



Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee

Oral evidence: Support for Ukrainian Refugees, HC 1223

Wednesday 30 March 2022

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Members present: Mr Clive Betts (Chair); Bob Blackman; Florence Eshalomi; Ben Everitt; Andrew Lewer; Mohammad Yasin.

Home Affairs Select Committee member also present: Dame Diana Johnson (Chair).

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Witnesses

I: Cllr James Jamieson, Chair, Local Government Association; Mark Lloyd, Chief Executive, LGA; and Sonika Sidhu, Principal Policy Adviser, LGA.

II: Lord Harrington of Watford, Minister for Refugees, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities; Catherine Frances, Director-General, Local Government, Strategy and Analysis, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities; and Emma Haddad, Director-General for Asylum and Protection, Home Office.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: James Jamieson, Mark Lloyd and Sonika Sidhu.

Chair: Welcome, everyone, to this morning's session of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Select Committee. It is an important session as we are going to be looking at the issue of refugees coming from Ukraine, at how they get visas at one end, and then at the services in particular that are offered to them once they get here and the challenges posed to local authorities in dealing with that situation. Before we come to our first panel, I ask members of the Committee to put on record any particular interests they may have that are relevant to this inquiry. I am a vice-president of the Local Government Association.

Mohammad Yasin: I am a member of the Bedford town deal board.

Chair: Welcome, Diana Johnson, Chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee, who is guesting with us this morning.

Dame Diana Johnson: I am a vice-president of the Local Government Association as well.

Florence Eshalomi: I am also a vice-president of the LGA.

Bob Blackman: I am a vice-president of the LGA and employ a councillor in my office.

Andrew Lewer: I am a vice-president of the LGA as well.

Q161 **Chair:** There are quite a lot of vice-presidents of the LGA, so our first panel this morning will feel at home. Would you please introduce yourselves?

James Jamieson: I am Councillor James Jamieson. I am chair of the Local Government Association and a councillor for Central Bedfordshire Council.

Mark Lloyd: I am Mark Lloyd, chief executive of the Local Government Association.

Sonika Sidhu: I am Sonika Sidhu. I am a principal policy adviser at the Local Government Association.

Q162 **Chair:** Thank you very much for coming. We all recognise the important role that local authorities have to play in the settlement of refugees when they come over to this country. First, I have a pretty obvious question to you, as representatives of councils up and down the country. The Government have promised guidance about the Homes for Ukraine scheme and, indeed, how refugees who come as part of the family scheme should be provided with services. You have had some guidance and more has been promised. What are the areas that you are currently waiting for guidance on, where you feel it is still difficult and challenging



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because you do not have what you need?

James Jamieson: If I could step back a little bit, we all recognise the tremendous humanitarian crisis and the really difficult situation faced by millions of Ukrainians, both within and outside the country. Our heartfelt sympathy is with all of them. Much of this scheme needs to be seen in that context.

When you talk about the guidance and the scheme, I would first step back and say that we already have an existing scheme for refugees that is, frankly, at breaking point. Therefore, we are very pleased that the Government have gone for, in effect, a parallel and different scheme. If we had not done that, they would be waiting on the borders of Ukraine for the next three or four months. It is important that this is a new scheme.

With a new scheme, where we are dealing with millions of people, we recognise the need for speed, which means maybe we do not quite have perfection and everything we want. The Local Government Association and councils will do all they can to support and house as many people as possible in as best a position as possible, but I put a caveat on that. If we are going to house as many as possible, we may not do it in a way that we would all like to do in a perfect world, if we had an eternity to do it in, because we do not. That involves compromises and we all need to recognise that up front.

When you talk about guidance, we have had talks around a light-touch regime and one where we emphasise getting people out of a very dangerous situation. There is a recognition that light touch may mean some risks, more than we would normally like, but we seek to minimise those. Therefore, guidance needs to be very clear about where that lays responsibilities.

We have two concerns here. We do not have perfect guidance. It is not reasonable to expect perfect guidance and it will be an evolving guidance. One of the key principles, and it is one that we have a worry about, is where legal responsibility lies. I can quote a line from the existing guidance. Safeguarding checks: "Councils have a statutory duty to promote the welfare of adults and children at risk". That is starting with a guidance that implies we are going to have to do everything we normally do to make sure we are absolutely to the same standard as normal. That is not compatible with a light-touch, fast regime.

We would really ask for clarity that we take a reasonable approach and that, therefore, the Government give us legal cover for when it does not quite go right. We need a bit of honesty between us all here. Something will go wrong, but the risks that people face in the UK will be far less than those they are facing in Ukraine. Therefore, getting them here quickly, with a measurable, limited amount of risk is better. We need legal cover for that. That is the first point I would make on guidance.



Secondly, we can clarify the guidance, the responsibilities of councils and who does what, but that will be an evolving situation and we would like that. We are keen to work with and we are working with Government on that.

Chair: That is regular contact and dialogue.

James Jamieson: Yes.

Q163 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Good morning. I want to ask about when the Home Office started to have a conversation with you about its plans. At the Home Affairs Select Committee, a Minister said that the Home Office had started in January to prepare for what might be happening in Ukraine. I wondered when it started having conversations with the LGA.

Mark Lloyd: It is at the point the conflict started that we had the first serious conversation with local government about shaping a response to the humanitarian crisis as it presents. Since then, we have had daily, if not hourly, conversations with officials about the various options that are available. There was guidance published for councils—I think it was on 18 March, if memory serves me rightly. We are hoping for updated guidance later this week.

I can report that the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has been consulting with the LGA and a select group of chief executives about the content of that guidance, so that we can offer constructive criticism and highlight the kinds of issues that Councillor Jamieson has mentioned that need to be addressed in the next iteration of the guidance.

Q164 **Dame Diana Johnson:** I also want to ask about data sharing. It is really important that councils know who is coming to their area. Could you explain to me the process of the data sharing? Is there real-time data sharing? When applications are made and granted for visas, are local authorities informed at that point, either under the Ukrainian family visa scheme or with the Homes for Ukraine?

James Jamieson: Can I take a step back on data, because it is a much wider question than just the specific matching question? Data is fundamentally important. Getting data to councils as soon as that data is reasonably available is really important. We would like perfect data, but, as I said earlier, let us deal with the real world.

First, we are not getting any data, as far as I am aware, on the family scheme. That is a significant issue and I will come to that in a moment. There are significant numbers and most of the people who are coming at the moment are through the family scheme. Obviously we are seeing sponsors coming through as well.

Secondly, we are not getting any information on people who have volunteered to sponsor people, so we are not able to get ahead of the game. We are getting data reasonably timely on where the matching



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scheme has taken place, but that data, if I am generous, needs cleaning, because there is some duplication and whatever. It is also missing details. It is very clear that dealing with a mother and two 10-year-old children is very different from dealing with a pregnant mother with a disabled child. We are not getting that contextual information on the families and that is really important when they come through.

Q165 Ben Everitt: James, good morning. This is really a follow-on from the information you have just given here. You mentioned that there are additional schemes. Obviously we have the Homes for Ukraine scheme. We have Ukrainians arriving through the other avenues as well, so the family scheme you mentioned, and then of course there are those who are arriving under the tourist visas and seasonal work visas or have existing visas extended.

Mark mentioned that there had been a lot of discussions with central Government. Has a clear set of guidance come from central Government as to how local authorities can support these individuals under the separate schemes, or has it all come as one set of guidance?

James Jamieson: At the moment, the guidance is essentially for the sponsor scheme. There is no guidance for the other schemes. It is a really important point, because these schemes all mix up. If you have a Ukrainian in your community, you want to support them. They may need English language teaching. They may need support with getting into work and all those things. The fact that they come from different schemes does not necessarily mean that they have different needs.

Combining these schemes or working together on these schemes is really important, particularly when the funding only happens for the sponsorship scheme. The data we are getting is only for the sponsorship scheme. For example, one of the big issues that we are all worried about is people presenting as homeless. The LGA did a survey last week of councils. We had 190 responses from councils with housing responsibilities, which is about two thirds of authorities. Of the 190, 57 said that they had already got people presenting as homeless.

If I look at that, that is 144 cases of homelessness, so 57 councils and 144 cases. I will make sure the data is correct and get it sent to you, but I will give it to you verbally. Of those, 44 were from the family scheme, 36 were from the sponsorship scheme and 64 were unknown or other. We believe that there is an element of people presenting as homeless because they are coming to Ireland and then, with the free movement, are able to come to the UK. That may be an element of the unknown.

Q166 Ben Everitt: You mentioned the funding. That is £10,500 per refugee, but it is only pegged to the Homes for Ukraine scheme. We are seeing these people who are presenting as homeless falling outside of that funding envelope.

James Jamieson: The 36 who are part of the sponsorship scheme clearly would be part of that envelope, but the others—whatever that



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comes to, about 108—would be outside the scheme. Sorry, I got my numbers wrong: 36 were through the sponsorship scheme, so it would be 108 outside the scheme.

Q167 **Ben Everitt:** Have the Government indicated that there is any funding available for local authorities to provide services to Ukrainians beyond the family scheme?

