



Department for Levelling Up,
Housing & Communities

Dame Diana Johnson MP
Chair,
Home Affairs Select Committee
London
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Lord Harrington
Minister of State for Refugees

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Dear Diana,

Thank you for your letter of 26 April 2022 in which you raised concerns about the operation of the Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme (Homes for Ukraine.) I welcome the committee's interest and engagement. I am responding to you as this matter falls within my ministerial responsibilities. Please accept my apologies for the delay in responding to you.

You noted that there were widespread concerns about the potential exploitation of women and children fleeing to the UK for refuge. You observed that the use of social media, in particular Facebook groups, allows people to connect with and share personal information in an informal online setting prior to any safeguarding checks taking place. You expressed concern that this creates risks that criminal trafficking gangs or others wishing to do so could exploit the system for themselves.

You asked for an outline of what the Department is doing about these matters.

The scale and immediacy of the problem faced by Ukrainians fleeing Putin's invasion of Ukraine has not been seen in Europe since the Second World War. Under such circumstances we had to act swiftly.

The model we designed has proven an effective way of facilitating connection between individuals fleeing war and potential UK hosts, enabling 62,275 Ukrainians to find a sponsor and be issued with a visa for travel in the past few months. This figure continues to rise. Families across the UK have acted with remarkable generosity in welcoming refugees from Ukraine into their homes and I am sure the Committee would applaud that.

The need for appropriate safeguarding – from the perspective of both UK hosts and Ukrainian applicants – has always been, and remains at the heart of, planning for the scheme, both within the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and the Home Office, which is responsible for pre-visa checks.

Hence, all potential sponsors and adults living in the household are subject to Police National Computer and wider safeguarding checks before an applicant is allowed to travel to the UK on a 'Homes for Ukraine' visa. These checks are conducted by the Home Office and must be completed before a visa is issued. This approach mirrors that used on other existing visa schemes.

Accommodation and Disclosure and Barring Service checks are undertaken by local authorities as soon as possible after notification that a visa application has been made, as an additional layer of safeguarding. Safeguarding responsibilities are ongoing and continue beyond pre-visa and post-visa checks.

We have been working closely with the voluntary and community sector (VCS) throughout the establishment of the scheme. This sector has played a vital role in helping develop guidance and support to both applicants and sponsors within the scheme and is becoming increasingly engaged in the provision of

direct matching services. We have already partnered with four organisations as 'Recognised Providers' of matching services and have published guidance for other VCS partners as we seek to expand this further.

Detailed guidance to sponsors, guests and matching organisations stresses the importance of safeguarding, and is reviewed and updated regularly.

This multi-layered system of checks is backed of course by the ordinary safeguarding duties which apply in schools, GPs, LAs and elsewhere in the public services. All frontline staff are trained in spotting signs of abuse or exploitation and should refer any suspected case of concern. There are a range of measures in place to identify and intervene in cases where safeguarding concerns arise.

We have also improved the safeguarding content in the Welcome Pack and Beneficiary Guidance to include:

- Detail on contacts for support to protect and care for children
- Links to organisations that can provide support regarding domestic abuse
- Guidance and support for protecting against modern slavery and human trafficking, including contact details for the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority, and the Modern Slavery helpline
- Worker rights advice
- Signposting to children and young people's services.

We continue to actively engage a broad cross-section of VCS organisations, subject matter experts on safeguarding, faith and community groups, Local Authorities, and other government departments to identify and mitigate the safeguarding risks inherent in a novel scheme like this.

You noted that Local Authorities had expressed concern that safeguarding checks were being conducted after applicants under the scheme had already arrived. You asked whether this was correct and, if so whether measures had been put in place to deal with it.

The guidance makes clear that accommodation and DBS checks should be conducted at the earliest opportunity on notification that a visa application has been made. Councils are encouraged to use best endeavours to conduct all checks before the arrival of the guest(s), but we recognised that due to the speed with which the war was advancing and the potential volume of arrivals, this would not be possible in all circumstances.

There was a need to balance pre-arrival safeguarding measures with the very real safeguarding threats that these mostly women and children were being exposed to whilst fleeing a war zone; sleeping in railway stations, accepting lifts and accommodation from complete strangers without any safeguards whatsoever.

Councils have a statutory duty to promote the welfare of children and adults at risk.

They must make a welfare visit after a guest has arrived to ensure they are safe and well, and there are no health and safety or welfare concerns, and only then should the sponsor payment be made.

You asked what discussions the Department has had with social media companies, particularly Facebook about these concerns.

Neither Facebook nor any other social media platforms are part of the scheme design; it is an organic development which has facilitated early uptake of the scheme. The scheme cannot be directly accessed through Facebook or other social media sites. To access the scheme the sponsor and/or their prospective guest must apply for visas through the Home Office run website. This action initiates the first stage in the multi-layered safeguarding defence system I have outlined above.

The National Crime Agency are supporting the Department and the Home Office to assess potential risks around the Scheme, and those looking to exploit the vulnerable, and assist with any safeguarding enquiries to ensure the scheme is as robust as possible.

We are aware that organised criminal groups and other malign actors are increasingly using social media to prey on vulnerable migrants and refugees. The Government is committed to tackling such activity. Law enforcement agencies are working more closely with these companies across a range of crime types to encourage them to take greater responsibility for preventing their sites from being used to facilitate criminal activity.

We plan to be able to do more to prevent this sort of activity in future; the Online Safety Bill, co-sponsored by the Home Office and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport will place a duty on companies to take proactive measures to ensure illegal content does not appear on their services and to remove material that is false advertising, disinformation or legal but potentially harmful swiftly once alerted to it. Ofcom will also have powers to take specific enforcement action with social media companies who fail to fulfil their duties.

You also asked whether additional resource was being provided to Local Authorities to expand their capacity to complete the necessary safeguarding checks as quickly as possible

Local Authorities are provided with £10,500 per individual arriving under the Homes for Ukraine Scheme. This funding is intended to provide for a broad range of 'wrap around' services, including covering the costs associated with DBS checks and follow-up visits conducted by Local Authorities. To put costs into perspective, an Enhanced DBS check costs around £42 per person.

Safeguarding is a statutory responsibility shared by local partners, with Local Authorities, the police, and Care Commissioning Groups all having their part to play. Safeguarding is further enhanced by a range of VCS organisations who act in this area.

You noted a general concern that the perceived slowness and complexity of the British visa-based scheme may be deterring some Ukrainians from applying to come to the UK.

The visa checks in place, while resulting in some delays initially, have provided a robust safeguarding net, enabling over 62,000 people in need to arrive at their new homes, safe in the knowledge that their host and accommodation have been vetted.

You raised specific concerns about instances where families were receiving visa approvals individually, rather than as a family unit, citing delays in the processing of visas for children. You asked whether there are any guidelines or rules in place to ensure visas are processed in family groups, as submitted.

The visa checks in place, while resulting in some delays initially, have provided a robust safeguarding net. Every effort is made to consider family groups at the same time where possible, however there will be occasions where processing times differ across individuals. All applications from families are normally processed together, but cases differ in complexity, and it is vital that robust safeguarding processes are in place to protect children from trafficking and other risks.

While we are able to conclude biometric deferral applications sooner and prepare Permission to Travel (PTT) letters ahead of linked group members who are required to provide their biometric data, we have intentionally delayed granting the former in order to link and release group outcomes as a single unit.

As you highlighted in your letter, the issue of safeguarding is of paramount importance. I hope this response has provided additional clarity and reassurance on this matter.

With all my very best wishes,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Richard". The script is cursive and elegant, with a prominent initial 'R'.

Lord Richard Harrington of Watford