



Home Affairs Committee

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From the Committee Chair

By email only

Rt Hon Nadhim Zahawi MP
Education Secretary
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
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10 March 2022

Dear Education 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 actions your departments are taking to ensure everything is being done to secure their safety as soon as possible. We have also written to the Home Secretary.

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.

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

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 that there was a covering principle that everybody who is legally here can use the system. The wider 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.

Are you, as Education Secretary, speaking to the Home Office about how the UK Government can support these vulnerable children to access safety, for example, by 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 security risk.

We would also like to ask how unaccompanied children who might be arriving in the UK from Ukraine specifically will be safeguarded. Will the Government ensure that local authorities are made aware if an unaccompanied child is coming to live with family members in their local area, so that the necessary safeguarding checks can be carried out? Will the Government further ensure that if unaccompanied children are arriving who do not have family connections, the relevant local authorities will be informed as the future corporate parent, so that children and family social workers can undertake the necessary assessments of need and put the appropriate support in place as soon as possible? 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. As you will be aware, 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 is dark and the background is white.

Dame Diana Johnson MP