James Jamieson: We are working on it.

Mark Lloyd: That is right. We are working on it. The answer at the moment is that councils have statutory responsibilities and our Ukrainian new arrivals have access to public services. The expectation is that councils respond.

To add one more stat to Councillor Jamieson's answer, of the 57 councils that have had homelessness presentations, there are 62 families that we have put into temporary accommodation already at council level, just to give you the rounded picture.

If I may take the opportunity to say this, we are focusing on the response to the Ukrainian crisis, which comes on the back of the Afghan response, the Hong Kong response and the wider asylum system that we are operating. As Councillor Jamieson said, it is at breaking point. We are in dialogue with officials at the Home Office about how we reshape the overall scheme. We are hopeful of announcements soon that would put more emphasis on councils and regional strategic migration partnerships to do some of the dispersal and ensure that we can respond across the whole country, rather than in just a relatively small number of communities.

James Jamieson: On that score, we still have some 12,000 or so Afghan refugees in hotels. There is not enough housing. One reason we are so keen on the data around people who are volunteering to sponsor is that, if we are able to have that data, we might be able to—it would take time, cost and all that—actually check out that housing and those people before the matching process. That would give us several advantages.

First, you are less likely to have a breakdown because you know the accommodation is there and it is suitable, so people do not turn up and find the accommodation unsuitable, and hence have breakdown. Secondly, as Mark was saying, in the second phase we could then look at a matching process in which, instead of discharging to temporary accommodation, we might be able to use all those great people who are coming forward to offer their accommodation in order to meet some of those needs and eventually, potentially, also for the Afghan and other schemes.

Getting the information on people who are willing to sponsor housing would be really useful, but it will take resource. We are talking about 200,000 people who have offered their housing. Getting round and checking all those out takes a lot of time and effort.



Chair: We will certainly raise the issue of funding with Lord Harrington when he comes. I am pretty sure that at the Home Affairs Select Committee he said that the funding was going to be available to people who came on the family scheme as well, so what we were promised is clearly not happening in practice.

Q168 **Bob Blackman:** The people arriving are going to be traumatised. They have been through horrendous experiences and they will be very vulnerable. Clearly there is then a need to provide wrap-around services as well from the local authority, not just housing. How confident are you that there is that wrap-around service assistance available to help these people in terrible need?

James Jamieson: Local government has a tremendous track record of supporting people in their communities. We are going to do all we can to provide the necessary support. We also need the support of our partners and the voluntary and third sector. It is a good point. I am very concerned that people are potentially traumatised. They have mental health needs and so forth. It is really important that there is a clear guidance to the health sector that it needs to provide that support. In particular, it should not expect councils to fund that support.

It is very clear that the £10,500 is there for all the things that we need to do, such as integrating, English language skills, helping them into work or as part of society, and there is the potential homelessness cost to us. It is important that the health service steps up on that.

Q169 **Bob Blackman:** Has that conversation been going on with the health service at a local level? Local level is the key. National politicians can make all these sorts of decisions, but locally is the crunch.

James Jamieson: I will let Mark answer on the local level. It would be very helpful if there was clear guidance that the health sector was expected to step up and fund all the health needs, including mental health needs, of these refugees.

Mark Lloyd: My honest response to your question is that there is not one answer. The answer varies across the country and that is for an important reason. The current asylum dispersal system has focused on particular geographical areas. There has been a willingness from our councils across the country, particularly the south-west, parts of the south-east and the east of England, to do more, but the way the current contracts that the Home Office places work has encouraged dispersal to particular communities. That has meant that those councils and their health colleagues have become very well versed in responding.

The sponsorship scheme of course is sponsor-led, which means we will have people arriving in communities that have not had the same experience of providing support historically. Under Councillor Jamieson's leadership, we have already set in train a sector-led support initiative to



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ensure that those councils that are not used to dealing with new arrivals are getting best practice and support from other areas in the country.

Q170 **Bob Blackman:** There is a natural reaction of people coming to this country who are refugees to go to areas where there are nationals of their own country, but that may not be the case. The family route is the one that is obvious, but then there are the other schemes and, as you rightly say, the generosity of British people to take people in. How prepared are those local authorities for potentially quite a large influx of people?

James Jamieson: This is a dynamic situation. Are we fully prepared on day one? No. We are dealing continuously, as councils, with vulnerable people for a whole variety of reasons. We have services in place. We work with our colleagues in other parts of the public sector. It is what we do, day in, day out. I cannot give you an absolute guarantee that we are 100% prepared, but this is what we do. It is our day job and we will deliver, because it is what local government does.

Mark Lloyd: As you have implied, certain communities already have Ukrainian populations. Really helpfully, through the Cabinet Secretary actually, they fast-tracked some ONS analysis of the most recent census data, so we have an up-to-date understanding of which communities are where. That has enabled councils to get themselves into a state of readiness.

Back to the point that Councillor Jamieson has made already, the sponsorship scheme is not led by the Ukrainian community in this country; it is the generosity of the British people. So we will have Ukrainians arriving anywhere in the country and we need to support those councils through that process.

James Jamieson: I will reiterate the point about data. If we knew where the sponsors were, we would have a heatmap to know who is going to need the most support in terms of the sponsorship scheme. We kind of have the heatmap for the family route. Having it for the sponsor route would be immensely helpful.

Q171 **Bob Blackman:** You mentioned at the beginning that you support the light-touch approach to this. One concern will be about the people coming forward to offer a place of safety. It is hoped that the vast majority of them are going to be people who genuinely wish to help and support, but there will be some who wish to exploit vulnerable people. I wonder if you have enough staff and training to do this check.

The other thing that has been communicated to me is the concern about people saying, "What am I taking on here for this length of time? Are these people severely traumatised? Do they speak English?" All sorts of concerns will be there, to make sure that not only the families accepting them have the ability to help, but also the local services are there to help them.



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James Jamieson: I am going to keep repeating “data”. Normally, I come here and I keep repeating “money”, but today it is data. I will say “money” a few times in a moment, just to even it up. But a lot of it is data. If we knew who the sponsors were, if we were given the opportunity to check them out before the families came, clearly we then would know the accommodation. We would meet the people who were offering the accommodation. There would be that conversation.

If we have more data about the refugees—and I know collecting data is hard, but any idea about their needs, particularly traumatisation, disability and pregnancy—that would enable us hopefully to have fewer breakdowns. It also gives the councils an opportunity before they arrive to know at least what is coming in and, to some extent, balance it up. It is not going to be easy. I do not want to pretend that this is easy.

Q172 **Bob Blackman:** There is also the verification of the people making the offer of accommodation.

James Jamieson: Yes, and that is my point—if we have the sponsorship, the information and the funding to go there and check the accommodation out before somebody arrives. At the moment, my understanding is that the checks are being done after the visa has been issued, so there is not the time to do it. You may end up in a situation that somebody arrives and three days later you go, “Actually, this is not suitable accommodation,” never mind not a suitable person.

Then there is the issue that you do the check three days later, and the family is happy and the Ukrainians are happy, but it does not tick every box. What do you do? Do you say, “This is not appropriate because you have mould in the bathroom,” while the Ukrainians are saying, “It is a lot better than a tent in Poland”? We need to do a lot of work around that and that is why I say “light touch”. The safeguarding is really important but, when it comes to property, do we need to do a full electric check and a full gas check? Do we do that for our own homes every year? You would do that if you were renting the accommodation.

Those are the sorts of issues around guidance that we need clarity on. The last thing I want is a family and a Ukrainian family who have been living happily for a fortnight, where everything is working out and they are going to the local school, and we say, “You do not have a smoke alarm in the living room, so they have to go.” That would be ludicrous. Admittedly, you could put a smoke alarm in quite easily, but you know what I mean.

Q173 **Andrew Lewer:** Phase 1 of the Homes for Ukraine scheme is for individuals with known connections. What role can local authorities play in these later phases in the matching process?

Mark Lloyd: We absolutely understand the Government’s ambition to work in the way that they have in order to allow us to act at scale and volume, and with urgency, in our response. In his response to other



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questions, Councillor Jamieson suggested that councils can actually smooth that matching process if we know the people who have made offers of sponsorship and we can work with them to clear the way for the arrival of people from Ukraine. There is a role for councils in there.

The unanswered question is, in the case of breakdown, whether councils have a role in rematching. There is a further question of course. The offer of sponsorship is for between six and 12 months, and we hope of course that it is as long as possible. At the point that that offer of sponsorship finishes, is there the potential for a new sponsorship? We do not know that.

Furthermore, if there is not an offer of a new sponsorship, a really critical issue that our members would never forgive us for not mentioning here is what the housing response is at that point from this country. We are already in a housing crisis—and I use the word “crisis” deliberately. We know now who is arriving. We will have a flow of people through. We know the end of the sponsorship period. What is our housing response? We need a proper conversation across all parts of Government about appropriate housing responses for the end of the sponsorship period.

Andrew Lewer: You raise some very important questions, which raising in this forum will assist with.

Q174 **Florence Eshalomi:** Sonika and Mark, in terms of the LGA working with councils up and down the country, you have highlighted some of the issues, including issues for the long term. What other long-term considerations do you feel that Government need to give for Ukrainians receiving sanctuary here?

