



Home Affairs Committee

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From the Committee Chair

Rt Hon Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities
and Minister for Intergovernmental Relations
Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities
4th Floor, Fry Building
2 Marsham Street, London
SW1P 4DF

By email only

26 April 2022

Dear Mr Gove,

I am writing to raise concerns around safeguarding applicants to the 'Homes for Ukraine' scheme.

The introduction of the Homes for Ukraine scheme was a positive development in the Government's response to the Ukraine refugee crisis. However, there are widespread concerns about the potential exploitation of women and children fleeing to the UK for refuge.

The letter (26.03.22) addressed to you from 16 refugee and anti-trafficking organisations, described the scheme as potentially operating as "Tinder for sex traffickers", with a "swipe left, swipe right" approach to matching refugees with hosts in the UK.

Plainly, there are a number of risks associated with the scheme. The primary risk is the method with which applicants and sponsors are matched. As you will know social media, in particular Facebook groups, are widely being used to connect sponsors in the UK with Ukrainian refugees. This allows people, prior to any safeguarding checks taking place, to connect with and share personal information in an informal, online setting. The safeguarding concerns are twofold. Firstly, the risk of criminal trafficking gangs systematically using these Facebook Groups to find out information and the location of refugees and contact them directly. Secondly, the risk posed by individuals who are not connected to any criminal organisations, but who wish to exploit the system for themselves.

There have also been reports of men using Facebook groups to offer their homes to Ukrainian women, in return for sex or marriage. This system is potentially allowing extremely vulnerable people to match with extremely dangerous people.

I asked the Prime Minister during the Liaison Committee, 30 March, (House of Commons) what steps the Government have undertaken working with social media companies, in particular Facebook, to address these concerns.

The Prime Minister expressed concern and responded that he believed the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities would be working on this specific issue. The Prime Minister also agreed that National Crime Agency would have a role to play. **I would therefore be very grateful if you could outline the work your Department is undertaking on these matters. Additionally, what discussions has your department had with social media companies, in particular with Facebook, on these safeguarding concerns?**

On 31 March 2022 I raised the issue of safeguarding with the Minister for Housing and Rough Sleeping, during the Urgent Question 'Homes for Ukraine Scheme' (Vol 711, Column 1015, 31.03.22) in the House of Commons. The Minister responded that the Government are aware of these challenges and that safety checks are completed at the point the application is made. The Minister also said that subsequent to the application being made, enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service checks are being made. Finally, the Minister said that a representative from the council will meet the sponsor and the guest to see if there are any safeguarding concerns. However, there have been reports from Local Authorities that visas are being issued before checks have been completed.

Local Authorities have expressed concern that the safeguarding checks are then being completed when the applicants are already living with their sponsors. Is this correct? If so, what measures are being put in place to deal with it? Is any additional support by the Department being made available to Local Authorities to expand their capacity to complete the necessary safeguarding checks as quickly as possible?

The other significant risk is that the complexity and slowness of the scheme is driving some Ukrainians to give up trying to come to the UK and either return to, or stay in, Ukraine. There have been reports of family members receiving visas at different times, in particular that children visas are taking longer than their parents, which adds to confusion and distress. **Can you confirm whether there are any guidelines or rules in place to ensure visas are processed in family groups, as submitted?**

I look forward to hearing from you about how the Government plan to address the issues I have outlined in this letter.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Diana Johnson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dame Diana Johnson MP

Correspondence copied to Rt Hon Priti Patel, Home Secretary