



Home Affairs Committee

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From the Committee Chair

By email only

Rt Hon Priti Patel MP
Home Secretary
Home Office
2 Marsham Street
London
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10 March 2022

Dear Home Secretary,

I would like to draw your attention to the deeply concerning evidence the Home Affairs Committee heard this morning in relation to unaccompanied children left at the Ukrainian border.¹ Given the vulnerability of these children, I ask that you inform the Committee of the action your Department is taking to ensure everything is being done to secure their safety as soon as possible.

Enver Solomon, Chief Executive of the Refugee Council, told us that his organisation has heard that there could be 'tens of thousands' of unaccompanied children who have been taken to the borders of Ukraine and left there alone. These children will be in need of protection. Other countries also have an important role to play in safeguarding these children, but the UK must (1) do everything it can to protect and provide safety to Ukrainian children who might have a family connection to the UK and (2) step up and support other children who might need our help, whilst understanding that other actors may be better placed to help, for example, EU countries where children may have a family connection. Mr Solomon said that the Government needs to create a safe passage scheme for unaccompanied children on the Ukrainian border, particularly those with a connection to the UK.

Zoe Bantleman, Legal Director at the Immigration Law Practitioners' Association (ILPA), shared one distressing case with us concerning an unaccompanied child who had travelled all the way to Poland alone. When they went to the UK visa application centre to apply under family rules, they were initially promised that their visa would be processed in one day. When they returned, they were then told it would be 12 weeks. This cannot be allowed to happen; these are vulnerable children under the age of 18 who need to be protected and cared for.

The Ukrainian Ambassador to Ukraine, His Excellency Vadym Prystaiko, also expressed his concern to us that Ukrainians here in the UK who are on time-limited visas are not able to apply to bring family members over to safety. He had assumed

¹ Home Affairs Committee (9 March 2022) [Oral evidence: Home Office policy on Ukrainian refugees, HC 1168](#).

that there was a covering principle that everybody who is legally here can use the system. We understand he is speaking to you about this and we urge you to enable Ukrainians with temporary visas to bring relatives, including children, to the UK.

We also heard in evidence that, at a practical level, applying for UK visas is extremely challenging; UK visa application centres in countries neighbouring Ukraine have limited opening hours, and applicants can be expected to provide their birth certificates to prove their family connection, even though in fleeing war it is likely they will have been forced to leave such documents behind. The UK immigration requirements for Ukrainian citizens are also more restrictive than they would be for citizens from some other countries, for example in North and South America.

Have you considered waiving visa requirements for unaccompanied children from Ukraine, near the Ukrainian border, particularly those with a family connection to the UK, to enable them to enter the country? As His Excellency Mr Prystaiko pointed out to us, children do not pose a national security risk.

Are UK visa application centres in countries neighbouring Ukraine being given the necessary support to deal with higher volumes of applications? Are staff prioritising applications from unaccompanied children, and are safeguarding concerns being considered in their engagement with these children? How will unaccompanied children be safeguarded on their journey to the UK if their visa is granted?

We have also written to the Education Secretary to ask how unaccompanied children who might be arriving in the UK from Ukraine will be safeguarded. It is vital the Government works together with local authorities so that assessments of need can be undertaken and the appropriate support put in place as soon as possible, particularly for any children arriving who might not have family connections. We are mindful of the fact that Brighton City Council was not consulted and given less than 24 hours' notice when unaccompanied asylum-seeking children were accommodated by the Home Office in a hotel in Brighton and Hove in the summer of 2021. The children's sector has expressed considerable concern about such arrangements.

In light of the urgency of the situation in Ukraine, we would be grateful for a response by Tuesday 15 March.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Diana Johnson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. The first name "Diana" is written in a larger, more prominent script, and "Johnson" follows in a similar but slightly smaller script. The ink appears to be on a light-colored background.

Dame Diana Johnson MP