Sonika Sidhu: One of the issues for us would be making sure, across the different schemes, as we have already said, that there is a longer-term view about how the broader situation around new arrivals is being dealt with, that everybody is being dealt with in an equitable manner and how we manage that across the system.

Q175 **Florence Eshalomi:** Are there any other concerns you would want to share with the Committee that maybe we could pass on to Ministers, from your point of view?

James Jamieson: Money is important. We have one year of funding at £10,500 for the sponsorship scheme. Particularly if the other parts of the public sector, such as health, step up, that is a reasonable amount, so long as we do not end up in a huge homelessness issue. We have no money—and I am very grateful that the Home Affairs Select Committee has been told that we are going to get it—for the family route. That would be tremendous.

There is nothing about years 2 and 3. I can recognise why you might not want to say that on day one. This is a fast-moving scheme, but it is something that needs to be addressed. That is very important about what happens in the longer term. Related to that is the housing issue that Mark



mentioned. Then, as Sonika alluded to, we cannot forget the other refugee and asylum seeking schemes and the impact that they have. At the end of the day, all these schemes will overlap over time. Certainly, there are innovative parts of this scheme that we would like to apply longer term to the other schemes and that would help us out.

Q176 **Dame Diana Johnson:** I want to ask a couple of very quick questions. One is about DBS checks. I saw some reports yesterday that sponsors of the Homes for Ukraine were being asked to pay by local authorities for DBS checks.

Mark Lloyd: That should not be the case. If you have examples of that, let us know and we will talk to councils.

Q177 **Dame Diana Johnson:** The second point is about safeguarding. Have you had any conversations with the Home Office about setting up a hotline for people who come to the UK from Ukraine where there are issues around trafficking and sexual exploitation, so that there is somewhere that Ukrainians can report? Have you had any conversations about that?

Mark Lloyd: I am not aware of a conversation about a hotline response. Councils would ensure that their safeguarding response was in place for people that have concerns. If you want to see some bigger scheme in place that could apply nationally, of course we would be happy to collaborate with you on that.

James Jamieson: You mentioned DBS. The speed of DBS checks is also very important.

Chair: Thank you very much for that. That is some really helpful information for the Committee. We are going to speak to Lord Harrington immediately and the Prime Minister is coming to the Liaison Committee this afternoon, so we might be asking him some questions about these issues as well.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Lord Harrington of Watford, Catherine Frances and Emma Haddad.

Q178 **Chair:** Thank you very much indeed, Lord Harrington, for joining the Committee this morning on what I think we all agree is an absolutely crucial issue: about how we make sure not just that refugees who want to come to this country are facilitated in doing so, but then, when they get here, that they are properly looked after. That is in all our interests and all our intention.

Thank you for coming this morning. You have been in the job for two weeks or so now, have you not? You came to the Home Affairs Select Committee recently and indicated that you would come to our Select Committee when you got a little bit more information, maybe, to share



with us about what is happening. You are welcome. Perhaps you could introduce your colleagues as well at the beginning of our session.

Lord Harrington: Thank you very much. I would be delighted to. Catherine Frances is the senior official, the director-general at DLUHC. My main working with Catherine has been about her responsibility for the Homes for Ukraine scheme, about which she is very knowledgeable, as I am sure you will find. Emma Haddad's title is director-general of asylum and protection at the Home Office, but again, in this context, Emma has been at the sharp end of the visa scheme. She and I worked together on the Syrian resettlement scheme in my previous life.

Although this is the DLUHC Committee, and I am very pleased to see Diana here as well, we are really cross-Government. That was the lesson of the Syrian programme. That is really the lesson of this programme. There is an article in the *Daily Mail*—not that I normally read it, but I saw it this morning—saying that it is this revolution that two Secretaries of State are having a meeting together. Of course, it has been happening every day. In a business it would be the most normal thing, but in Government it is regarded as being different. It is not just a cliché, this across-Government thing. We really are trying to make it as seamless as possible. I responded quite extensively to your letter, and I apologise for its late arrival.

Q179 **Chair:** I am going to begin by thanking you for the answers to the questions that you have given to the Committee, which we have sent around to Committee members.

Lord Harrington: Would you like me to perhaps go through the numbers, where we are at the moment?

Chair: That was my first question, to ask about the numbers, so you have anticipated it. Yes, off you go, absolutely.

Lord Harrington: I know that probably we are here to talk about mainly the Homes for Ukraine scheme. For both the family scheme and Homes for Ukraine we have had just under 60,000 applications that have been received for both schemes together. That is 59,500. In the family scheme of that, we have had 31,200 applications and 22,800 visas have been issued. For Homes for Ukraine, the sponsorship scheme, we have had 28,300 applications. As of last night, 2,700 visas have been issued.

In terms of what we can forecast, which is very important, I am very conscious that it is easy to promise jam tomorrow. In my business life, in every business plan I have ever seen, suddenly it is like that and then next year it goes like that. We have tried to avoid that, but this is still a new scheme. I am hopeful that we can have a run rate for both schemes together of about 15,000 visa applications per week. I hope, by not this week but next week or the week after, that that will be the run rate and the backlog will be cleared quite quickly.



We do not know how many new applications there are going to be. There has been some talk, quite correctly in my view, that the visa application process, the actual filling it out, is too slow. I agree with that. I sat down on Saturday morning and spent just under an hour filling one out myself, and I was sitting comfortably with a cup of tea, rather than being a refugee in Poland and so on. We are going through every step of trying to shorten that form, with the support of officials and the full support of the Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for DLUHC.

Since I got the job a couple of weeks ago, as you said, Clive, I am viewing it as very operational and so is the team. We are looking at every single bit of the process to try to speed it up.

Q180 Dame Diana Johnson: Can I confirm whether the form is still 49 pages long?

Lord Harrington: I do not know the number of pages. I am not saying you have asked the wrong question, but I was not looking at it like that. I was looking at the time it takes to fill in. For example, there are four or five things on four or five pages. My view, instinctively, was to the officials, "Why do we not just put them all on one page?"

We tried it on a mobile phone. It seems silly to me to have a separate page for your email address and a separate page for your mobile phone number, for example. Some of these people are doing it on a mobile phone. I was doing it on my tablet. Put it on a mobile phone. That is why I do not think that it is correct to have the number of pages. In my opinion, how long it takes to fill it in is a better test, and it is too long.

Q181 Dame Diana Johnson: At the Home Affairs Select Committee, I think either you or one of the officials said that it was 49 pages. That was how it was counted, so it is still the same.

Lord Harrington: I am not denying that.

Dame Diana Johnson: No, I understand, but it is still the same, despite, at that Committee, being told that the Home Office was working day and night to reduce it down. It is still the same form.

Lord Harrington: I will pass over to Emma, not because it is a difficult question but because she can answer specifically. It is less than it was when I spoke to that Committee. I am afraid that I cannot tell you the number of pages, but it is less. Previous questions such as, "Are you a war criminal?"—all that kind of stuff—that was on the standard forms and that you see on these things are gone.

Emma Haddad: We have cut the form by about a third of what it was previously. It is modelled on the same application form as the Ukraine family scheme. We were able to cut about a third from that form and the same for our form. The length varies depending on what you answer to different questions. If you answer something, you might have to carry on with a few other pages, or it might skip those pages, depending on your



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answer. As the Minister said, a lot of those pages are literally one question, yes or no, and you move on to the next.

Q182 **Dame Diana Johnson:** It is still about 30 pages, roughly.

Emma Haddad: Probably at its minimum, I would say, yes.

Q183 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Changes were introduced so people with a Ukrainian passport did not have to attend a visa application centre. Can you say now what the percentage of people who are still having to attend a visa application centre is?

Emma Haddad: I do not have the percentage in my head, but it is absolutely minimal. The vast majority are doing the complete application online.

Lord Harrington: An approximate number is that 10% have to go to the centre.

Q184 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Are those 10% the most vulnerable? I am thinking of the elderly, who may not have a passport, or unaccompanied children. Who is actually going to these visa application centres?

Lord Harrington: The cases I have been reported have predominantly been children, not children on their own but children with a mother, where we have had to try to identify that they are indeed children of that mother. Our fear, which I am sure everybody would have great sympathy with, is that with young children, where we do not have identity, they could basically be being trafficked.

Please do not think this is complacency—it is not—but the better news is that the time at the visa application centres is much less, because the majority of people do not have to use them. This safeguarding thing is a worry. Safeguarding in the UK is a difficult enough matter—of course it is—but we have systems and everything here. When people are being moved halfway across a continent, we have to try to—and it is not perfect—make sure that they are who they say they are.

Q185 **Dame Diana Johnson:** I have a final question about safeguarding, trafficking and, in particular, unaccompanied children. What are we doing to make sure that we support unaccompanied children particularly and to deal with the concern that many charities have raised about the Homes for Ukraine scheme being a Tinder application for sex traffickers?

