homes for Ukraine scheme and the evolving policy and delivery landscape, the structure and the duration of the contract offered limited flexibility for the Council to respond in an agile way. It is understood that the duration of the contract award was in line with other refugee resettlement contracts to ensure equity to all those in receipt of support because it ensures the service is in place for at least 12 months after the last anticipated arrival.
- 3.7. The lessons of previous best practice and also the need to respond quickly to an emerging situation needs to be considered up front. Where the Council is entering into a single contract negotiation, there should be greater detail provided in the risk management section of the Cabinet report, so it is clear what the risks are, how these are being mitigated and what the trade-off of any decisions are. The Council has already reflected some of this learning into its work and has developed more flexible contracting arrangements for

refugee resettlement and integration. This is a positive step in ensuring that the Council can be more agile and diverse in its approach to commissioning in a similar crisis. The Council should consider this more flexible approach more widely so this can apply across all services.

## **Recommendations**

- viii. In future programmes or situations of this kind, the council should consider earlier diversification of its supply of capacity, thinking widely and flexibly across the range of partners and providers available.
- ix. Where possible, the council should develop a diverse ecosystem of 'pre vetted' providers that it can draw on quickly and flexibly, to avoid undue reliance on a single provider or the delays required by a full tendering process.
- x. Where Cabinet is presented with a single contract negotiation decision, particular care needs to be given to the assessment of risk, so this can help Cabinet to assess and advise on the appropriate mitigating actions that may need to be put in place to mitigate and/or reduce the risks.
- xi. Publishing a regular list of decisions taken under delegated and single award and officer name to encourage accountability and transparency.

## **4. Delivery of support - Refugee Action performance**

### **Context**

- 4.1. Following the agreement by Cabinet to the single contract negotiation, the Council developed an initial mobilisation plan with Refugee Action, which set clear expectations around the timeline and speed of deployment of the contract. The plan accounted for the transition of work from different areas of the Council to Refugee Action starting from the 6<sup>th</sup> June 2022. Whilst the expectations were communicated, these were not met and led to timelines being extended and revised. The protracted mobilisation resulted in delays to the support to guests and hosts.

### **Critique**

- 4.2. The information and evidence gathered indicates:
- 4.3. Many of the hosts and sponsored guests who arrived at the start of the crisis, felt that the support available to them from Refugee Action at that time did not meet their needs and expectations, and they turned to local community groups for support instead.
- 4.4. Refugee Action acknowledge that the contract at the early stage was not delivered in the way it should have been and this meant that support was not provided in the manner that was needed.

- 4.5. Refugee Action did not have the staff in place required to deliver their contract, and recruitment and on-boarding did not proceed as quickly as they anticipated. The impact of this was a lack of support for Homes for Ukraine host and guests early in the programme. This was a likely consequence given the limited number of providers the Council could directly award to at the start of the response.
- 4.6. The Council did recognise the deficiencies in support being provided and worked closely with Refugee Action to prioritise support whilst capacity was being built up. Due to the delays in mobilisation and the large number of guests that had arrived before the contract had been awarded (up to 300), council officers had agreed for Refugee Action to focus on issuing initial payments to all guests, as well as contacting guests and hosts flagged as a priority (families with young children, unaccompanied children or where initial checks had flagged early intervention).
- 4.7. The level of available support was not communicated effectively to community groups and organisations that were then providing support to guests and hosts. Alongside the delays, there have been misconceptions about the value of the contract awarded to Refugee Action that does not reflect the actual value over the duration of the contracted period and has been conflated with expectations of the provider and their subcontractors.

## **Recommendations**

- xii. When awarding direct contracts through a single contract negotiation, the Council should consider limiting the initial duration of the contract, for example up to a maximum of 12 months to maintain flexibility.
- xiii. The Council should continually engage and communicate with service users around changes to provision and the nature of support on offer. This will help to ensure that there is a common understanding of what is being delivered and why, which can help to manage expectations and improve partnership working.

## **5. Delivery of support - Reflections of guests, hosts, and community organisations**

### **Context**

- 5.1. Over the course of arrivals, hosts and community organisations have played a pivotal role in supporting Ukrainian families to settle and begin to integrate into the city. The Council held a number of engagement events with hosts to discuss the challenges, issues, and priorities in supporting guests and hosts. The outcome of these discussions has shaped a priority action plan. As part of the discussions, the Council also recognised the frustrations being voiced about the level of support that was being provided by hosts and community

organisations versus the support received from Refugee Action at the outset of the contract.

