

Oxted and Warlingham Ukraine Support Group September 2023 update



We had hoped that by now, more than 550 days since Russia's latest invasion of Ukraine, we would be updating you on the outcome of peace talks and the move towards reconstruction. But sadly not: the war goes on.

A glance at the Kyiv Post shows a video of a Russian transport aircraft being destroyed far inside Russia, less than 24 hours ago (as we write).



Other sources regularly viewed depict the extraordinary resourcefulness, resilience and determination of those in Ukraine – military and civilian alike.

Perhaps the tide is turning and the Ukrainian counter-offensive in the south and east will have further successes. Perhaps another drama like the sudden demise of the Wagner Group boss will change the odds in Ukraine's favour. Perhaps the increasing deployment of western armaments will give them an edge. Perhaps – finally – someone of sufficient stature and wisdom will devise the beginnings of a peace deal.

Having just marked Ukraine Independence Day for the second time during their stay here in Tandridge, we have to be constantly aware that many of those from Ukraine watch daily news directly from Ukraine via social media. Much of it, of course, is very sad. Our local Ukrainian friends need our help and understanding, now more than ever. Strong probability is that the war will continue for quite some time yet. We need to be prepared for the long haul.

Our group -- latest activities

By happy coincidence, a company here in Oxted partnered with 'United24' – President Zelenskyy's fundraising platform, including for reconstruction (<https://u24.gov.ua>) provided the kit for a benefit football match 25 August.



For those unfamiliar with the other two faces, they are (or were) Arsenal and Chelsea players; and Shevchenko is a former captain of the UKR national team. (The original Zelenskyy shirt apparently omitted the extra 'y', so a new one had to be sent by fast courier just in time for this pic!)

At the 'Game4Ukraine', each of the famous Ukrainians captained a side including an array of very famous footballers and other personalities. The event included a mini-pop concert, featuring The Pretenders and others. In brief, with hundreds of Ukrainians there too, including several from Tandridge (with free tickets), it was a truly memorable occasion. All money went towards the reconstruction of a school in Chernihiv Oblast, destroyed by a Russian missile. Final score: a respectable 1-1.

We are in touch with the kit-making company here in Oxted, co-operating with them on a new venture – Play4Ukraine. One of the local UKR residents will be working with them to develop this initiative, aiming to spread the idea of playing football for the benefit of various reconstruction initiatives in Ukraine.

Not sure *exactly* what we can do to help, but always open to ideas. If anyone reading this has football or sports-club connections, please let us know. Email address: humansighs@gmail.com

English lessons

Our Thursday evening English lessons for Ukrainians continue. Volunteer teachers and helpers do the bizz, and provide a crèche with fun and games (and films). We are so grateful to Oxted School for providing excellent facilities at zero cost; and to the East Surrey Rural Transport Partnership for the free bus for the 'students', even including an amazing lady driver who teaches the children English songs, and listens to Ukrainian ones.

Funds

We have established a modest 'Discretionary Fund', with contributions from the bishop of Arundel and Brighton; and from LandAid, for which we are most grateful. The fund will be used solely for those from Ukraine, e.g. small items of furniture etc when they move out of hosting. Contact via humansighs@gmail.com if you hear of any need for our (sensitive) intervention.

Ad hoc information requests

We get occasional requests from individuals and organisations for help of various sorts, mainly involving government offices or similar. Over time, we have gathered fairly extensive knowledge and always happy to share experience with others, via the same email address.

Upcoming

We are currently working on creating an event later in Autumn, to bring the reality of Ukraine more readily to the local consciousness. Truth being the first casualty of war, most media tend to follow a particular line about what they portray. They can tend to ignore impacts on individuals and local communities in Ukraine. We will also be careful, aiming to engender greater local empathy with those here from Ukraine. (The underlying goal will be to increase the availability of rented accommodation in the area. See more on that below).

Homes for Ukraine visa scheme -- latest data

- As at 14th August, 3,638 **Ukrainians arrived in Surrey** under the Homes for Ukraine ('HFU') visa scheme. Of those, there are some 2,900 remaining, either under HFU or having found follow-on accommodation in the private rented sector in Surrey.
- Across Surrey, there were 75 new arrivals from Ukraine in July and 43 in August.
- Overall in Surrey, 45% have found private accommodation after initial hosting and 27% have returned to Ukraine.
- **In Tandridge District**, 320 visas have been issued for Ukrainians under HFU visa scheme, to come to Tandridge District.
- 31 have been rehoused, and 8 moved in from other districts are now hosted in Tandridge. In Tandridge, 34 have moved on to private accommodation*. 25 have returned to Ukraine; 8 have moved to another country, typically to be with other family members in that country, or closer to Ukraine.
- 27 to whom visas were issued to come Tandridge have yet to travel to the UK.
- 8 others left the HFU scheme for undisclosed reasons.
- Exactly 100 Ukrainians in Tandridge are under 18: of those, 16 pre-school age; 45 primary; 27 secondary and 12 are 16-18.

* Vote of thanks to **Rawstone Vehicle Hire** in Sevenoaks, whose generosity has allowed us to help UKR friends moving to rented accommodation. Nice people, modern vehicles and great value!

Official updates and recent changes

- Announced 24 August, the UK government Department for Levelling-Up, Housing and Communities now offers further help for English language learning and employment support, for up to 10,000 Ukrainians across the UK. Enrolment asap recommended! <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/language-and-employment-courses-for-ukrainians>
- Free bus pass scheme is extended at least up to 31st March 2024. Looks like only for max 6 months though. <https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/community/housing/support-for-ukrainian-nationals/bus-pass>
- Within recent days, our local MP, Claire Coutinho, has been appointed Secretary of State for Energy and Net Zero. (Not for discussion here, but home owners with oil heating may be breathing a sigh of relief!). Ms Coutinho has been helpful in resolving various Ukraine-linked issues. She attended a local Ukraine-support football match in Bletchingley early August.

Last item, but the most important: Urgent need for more accommodation

Over the coming months, many more hosting arrangements will reach an end. It has been truly heartening to see how many hosts have agreed to continue their hosting arrangements. If you are among those, be assured that your kindness and generosity has not gone unnoticed.

Tandridge is a nice place to live and correspondingly, private sector rental costs are relatively high. So, we now unashamedly ask here for vast swathes of philanthropy. At least one of whom we know bought a flat last spring as a medium-term investment. He subsequently offered the flat to a Ukrainian family for minimal rent. We need more like that.

If you are downsizing because your house is too big and likely to have spare cash, or plan to meet your financial advisor soon to discuss your portfolio; or looking at buying property as a fairly solid investment in this current buyers' market..... we can help to provide you with a tenant / house-sitter / caretaker in the form of one or more of our local Ukrainian friends.

We included info about the 100 Ukrainian children in Tandridge above deliberately. Hosts have been amazing, and Ukrainian friends have become dewy-eyed with gratitude at the local generosity. But after a year or more here, those displaced so violently and tragically from their homeland – where their family members are keeping their and our enemies at bay – well, they need some space to call their own while the war rages on.

So, if anyone has the cash to invest, we can help with the leg-work of finding suitable accommodation and aligning scarce supply with high demand.

And of course, all other bright and creative ideas aimed at finding places to rent (preferably peppercorn) – we'd welcome sharing a coffee with you.

*Thanks for reading. Feel free to get in touch: humansighs@gmail.com
Damian and Nick.*