Lord Harrington: Both are valid points. As far as the unaccompanied minor programme goes, I learned a lot about it myself practically when trying to deal with the situation with these 51 children from the orphanage, the Dnipro case. Many people were involved. Ian Blackford of the SNP was helpful. Everyone was trying to help, lots of charities and things like that.

The Ukrainian Government made it very clear to us that their policy is not to move unaccompanied minors, or indeed even children from



orphanages, away from the countries adjacent to Ukraine, because they do not want them resettled. When we bring in those children, it has to be a specific exception. The Home Office has been criticised in the press for delaying on this. It actually was not.

We did all the paperwork. I am not saying it is that brilliant; it is our job to do all the paperwork. We spoke to the Ukrainian ambassador. He was not able to give us that permission. It had to go back to his Government—I cannot quite remember exactly, but the Ministry of Social Policy or something like that—which had to sign it off. Otherwise, in law, we would have been kidnapping those children. We would have been transporting children. That took three or four days.

The main policy at the moment, except in those circumstances, is to try to help unaccompanied children through our humanitarian aid programmes over there. Their system is different from ours. We do not have a system of children's homes, as everyone will be aware. It is predominantly fostering children, except in certain circumstances. Their system is what we would traditionally call orphanages. The word "orphan" does not necessarily mean that these children have no parents; they may have them, but they cannot look after them, so they are in children's homes. It is not that easy, but we are keen and willing to help.

Q186 Dame Diana Johnson: The issue for me is unaccompanied children who have the right under the family scheme to come to the UK. What are you doing about them, so where there is a clear right under the scheme, not children who are perhaps from orphanages? I want to know what we are doing to get those children over and how you are supporting them.

Lord Harrington: I am not sure about that. I cannot answer that question, because I have been concentrating on children who are in Poland and other places. That does not mean that I do not want to. I do not want to give you a waffling answer, because I actually do not know the answer to that.

Catherine Frances: Maybe we can help a little bit on your question. You have asked both about the Homes for Ukraine scheme and about the family scheme. Let me first talk about Homes for Ukraine. That is the sponsorship scheme. There is quite a process of safeguarding built in at a few points here, which you might want to cover later in the hearing. When you are talking about whether people are vulnerable to sponsors approaching them, there are a few stages in the process.

First, when you make a visa application under the sponsorship scheme, you can fill in the form either if you are the person who is arriving from Ukraine or if you are the sponsor. You need to have full details, the opposite person's passport details and so forth, and enter those on the system. At that point, when you make the visa application, the Home Office conducts checks. It conducts checks on the applicant who is applying from outside of the country, but additionally on the sponsor adult and all the adults in the sponsor's household.



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At the same time as that visa application process is happening and those checks are happening, the information is conveyed to local government and a council—we might want to come on to how that happens—then receives that data. We are asking councils whether they could then please trigger checks, DBS checks and enhanced DBS checks with barring where appropriate and for certain groups, which I can talk through with you. We have made available a fast-track DBS process for them as well. You have a multiple-tiered approach on safeguarding in the sponsorship scheme.

You separately asked about the family scheme, which I will bring Emma Haddad in on. Then you are also asking about unaccompanied minors. Unaccompanied minors are not allowed to apply for the sponsorship scheme.

Lord Harrington: Before Emma comes in, the reason I did not go through that is that I thought you were asking about how we bring unaccompanied minors in.

Q187 **Dame Diana Johnson:** My question was about safeguarding. I wanted to know what you are doing.

Lord Harrington: Then I could have answered your question. I apologise and thank you for saying it, because obviously the safeguarding side is really important to us. Some of the words that are in the criticism of us say, "You are too worried about security." They are thinking that it is to do with spies and all this kind of security, but it is more like the safeguarding security really. Sorry, I was at a tangent. I thought you meant, "There are all these unaccompanied minors there. What separate programme do we have to bring them in?" Otherwise, thank you very much. It is not that I did not know that, to clarify.

Q188 **Florence Eshalomi:** Good morning. Lord Harrington, you will be aware that, when the Secretary of State made the statement in the Chamber on 14 March, he outlined that Ukrainians with a valid passport would get their application processed within 24 hours.

I represent Vauxhall, a vibrant constituency, where so many of my constituents have come forward to offer their homes. I got an email from my constituent, who was actually quite frustrated by the timescale. He said to me, "Almost two weeks later, we are still waiting for their visa to be approved, myself comfortably sitting in a large empty house in London, while they are in temporary and cramped conditions in Ukraine." What would I tell my constituent? You have outlined that the backlog will be addressed and looked at. What is the timescale for those backlogs?

Lord Harrington: That is a perfectly valid question. I do not recall the Secretary of State saying 24 hours. I would love to have it within 24 hours. If that is given as a goal in my head, it is. The reality is that it is taking too long now. For your individual constituent, would you mind sending me the details and I will deal with it?



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Florence Eshalomi: I will send all the application and the details.

Lord Harrington: I am trying to deal with them on a one-by-one basis for loads of people, not just from MPs but from anybody. We have a hotline with the hub at Portcullis House, which is very good, but there are all those things. At the moment, it is not 24 hours. It should not be two or three weeks. That is unacceptable.

I would like to get it down. If I say “a few days”, I am not talking about 10 or 15 days. For me, a reasonable target would be perhaps two or three days. I would love it to be 24 hours, but I do not think that is feasible for the moment, because of the different components in it to do with safeguarding, the sponsor, the criminal records and DBS checks on the sponsor here and trying to make sure there that people are who they say they are, particularly for children with parents, as we have been saying.

Emma Haddad: I definitely want to get the processing time down and I am very sorry that people have been waiting. We want it to be quicker. The context is that we went from an idea of a scheme to go-live in under three weeks. To go from idea to design, to setting up the IT application form, putting in place a process, training people to process the applications and operationalising all of that, in a very short space of time, has been very difficult.

We are ramping up. It will get much quicker. We are getting through many more applications now than we were last week, but with a new scheme it just takes a little bit of time at the beginning. That is exactly what we saw when we launched the Ukraine family scheme, so the same trajectory. We will be at a pace, as the Minister said, where we will be deciding 2,000 to 3,000 per day.

Lord Harrington: If I am positive, I can say that we have 30,000 completed forms, or thereabouts, but we have not got everything right. It is not as seamless as it should be. I have tried to look upon it as if it was almost like an operation in a business, in a way. Unfortunately, the product is human misery. If I were Diageo or GSK, how would I speed up that process? We are looking at it like that.

It is usually the Home Office that gets the blame. I know this is not the Home Affairs Committee, but we are not trying to slow things up. You will correct me exactly, but the last time we looked there were more than 300 staff, and about 500 staff if you include both schemes. We have started evening working. We have started weekend working. We are using every suitable terminal—it is not just a laptop; it has to be a special type of terminal for the security stuff. We have got them from every bit of the Government. We have HMRC people working.

This is like an emergency operation. It is not that “they will just have to wait,” because people are there and they are desperate to come over.



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They have got through the system and we have to get them here as quickly as possible.

Q189 **Chair:** I have one simple question. How many people have actually arrived in this country under the Homes for Ukraine scheme?

Lord Harrington: It is too early to publish that data, because it really only started the other week. If you could give me until maybe Friday or Monday, I will write to the Committee with that.

Chair: Okay, thanks.

Q190 **Ben Everitt:** Thank you for coming, all of you. Lord Harrington, in your introduction you mentioned that you were here primarily to talk about the Homes for Ukraine scheme. The answers to the previous questions indicate, particularly on safeguarding, that there are multiple issues across all the schemes. People can arrive here on the family visas. They can arrive here on seasonal visas or visa extensions, and they are incredibly traumatised.

The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has issued guidance to local authorities for their roles and responsibilities on the Homes for Ukraine scheme. When can we expect guidance for local authorities on their responsibilities for the other schemes? We heard from our previous witnesses, the LGA, that there is still this statutory responsibility for local authorities to provide services for these individuals, but there is not the clarity around the guidance that they need.

Catherine Frances: I can come in on this, on the family route in, the Home Office-led route, in terms of being a visa route in. You are absolutely right that a council would have its normal statutory responsibilities in place there. There is quite a lot that is similar across the schemes. People have access to public funds, access to support from local government and all those things. The logic of the family scheme is different, in that you are applying because you have family here and it is an extension of existing arrangements on that, unlike the Homes for Ukraine scheme, which has a different sponsorship element outside of your family. Emma may wish to say more about the statutory responsibilities, but they are as standard for local government.

Q191 **Ben Everitt:** You mentioned then the cost of providing those public services. There is the commitment of £10,500 per refugee, but that only relates currently to the Homes for Ukraine scheme. We have thousands more coming through the other schemes. This is a tremendous burden on public services, and local government in particular. As we heard earlier, this is on top of the schemes that we have done for Afghans, the Hong Kongese, Syrians and so on.

There is already a system that is at breaking point and we are adding more burden on that system, but without adding funding through the other schemes. Can we get a commitment that the Government will provide more funding across the other schemes, as well as the Homes for



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Ukraine scheme?

Lord Harrington: I cannot give that commitment, but you are correct in what you say. For the Afghan scheme, when we did the Syrian resettlement programme and for the Homes for Ukraine scheme, it is different. As you said, Catherine, we have always had family schemes, not just for Ukrainians, and they have never had the separate payments as this has.