## **Critique**

- 5.2. The information and evidence gathered indicates:
- 5.3. Hosts and community organisations have provided extraordinary support to Ukrainian families to settle in the city. Their generosity and the warm welcome they have offered has been truly overwhelming and is a positive reflection on Birmingham City as a City of Sanctuary.
- 5.4. Hosts were very proactive in supporting Ukrainian families to navigate their way in getting some of the immediate and basic needs met. Local community groups became a key source of support for both hosts and guests particularly in helping to create networks and share information.
- 5.5. There was a very wide range of expectations within the guest community about the support that would be available to them. Some expected a high level of support, whilst others assumed they would need to be highly independent.
- 5.6. Hosts in particular did not receive sufficient communication early in the programme, and this left them unsure about what support was available and reliant on other networks. This situation has subsequently improved significantly and there is now regular engagement and communication with hosts.
- 5.7. With hosts having to navigate some of the early support for guests, they begun to see some of the structural and process challenges that exist for refugees arriving in the country and more broadly for citizens who need access to welfare and public services.
- 5.8. There have been considerable challenges in accessing school places and English classes. Many of the challenges are reflective of broader issues for refugees related to English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) provision, benefits, housing supply and affordability. Despite their circumstances and pre-existing capacity challenges, Ukrainian families (like other refugee groups) are expected to go through the same processes as all residents. Additional funding from central government, on its own, has not been successful in unlocking sufficient capacity and/or increasing provision to meet the early needs of Ukrainian families.
- 5.9. The key priority at the moment for Ukrainian arrivals and their hosts is how they transition from their host accommodation and move on to independent living. The Council has recognised this through the development and launch of a move on package. Whilst this has addressed a significant need, challenges still exist for Ukrainian families in trying to navigate the housing landscape, particularly the private rented sector. At the start of the response, the housing requirements were not fully anticipated by the Council so the

contract with the Provider focused on the provision of housing advice. More practical hands-on support is currently needed.

- 5.10. Some guests have been placed in temporary accommodation and this has been seen as a failure of the service. However, it is acknowledged that temporary accommodation placements in Birmingham are relatively low and, in some circumstances, has been unavoidable and short term. The nature of the Homes for Ukraine Scheme provides an alternative housing pathway instead of homelessness for Ukrainian families, therefore there should be an emphasis on moving guests to a new hosting arrangement (re-matching). However, it is noted that this is reliant on the Council having in place a large pool of available hosts.

## **Recommendations**

- xiv. The government provided additional school place funding to support Homes for Ukraine children – which is not available for Ukrainian children here under the Family Visa scheme or other Ukraine visa schemes. Despite this, many guests still struggled to secure the school place they wanted for their child or children, and this is disappointing. The council should consider what more it could do in similar situations to encourage and enable schools to accept refugee children. We welcome comment from schools to know what additional support/help is needed to enable them to offer more places.
- xv. The Ukraine crisis has created significant additional needs for housing when guests move on from their hosts, in a context of a very challenging wider housing environment in the city. Birmingham City Council has developed, in partnership with stakeholders and hosts, an innovative and well-received ‘move on’ scheme that provides direct financial support to guests moving into the private rented sector. However, there is a specific challenge with guests who are dependent on Universal Credit and require rent guarantees – the council should explore and support solutions for this group of guests.
- xvi. Many Ukrainian guests require more intensive and flexible English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) provision. Many are highly skilled and seeking work. With English skills they would be able to secure higher-paid employment opportunities and independent incomes. However, there is a shortage of such provision in the city, and steps should be taken to expand this provision for Ukrainian guests and all refugees in the city

## **6. Overall level of support by Birmingham City Council**

### **Context**

- 6.1. The Council's overall level of support through its Ukraine Response far exceeds that which is available to other refugee groups in Birmingham. The Council has tried to be as responsive as possible, within the resources available, in providing services specifically for this group. It has pioneered new initiatives and partnerships that can be extended to other refugee groups, as well as put in place innovative approaches to some of the more systemic challenges that have arisen for example, through the provision of a move on funding package.

### **Critique**

- 6.2. The information and evidence gathered indicates:
- 6.3. Birmingham City Council provides a relatively generous range of services and support for Homes for Ukraine hosts and guests compared to most other local authorities' Homes for Ukraine arrangements. In addition to providing a specific package of contracted support, it has also provided grants to local community organisations, administered free 12-week bus passes and developed a funding package provided to Ukrainian households to support them to move onto independent living.
- 6.4. The majority of core cities have relied more on their existing mainstream services to support Ukrainian guests within their existing capacity. By contrast, Birmingham City Council has utilised its funding to introduce new initiatives to pioneer different approaches to meeting the needs of Ukrainian arrivals, with the view to looking at how this approach can evolve to support Ukrainian families outside of the Homes for Ukraine Scheme and other refugee groups.
- 6.5. The support available to Ukrainian arrivals under the Homes for Ukraine scheme is much more generous than that available for other refugees and asylum seekers. There is also no similar package of funding and data available to the council in respect of Ukrainian arrivals under the Family Visa scheme.

### **Recommendations**

- xvii. The Council applies the lessons of the Ukraine Response and now considers what can be applied to other groups in a coherent and equitable approach that will provide support for all refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY & EVIDENCE REVIEW SESSIONS

### Evidence Sessions

Workshop 1 (01/03/23): Birmingham City Council officers' report

Workshop 2 (10/03/23): Guests, hosts, and community organisation evidence session<sup>2</sup>

Workshop 3 (20/03/23): Refugee Action evidence session<sup>3</sup>

Workshop 4 (24/03/23): Task and Finish group review session

### Materials Reviewed

- Refugee Action 'Homes for Ukraine' full contract including key performance indicators
- Birmingham City Council officer's report (included policy overview, PwC award information, Refugee Action performance management info, funding overview/breakdown, temporary accommodation details)
- Refugee Action payment breakdown
- Homes for Ukraine 'move on' application process, Frequently Asked Questions document

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<sup>2</sup> The session notes are included as Appendix 1 in the full evidence pack

<sup>3</sup> The session notes are included as Appendix 2 in the full evidence pack