The only point I would make is that the refugees coming on the family scheme are of course entitled to the benefits and everything of the country. That could be universal credit, housing benefit, all those things, if they need it. It is not that they are treated differently in that way. The money that is paid to the host is different. As you are probably aware, under the Homes for Ukraine scheme they get £350 per month, not per refugee, but per offering. The local authorities get paid £10,500 per refugee. That is not the case. In terms of the individual, they are entitled to the same benefits in terms of work or education, for example, and all those things.

Q192 **Ben Everitt:** Turning to data, another point that came through loud and clear when we had the LGA in here earlier was that it is screaming out for data. Local authorities really need data on who is covered by all the schemes, not just the Homes for Ukraine scheme. In particular, a big ask from the LGA was on some of those family schemes, so they can look at the heatmaps of where people are going and resources can be directed more appropriately at the local level. Is there a plan for the Government to share all data on all Ukrainians relative to supporting their needs, so that local authorities can do their job?

Catherine Frances: You are quite right on the Homes for Ukraine element of this, which I recognise is one part of what you are talking about. Local government is getting a data feed. It is currently going to the upper tier local authorities. We have asked them to cascade down. It is different in some areas. Some places want it direct to the lower tier, so we are switching that on as well.

In terms of the family schemes and other movements of people, people arrive in the UK and are free to go wherever they want to go. We are looking at the data and what we can most effectively give to local government to help it plan. We all have information about where the current Ukrainian diaspora is living, which of course is helpful, but we are working on that. At the moment, the solid data flow that is going to local government is on the Homes for Ukraine scheme, because we have, if you like, the luxury of having of the sponsorship detail and the sponsorship address, which we can pass on.

Q193 **Ben Everitt:** We need to recognise in this context that the people we are supporting here will take a lot of support. They will cost a lot of public money to support. Not only are they fleeing a conflict, and they will have various needs relating to that, but they may well have other special



educational needs, disabilities and particular language needs that we all need to cover across. Therefore that data around not only where they are going but what their needs are is vital for local authorities to be able to plan, budget and deliver those services, so that we can support everybody properly.

Lord Harrington: That is a very valid point. With a scheme like we had for Syrian refugees, for example, before people arrived we knew a lot of information about them. For example, there were planes arriving. We knew every single person on that plane from the processing that was done in Jordan and so on. To have that kind of information that you are quite rightly talking about is a lot easier than a sponsorship scheme, where people are free to go where they match up with a host. It could be anywhere.

The frustration for James Jamieson and others, whom I have met weekly to try to hammer out these things—I know he gave evidence before this—is that, at the moment, we do not actually know that much. They apply, find the host sponsor and come. For example, we have welcome centres in most of the main airports and a station, but there is nothing to stop people going to a completely different airport. We are trying to organise it, but the system of sponsorship itself is not so easy to pre-organise. We will get better at it. As I said before, this is not a perfect scheme. We do not have everything right, but there is a proper will in Government there and local councils as well. They are really helpful. They are not trying to stop us doing anything.

Q194 **Chair:** I have one point about the funding. When we had the discussion at the Home Affairs Select Committee, I asked you precisely, Richard, whether local authorities would get the £10,500 for refugees who came over on the family scheme as well as the homes scheme. You said yes, they would.

Lord Harrington: No, they do not.

Q195 **Chair:** That was on the record in the Home Affairs Select Committee. We have the record of it.

Lord Harrington: They do not get the £10,500 for the family scheme.

Q196 **Chair:** You confirmed that they did. It is in the record of the Select Committee.

Lord Harrington: It was my second day. I do not recall saying that. If I said it, I said it, and I can only apologise, but the system is that, in the Homes for Ukraine scheme, as in, I believe, the Afghan scheme and the Syrian scheme, they get the amount of money, £10,500 per refugee, but they do not get it in the family scheme.

Q197 **Chair:** The LGA said to us today, very clearly, “We are not providing the housing, at last not at first instance, under either scheme, but under both schemes we are providing all the necessary support, help with mental



health issues, special educational needs issues and so on. The costs for people coming in under the family scheme are no different to us, except maybe DBS checks and one or two other things that are done slightly differently. We still have costs and we are getting nothing for those costs". It needs addressing, does it not?

Lord Harrington: That is a very valid point you make, Clive. We have not done it in family schemes before. Maybe we need to look at it. If I misled the Home Affairs Committee, I promise you that it was not on purpose and I apologise.

Q198 **Chair:** We accept that. It is probably a wider Government scheme. Maybe again we will raise that with the Prime Minister this afternoon, to see if he can take a cross-Government decision.

Lord Harrington: I am sure he will not mislead you either.

Q199 **Bob Blackman:** In the earlier evidence from the LGA, it was confirming data on people who were arriving under the family scheme now presenting themselves to local authorities as being homeless. That suggests that there will be extra burdens on local authorities without any funding and, equally, a challenge to the joined-up approach of these schemes. If people are presenting in that sort of way, it is not as the system was designed to work. Presumably you have data on this. What are you doing about it?

Chair: I think that the LGA said that there were 44 homeless applications already from people under the family scheme.

Catherine Frances: Maybe I can answer this in terms of homelessness and the standard Department responsibilities and that of local government. We, too, understand that the LGA has not yet got a complete set of responses from local government but, as you would expect, it is seeing homelessness presentation through many different routes for people arriving from Ukraine.

We are doing two things about this. First, we will work with local government and keep it under review. It has a statutory responsibility on homelessness. We fund it on homelessness, but we will work with the councils to get a sense of scale and distribution on that. Secondly, for the Homes for Ukraine scheme, part of what was costed into the 10.5k is some assistance for temporary accommodation where it should be necessary, although it is not modelled as being the primary thing there, because you should be going to the sponsors.

Q200 **Bob Blackman:** Sorry, the problem here is that people are arriving under one scheme and, interpreting this, they are being turned away and told to go to the local authority for assistance, which cannot be the intention of the scheme. The worry is that that is a relatively low number at the moment, but it could become a really serious burden for local authorities if it continues.



Catherine Frances: That is exactly why we are keeping it, working with local authorities, under review. We need to see how their caseload comes through in terms of homelessness for any route into the UK, as we do more widely looking at the homelessness burdens.

Lord Harrington: You are right, Bob. It could in fact become the norm that people find out you can do this. I hope it will not. That would be quite cynical and I am sure with most of the people offering family accommodation that is the last thing that would happen, but it could. That is why we have to keep this under review. There are 44 cases, as you say. The LGA just brought it to our attention. Nothing is written in stone on this. I am trying to react to situations to pre-empt if we can, but based on the evidence, and that is why we work so closely with the LGA.

Chair: If we know anything, we know that the homelessness situation in many authorities is at crisis point—the LGA used the word “crisis” this morning. We have the Homes for Ukraine scheme because there simply are not the affordable housing units out there to put people into.

Q201 **Florence Eshalomi:** Just following on from that and linked to that, I am quite worried that it seems as if the responsibility is being pushed on local authorities yet again. Again, I am speaking from a selfish point as a London MP and the housing situation across all London boroughs is quite precarious at the moment. In the update to the statement I asked the Secretary of State about the fact that we still have many people in hotels, including in my constituency. That is not suitable accommodation. My worry is if these Ukrainians coming through who are now registering as homeless may end up in the hotels. How are you and the Department working to ensure that does not happen?

Lord Harrington: First of all, you are quite right; the hotel situation is unacceptable. I took on this job and found there were still—

Florence Eshalomi: There were 14,000 people.

Lord Harrington: I was going to say I have not got the exact number. I think it was 12,000, but far too many Afghan families are still in hotels. By having the sponsorship scheme, we have tried to avoid the need for temporary accommodation beyond the sponsor route, but the truth is that you are quite correct; there are not vast amounts of accommodation suddenly free and available for long-term occupancy for people in this situation and we are looking at all options. We are looking at blocks of flats that are available on the market not to buy, but for letting. We are looking at whatever accommodation the Government have all over the country and everything else, but the hotel situation is not acceptable.

In fact, I think I said when I spoke to the Home Affairs Committee that in exceptional cases we might have to have hotels, for example the welcome centres. If people arrive and the sponsor is not contacted or not available, yes, we would put people up. We have a budget to do that for hopefully the very short term, but this system is not based on putting



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people in hotels and then hoping what is going to happen, because that is unacceptable.

The final point is that it is the burden of local authorities. That is right and the reason for that is that they are much better at it than central Government. The funding point and how they do it is a separate matter, but in terms of a local authority being the best organisation to do it, in the vast majority of cases, it could be. It is not something that you could easily do centrally.

Florence Eshalomi: It is the best place for them to do it, if they have adequate funding.

Chair: We are all agreed on that. It is the funding issue that we will be following up elsewhere. The issue of communication with local authorities is very important.

Q202 **Mohammad Yasin:** Absolutely, it is very important. We heard this morning that local authorities are looking for clarity and, the LGA said, legal cover when things can go wrong. As the Chair said, communication is very important. How are the Government co-ordinating their communication with the local authorities? Is there any central point of contact to make that easy for local authorities?

Lord Harrington: I did not hear James Jamieson's evidence this morning because I was outside, but he has made those points to us and we are working on it. Catherine, perhaps you could expand on that, please.

Catherine Frances: I can expand on how we are sharing information with local government. In formal terms we shared a full suite of guidance with them back on 18 March. We are refreshing that now, because we are working with councils and council representatives as well about the ways that we need to get further information and further detail in there. A lot of our work with local government now is on a working group basis, for example looking together at finessing the next piece of work on safeguarding in terms of exactly how we do that and how we take it forward.

Beyond that, from DLUHC we do a lot of communication with councils and I have personally chaired a session with all chief executives in the country, but Ministers have also led webinars with leaders across the country. We have had multiple communications. We issue communications to them every day. Last week we wrote to every chief exec explaining about safeguarding and how they trigger responses. It is in the DNA of the Department.

In terms of where they come centrally, we have our local government engagement function in DLUHC, which we use for anything that is the matter of the day. It is entirely focused on this at the moment. Additionally, for councils that have issues with IT connectivity with the movement of data, which is exceptional and has been ramped up at



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higher pace than normal for reasons you will understand, we have support services there to try to unblock problems. I hope that answers your question.

We acknowledge that it is not always perfect, but that is to do with launching a new scheme at that sort of pace. We are trying to learn the lessons of covid, where we know we need to co-produce, finesse, move forward and keep listening.

Lord Harrington: We are not holding anything back from them. I know that. I know officials have met with all the chief executives. I have met with many political leaders, not because of being Conservative or Labour, but anyone in London boroughs or anywhere in the country, and the Scottish and Welsh. We have to get this right, but we are reacting. It is the beginning of the thing. They gave us feedback. We try to deal with it and move on, but I hope they have not said, and I do not think they would, that we are holding anything back or anything like that. We have no reason to. We would not anyway.

Q203 **Mohammad Yasin:** Moving on to the Government communication with sponsors, will the Government co-ordinate communication with the sponsors for the six months they are required to provide accommodation?

Lord Harrington: As far as the Government centrally are concerned, again, it goes back to the local authority. The initial form the sponsor puts on effectively a database, et cetera. Then it is matched up, but then the local authority is responsible for, for example, visiting the property, checking the property after, checking the people there and that sort of thing. Central Government do not do that, but they do act as the conduit for the process to start. That is really why we pay the local authorities the money. Part of the £10,500 is to do that.

Q204 **Mohammad Yasin:** Do local authorities have guidance on that already?

Lord Harrington: Yes. It is on the internet as well. It is quite a comprehensive document.

Catherine Frances: It might be worth drawing attention to the fact that sponsor guidance is published as well, which is designed to be used by the British public really, but also ties together with a set of frequently asked questions. If you read these two together, you can see what is expected of you as a sponsor and then that ties together again with the local government guidance, so it locks as a piece. I do not doubt that over time we might need to just get the feedback from people about what additional support they are needing and then keep adjusting the suite.

Q205 **Mohammad Yasin:** Moving on to training and support for sponsors, especially those who are receiving vulnerable people, what training and support is available for them?

Lord Harrington: That is again part of the responsibility for local authorities. In terms of training, do you mean training them how to be



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sponsors? They are given guidance. For example, it is not their responsibility to provide food and so on.

Q206 **Mohammad Yasin:** Is there training to look after vulnerable people in their homes?

Catherine Frances: It is important to remember that at the moment we are in phase 1 of the sponsorship programme, where individuals are connecting if they already know each other or have a connection that they can make together. In that phase, we are basically saying to people, "You need to know each other already, or need to have a contact in common, in order to make that sponsorship connection and fill in the form there." Then you have some quite headline guidance backed up by councils, which, as the Minister said, will go and call on every property before any of that first £350 payment is issued to any sponsor and will do the safeguarding responsibilities and accountabilities around that.

What we are then thinking about for the next phase of the project, which is not yet developed policy, is whether you should look at supporting institutions or charities to take more of a wrap-around service in contexts where you might have people who do not know each other, but where there are institutions that want to make connections in some way. We have not made policy announcements on that yet, but Ministers have flagged that we are just exploring that still.

Q207 **Mohammad Yasin:** Training is very important. If somebody has disabled people in their home and they have never dealt with that situation before, how will they look after those people who might have special needs?

Catherine Frances: At the moment they should not be bringing people into their homes unless they have an existing connection, but we would expect councils, when they go around, to take a look at what the context is and to ask all of the basic questions about provision and needs there and whether the sponsor understands the needs of the person who is arriving with them. That is the arrangement at the moment.

It comes back, on special educational needs, to the point we raised earlier. It is a trade-off between the questions you were asking about the pace and the ease of using the visa form and what information the council gets. At the moment, local service providers are provided with the information that is on the visa form, which is necessarily kept sufficiently light that it is possible to fill in easily, so the council will then be arriving and assessing the needs of the people who are there.

Lord Harrington: The alternative for that, Mr Yasin, would be to make the forms even longer at the other end, like going into real detail on that, and that would add another half an hour, an hour or whatever to fill out the form. It is quite difficult. That is why we are basically paying the local authorities to do that assessment when people arrive here. Otherwise,



the numbers, which I have already said are not acceptable in time delay, would be even longer.

Q208 **Chair:** There is a conflict there. You are saying the local authorities should do the assessment when people get here, but the people should not be put into accommodation where those looking after them are not capable of providing help to people, kids with disabilities or whatever.

Lord Harrington: Remember that it is matching people. What we are not doing is doing over there a full health assessment, disability assessment and that sort of thing, because it just does not fit in with the thing, but the local authorities then basically inspect the property, and meet and see the people, because, if special needs things are needed, they are there to do that. We talk about bureaucracy. The amount of bureaucracy prior to arrival would otherwise be significantly more.

Q209 **Andrew Lewer:** Can you tell us a little more about the central Government portal for matching sponsors with guests and when that is going to be launched?

Lord Harrington: Would you like to?

Catherine Frances: I can try.

Lord Harrington: It is the next phase that we are talking about.

Catherine Frances: The central Government expression of interest form is up and running. We do not have a matching service run by central Government. Quite explicitly, we are saying that the connection is to be made in this stage of the process if you have any external connection. The question then becomes, in a sense, why it is helpful to have got the expressions of interest. The answer is, first, that we wanted to gauge levels of interest and, secondly, that we want to keep in touch with those people and to explain to them how the system is working. We are issuing basically a weekly communication to them and the most recent one has explained that we are in this phase of the process where you connect independently with someone you already know.

The Government have not announced a next phase policy yet, but we are working at the moment with colleagues, including those in the VCS, to talk about the best way to support a more structured process to people connecting with individuals. For instance, there is some evidence from the Canadian example, where they have quite a successful scheme that works on sponsorship, in which you see VCS organisations and independent organisations connecting people with particular needs or particular affinities.

Q210 **Andrew Lewer:** The next stage beyond people who already know each other, which is relatively straightforward, is this idea of the people who have offered to help, but do not actually personally know anybody in Ukraine. Are you saying that there will not be some sort of single central Government portal for matching a family offering to a family in need?



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Lord Harrington: Yes, that is correct, because it is best done by organisations. For example, one of them we are actually funding to help set up a portal to do this. It is a decision. Should central Government do it ourselves? In the past, central Government schemes in history have not worked that well. We mentioned Canada as an example, where it could be a religious group, it could be a charity or it could be an NGO working on the ground in Poland or Moldova. They become the conduit for almost like blocks of people and blocks of accommodation.

For example, we are being given some very generous offers by people who own property en masse, not necessarily all in the same area, but I was contacted by a great philanthropist the other day, Steve Morgan. He has access to about 1,100 properties in the north-west. That is ideal for the next phase of the operation. We are collecting these. We are finding out the best way to do it, but the Government should not necessarily be the owner of that database.

Q211 **Andrew Lewer:** No, I am sympathetic to this concept of, on the one hand, needing to get on with this and, on the other hand, concerns about being careful, and sometimes the tension in between. Given that there is going to be that slightly more devolved, non-centralised approach, have the Government and the Department given any thought to how you can check who is making these offers and who is doing these sites, so that they are not being used by trafficking organisations on the net and people who exploit other people? Do you know if the National Crime Agency is taking a view on how to keep an eye on that?

Catherine Frances: I probably cannot go into it in that much detail, given some of the information, but yes, we are thinking about it. We will certainly build it and any recommendations into our next steps forward. Exactly for the reasons you have outlined, there is both a pressure of pace, given the international context and risk profile for people, and a need for us to go with a degree of staging to make sure that we build on strengths. That is why for this first phase we have really focused on the safeguarding around the individuals, at both local and national level.

Lord Harrington: In terms of things that keep me awake at night on this, it is that the system facilitates groups of people who are trafficking young children or women to work in the sex trade or any form of exploitation. That is why the original system, the one that is working now, is very much safeguard-oriented and we cannot give in on that, but at the same time it is an emergency situation over there with hundreds of thousands of people.

Q212 **Andrew Lewer:** Indeed, yes, that is just the essential tension of this entire discussion really. Into this next stage in matching then, do you have any thoughts about how councils can play a role in that, given that they are responsible for some of the support services that will follow on from it?



Lord Harrington: In the end, the council has the duty and responsibility to provide all these services. That is why we are paying them the money to do it. We could not say, for example, "Normally, local authority, you are responsible for the safeguarding and all this, but you are not going to be in this case."

Q213 **Andrew Lewer:** You are not anticipating councils playing a role in the matching process, but simply the responsibilities for the services after matching.

Lord Harrington: Yes. Having said that, they could, if they want, be part of a matching process. For example, the Scottish Government at the moment, and from last week the Welsh Government, are super-sponsors, so it could be that every local authority decides, "In addition to doing our duties, we want to do more and we want to become a sponsor in our own right." The system will allow that, but they may say, "I have enough on my plate and there are plenty of other conduits to provide the refugees that we will have in our area." Yes, they could, but it is not planned just for it to be them.

Q214 **Andrew Lewer:** I am sure that message will have gone out there. Do we know how many refugees arriving through the family scheme require accommodation? Will they be able to be matched with sponsors through the Homes for Ukraine scheme?

Emma Haddad: I do not think we have data on how many require accommodation, because the whole concept of the family scheme is that there is family bringing you over and the plan is that you are staying with family. There is not meant to be in-country switching between the schemes. We have some applications on the family scheme where people have not been eligible for that scheme and we are offering them the sponsorship scheme because they are eligible on that, so switching at the application stage, but it is not envisaged that they would switch once here.

Q215 **Andrew Lewer:** We have been saying a lot today about how many people are anticipated and the volume of people. Inevitably, in some of those situations there is going to be a breakdown between sponsor and guest and things are not going to work out—that is simply human nature. What are your thoughts about the process for when that breakdown takes place in terms of looking after the people who were displaced as a result? Is there any thought about local authority role in that in particular? More specifically, given that that is going to be a fairly hefty number of people, what is the thought about the process to deal with that when it happens?

Lord Harrington: As far as the sponsorship breaking down, where people have come and it has not worked out, for whatever reason, we would try to put them into another sponsor if we possibly can. If that does not happen, it would become the local authority responsibility to make sure that they are housed properly, but we have every reason to believe that, if that does happen, another sponsor will be found.



Catherine Frances: In the first instance, while we are setting up, because we are building the systems at pace, we have said in the published guidance for local authorities that they should take anyone who falls out of the system, because we think they are just going to be most visible to local government.

We have said to councils, which have been extremely inclined to roll their sleeves up, for which we are very grateful, "Please go and knock on the door, check the property is there and then do the safeguarding checks." Talking to local councils over the last week or two, they are scanning properties, scanning people and checking it against their existing databases of people who might be supporting in other ways, such as fostering or whatever. We know that they are the people who are going to understand the risk right in front of them, which comes back to the wider question about their role.

Q216 **Andrew Lewer:** When that sort of breakdown takes place it will incur cost. In terms of the figure you are giving to local authorities for people in their areas, is this situation factored into that global figure?

Catherine Frances: It is, but what we are going to try to do, building the system as we go, is to work out whether local authorities can, as the Minister said, flag the case to us, because we may actually be able to put somebody back into a central database. Equally, given that we have some expressions of interest in any part of the country, we are going to need to explore with local government the most effective ways of using those. That policy is not formulated and tied down yet, but that is the intention.

Lord Harrington: It will have to happen like that, but we have to be flexible. There is no question about that. We cannot have a hard and fast rule because we do not know. I am sure the vast majority of people who have offered a property or a place in their property for six months are perfectly happy to do it and hopefully the vast majority will work out.

Andrew Lewer: Hopefully the vast majority will work out, but that still creates a fairly hefty minority, given the figures involved.

Q217 **Chair:** Just coming on to this issue about availability of information, is one of the problems that you have these two schemes and they almost seem to be operating in parallel without join-up? It is back to this issue that refugees coming into the family scheme do not have to have an offer of accommodation. It could be that there are a couple of elderly grandparents here in a small flat and there is a mother and kids coming over here, who cannot be accommodated with the grandparents, but they are here, so it is back to the local authorities.

The LGA was asking us this morning, "Why can they not have information about people who want to be sponsors under the sponsorship scheme, so that they could probably match up refugees in this situation without a home, rather than placing those refugees in temporary accommodation?"



Would that not be an awful lot better for everyone concerned?

Lord Harrington: It would be much better and we are looking at it because they asked us that.

Q218 **Chair:** Hopefully by next week it will be in operation.

Lord Harrington: I cannot promise that, Clive, given that we only started it the week before last. It is a very logical and rational thing to do and we would hope to do it.

Q219 **Chair:** As they have said, they have homelessness applications, some from people in the family scheme and some already, unfortunately, from people in the sponsorship scheme, but others who have come in by completely different routes. It is about trying to get all those people maybe into the sponsorship scheme. It surely cannot be right, if you have homeless refugees in this country legitimately and somebody—

Lord Harrington: Somebody in the same town who has accommodation.

Chair: —who wants to house them, and they cannot be joined up together.

Lord Harrington: Quite right. We are on it.

Chair: That is the objective.

Lord Harrington: It is.

Q220 **Chair:** That is helpful. Just in terms of other services, while local authorities are dealing with the issue, we want to make sure that refugees, wherever they go in this country, are getting a similar standard of service. Are we all clear now that the health service is geared up across the country to provide all the necessary support? The LGA again was saying that, in parts of the country, the health service is used to having refugees, because refugees traditionally have gone to certain areas. In other places it may not have past experience. Within the health service, is that information and expertise being shared, so that mental health support is offered everywhere?

Lord Harrington: On the general point, yes, that is right and I had exactly the same problem with the Syrian refugees, in so much that there were excellent places—just to pick at random—such as Bradford, Birmingham and Leicester, which are very experienced in this sort of thing, but we found the benefits of settling refugees in places that had not had refugees. While the authorities not being quite used to it is a problem, the benefits the refugees got in how well they were looked after by small rural local communities outweighed that.

As far as the Government are concerned, yes, the Department of Health and Social Care—particularly health in this case—is switched into our system. They are very conscious of the fact that they will have to go into action. Again, with this sponsorship system, we cannot forecast to them that they are going to have 100 people, 500 people, 1,000 people or



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whatever it is. The sponsorship system is an excellent one, but that is not one of the advantages of it. I do not know if you would like to add to that, Catherine.

Catherine Frances: No, you said everything. The data has been shared and some of the work we will need to do in the coming days will be around finessing some of the demographic summaries, but the data has been shared with DfE, DHSC and others, as you would expect.

Q221 **Chair:** Some of the real worries are around services that are already very constrained in large parts of the country for existing residents. Mental health is one of them. You can wait a year as a child to get a mental health appointment and that is not going to get any better soon. If you have a lot of these children coming over who need exactly the same services, I just wondered whether somebody is addressing that. It is not just down to a local level, surely. The other one is school places. If there literally are not school places in an area, what are authorities meant to do?

Lord Harrington: I accept these are both fundamental problems. We have very good will from Government Departments, but at the moment pupils or prospective pupils will be redirected to places that have spaces, which might not be as close as they want it. I am doing a weekly meeting with all MPs, on a cross-party basis, and this point has been brought up. Somebody mentioned to me earlier this week that the nearest school with places was 45 minutes away. That would be in a rural constituency. In fact, Robert Jenrick was talking about Newark as an example. I cannot hide from that.

Our crunch is this. Do we say to local authorities or to schools, "You have to have more people," when it would break the normal rules of how many children are in a class, or do we say, "We are going to provide transport to move children a bit further away than would be ideal to go to a school when there are vacancies"? At the moment we are working on the latter rather than the former. I do not know if you would like to add to that.

Catherine Frances: DfE has quite a good sense, working with councils, of where capacity is more or less strained in the country. In the programme that Emma Haddad here has run in Afghanistan, we have seen that it took a little bit of time to place children in schools, but ultimately they were all in there and we are expecting the same mechanisms to work in terms of DfE working with councils and really getting into that. They are already starting to think about it.

Q222 **Chair:** You said in the letter to us that authorities can make an application for additional funding if they need, say, to put some temporary accommodation in.

Lord Harrington: That is correct.

Q223 **Bob Blackman:** We heard from the LGA earlier about a light touch to the checks that local authorities will be carrying out. Indeed, that is quite



clear from the statements that have been made in the House, but the guidance to local authorities is not clear yet. When will local authorities get very clear guidance on what checks they have to carry out?

Lord Harrington: It is clear, but it does not tell them exactly what checks. I know James Jamieson's point, which he made to me earlier this week, is about wanting full cover for not doing every single check and so on. That was his expression; he probably did the same thing this morning.

Catherine Frances: Maybe I could come in. The guidance issued to local government on 18 March sets out absolutely explicitly that every adult in the sponsor household needs to be subject to a DBS check and it also sets out that, where a child is arriving from the Ukrainian household, that needs a DBS check that is enhanced and with the barred children's list as well. It also sets out that for certain vulnerable adults we will need to do the enhanced check on all adults in the sponsor household as well, where necessary with the barred list. That has already been issued to councils back on the 18th.

Last week one of our directors wrote out to every council in the country and explained to them that, if they accessed the DBS central services, which are stood up and ready to go on this, using a particular code, they would be expedited fairly quickly, and we are going to monitor that information to make sure it happens. We also have a working group with local government focusing on exactly how to implement this.

Q224 **Bob Blackman:** That is fine and that is good. Do not get me wrong; I completely agree. But there is the other issue about the checking of accommodation that local authorities have to do and what standards have to be applied. Councillor Jamieson made the point, "Yes, it may not be perfect accommodation, but it is better than a tent in Poland, for example." Therefore, local authorities are going to have to move quickly to try to get people into accommodation. What clarity is there on those checks that are required?

Catherine Frances: Councillor Jamieson is right to be thinking about the balance of risk across the whole system. The clarity is this. First, for local councils, we are asking them to visit the property first up and, as I mentioned earlier, not to release the £350 payment per address until they have done that first visit. The reason why we have structured the payment like that is that we did not want inadvertently, in the thank you payment, to create any incentive for people to make too many offers of the property.

Q225 **Bob Blackman:** To be clear, what we heard earlier was the local authority being told to accommodate people and then do the checks afterwards. The risk is that you then put people into accommodation. They say, "We are very sorry. It is now not suitable. We have to move you." They have to put the children into schools and all these challenges, and then they carry out the checks. "Oh dear, we have to move people."



Is that the guidance?

Catherine Frances: I very much doubt that the children would be in schools, because the local authority is getting the information about—

Bob Blackman: It is the standard of accommodation.

Catherine Frances: The local authority is getting information about the address at the point of visa application, not visa release. We are then saying to the local authority, "Please go round with all due haste and look at the property, and do not release the first payment to the sponsor until you have looked at the property."

What the LGA has raised, which is a really good point, is the standard that they should be checking. We have been clear in our sponsor guidance and in our FAQs for the public on the basic health and safety material there, so you need your smoke alarms and your carbon monoxide alarms, and we have also reiterated the point about basic guidance on the number of people you can have in a property, overcrowding and so forth. We have reissued that, so councils will basically be going in and looking, using that sort of metric. We need to work with them on exactly how they apply it, so that they feel most comfortable. That is their ask, which I completely appreciate.

Q226 **Bob Blackman:** Richard, you said before the Home Affairs Committee that some refugees will be housed in temporary accommodation while checks are carried out. Is that still the case?

Lord Harrington: We have moved on beyond that. James Jamieson made these points to us and we have not been arrogant about it. If I could give you an example, we have put in the guidance things like, as Catherine said, for example, smoke alarms, carbon monoxide alarms and damp in the house. As I pointed out to him, my house has some damp in it. Do I have to look and say, "I cannot bring a refugee in," whereas otherwise I would hope it is a proper place to be?

We are between a rock and a hard place on this. We cannot be too prescriptive. If we were building new properties with a design, we could say, "This is designed for refugees or anybody else," but we cannot be too prescriptive. He is caught also between a rock and a hard place because they want certainty, but also we have to have flexibility in it, because it is a sponsorship programme. I do not know the answer, but we call it "light touch" and I think we have the balance.

Q227 **Bob Blackman:** There are issues around safeguarding and accommodation checks, but what happens if they identify issues? What is the process?

Catherine Frances: We have said to councils that, if they identify issues, they are necessarily going to have to say, "It is not appropriate for you to stay here."

Lord Harrington: We need to get them out.



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Q228 **Bob Blackman:** Will local government be given the funding to carry out these checks?

Lord Harrington: That is included within the £10,500, and they have been told that in the guidance.

Chair: We have two further subjects briefly just to consider, because we appreciate the time and thank you for staying as long as you have. That is really helpful.

Q229 **Florence Eshalomi:** You are going to clarify the point about the £10,500 scheme later on, Lord Harrington, which we would appreciate, but I just want to get a better sense of what that funding will actually cover, because, again, we have heard from the LGA and from stories we are getting from many councils that they are quite worried that that funding may not be able to cover what they are being asked to do.

Lord Harrington: Should I perhaps just go through what it does include? You will excuse me for reading this, but I want to get it right; normally I just would not read something out. It is expected to cover initial reception, safeguarding check, interim £200 payment per guest, service referrals, homelessness assistance, community integration and administering payments to sponsors. In the vast majority of cases this should cover it. If exceptional cases come up, we will deal with them on a case-by-case basis. They might have very specialist needs along the lines that we have been discussing today. Then we must have the flexibility in exceptional cases to say, "Yes, we will give some extra funding for it."

Q230 **Florence Eshalomi:** Will local authorities be covering the cost of administering the £350 monthly payment?

Lord Harrington: Yes.

Q231 **Florence Eshalomi:** Is that separate from the £10,500?

Lord Harrington: No, the administration costs are included within the £10,500 per refugee, but the £350 is per offer from a sponsor. If there are several refugees, you still only get one lot of £350.

Q232 **Florence Eshalomi:** One of the other issues we heard from the LGA was beyond the first year. If we are honest, some of these families may stay beyond the first year. What is going to happen to the funding situation then?

Lord Harrington: I hope from their point of view it does not, but I share your view. Unfortunately, the way things are, it does not look good, does it? Given that people who are brought in on these visas have the full rights to have benefits the same as anybody else does here—for example, universal credit, the right to work and every other form of benefit, including housing benefit—they would then go into that system and would be entitled to what anybody else would in a similar income level or circumstance.



Q233 **Chair:** There will have to be a review about whether these schemes continue beyond the year.

Lord Harrington: Yes.

Chair: It is hopefully before the end of the 12 months.

Lord Harrington: I hope so from their point of view, because they all want to go home.

Q234 **Chair:** Yes, of course. Just to be clear, there is extra money for school places and the health service will pick up costs in the health service.

Lord Harrington: That is quite correct.

Q235 **Bob Blackman:** Just in terms of the sponsors who are going to assist people arriving, the Work and Pensions Secretary has said that the Government are "ensuring that those who have stepped up to sponsor a Ukrainian individual or family do not see their household benefit entitlements affected as a result". How is that going to work?

Lord Harrington: The £350 is not treated as income. It does not affect any of those things, such as council tax and so on, because it is not counted as income by HMRC or by anybody else, in my understanding.

Q236 **Bob Blackman:** For example, you have an individual who is living by themselves and gets a 25% discount on council tax, but now he is accommodating a family. They are no longer an individual.

Lord Harrington: He would still get that discount in your example.

Q237 **Bob Blackman:** You gave assurances once again before the Home Affairs Committee that sponsors would not be affected by their mortgages, for example, and insurance. Can we get some more detail on how that is going to work? There are various lenders. There are various insurance companies. They may have a view on this and we need to get that right, definitely.

Lord Harrington: Yes, that is true. We spoke to the ABI, which is the trade body for insurance, and—excuse me if I get it wrong—UK Finance, which is a trade body for the mortgage things, and they have instructed us that it will not affect insurance policies whatsoever. Catherine, as far as mortgages are concerned, the guidance, as I recall, is that people are asked to check with their bank, building society or provider, but because these people are not treated as tenants at all, under any Act of Parliament, that will not affect a normal mortgage. They do at least notionally require permission for that. That is my understanding.

Catherine Frances: That is basically right. On a mortgage position, the mortgage providers are working with us and are basically committed to being as helpful as possible, but we anticipate at the moment that people need to talk to their mortgage provider. On insurance, it is exactly as the Minister said. For a homeowner, the ABI has said they will not be affected.



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Q238 **Bob Blackman:** A lot of mortgage providers will insist on knowing the names and details of everyone who lives in the property, for the obvious reason. Were there to be a default on the mortgage, who would have a claim to say, "Well, you cannot kick me out because I am here"?

Lord Harrington: If that was the case, under the sponsorship scheme those people do not have rights to stay that any mortgage provider could be worried about. They do not have the right to be a tenant, so they could not override any legal powers that the bank would have if people did not pay their mortgage payments, and that is very clear.

Bob Blackman: Thank you. That is very helpful.

Q239 **Chair:** What about people who move into private rented accommodation and maybe their landlord has rules about not having other people in the property?

Lord Harrington: They would need to get permission from their landlord, yes. I cannot see that any landlord would refuse it, but they would have to ask their permission.

Q240 **Chair:** If there are problems with any national organisations, insurance companies, banks and things, we would expect people to start shouting about it, so that we can raise concerns with you.

Lord Harrington: We would, and we have our feelers out as well, but up until now the trade bodies have been very co-operative.

Chair: Minister and officials, thank you very much indeed for coming today and answering a lot of questions. We appreciate it is still a work in progress, but a really important one. As we said at the beginning, there are people in absolutely desperate circumstances fleeing for their lives from their homes and from their families, in many cases, and we all collectively need to do what we can to help. That is part of this process. We are having this discussion to make sure that we get that help organised in the right way for everyone concerned. Thank you very much indeed.

Lord Harrington: Thank you for having us.