

Oxted and Warlingham Ukraine Support Group

A Brief Review

November 2022

On 24th February, Russia invaded Ukraine, having previously annexed Crimea and attempted to take control of the Donbas region in 2014.

On 16th March, the Oxted & Warlingham Ukraine Support Group first met to define how best to welcome Ukrainians into our local community, and especially how to support host families. This meant that by the time the ‘Homes for Ukraine’ visa scheme got underway, the Group was prepared, with volunteers setting up several initiatives.

Now, some seven months later, the work of the Group – *your* Group – continues. This brief review speaks of the efforts and experience of the Group’s volunteers so far.

What’s the current situation?

- In the UK, over **98,000** Ukrainians have arrived. In total, almost 150,000 have applied for UK ‘Homes for Ukraine’ visas. Some 134,000 visas have been issued so far.
- In Surrey, **2,767** Ukrainian guests have arrived. The peak arrival month was May with 590 arrivals, but August and September saw 441 and 574 arrivals respectively. Numbers are rising after a dip in the summer.
- In Tandridge District, **184 Ukrainians have arrived so far**. There are 108 host properties in Tandridge. 283 Ukrainians have applied for visas to stay in Tandridge, so more are arriving every week. About a third of those coming to Tandridge are under 18, the youngest just 3 months old (the oldest is 78). Very few elderly people are coming to the UK.
- With the creeping realisation that the war is not going to stop any time soon, and the likelihood of a very difficult winter, there will likely be a significant increase in the number of UK visa applications over the coming months. **More hosts will be needed.**

Early challenges

Few can fail to be impressed by the courage and generosity of those hosting displaced Ukrainians within our local community. Few can fail to be moved by the courage, motivation and stoicism of the Ukrainians now among us.

For the early host families in Oxted, the bureaucracy of the UK Immigration ‘Homes for Ukraine’ scheme was truly something to behold. It had to be tirelessly navigated before any Ukrainian guests could arrive. They battled the system and very actively made sure that their guests did arrive safely. The frustrations they overcame required uncommon stoicism and determination.

Through a local resident, we learned about ‘LOVE Bristol’, a group having set up a ‘welcome pop-up’ centre on the Ukraine/Polish border to help Ukrainians wanting to come to the UK. The opaqueness of the UK visa scheme put many people off. The scheme failed to reflect the realities on the ground, e.g. requiring applicants to produce utility bills and letters from children’s fathers permitting them to accompany their mothers abroad. Many fathers were rather busy battling the Russian army.

One host family in Tandridge has been trying for 3 months to help their prospective guests – a mother and 5 year old child – to get visas. Three times the government ‘helpline’ said they would ‘escalate’ their enquiry, and to wait 5 days, but nothing happens. Meanwhile, the missiles continue to rain down on the city where the mother and child are living. So frustrating, shameful even.

Credit to local MP, Claire Countinho, though. She has provided direct help in a range of individual cases and has lobbied on our behalf too.

Surrey has the highest number of displaced Ukrainian children of any English county – some 760. Finding school places for them has been a challenge. Most schools have been extremely helpful. There are at least 14 at Oxted School, for example, with others in Woldingham School and Caterham School. Ms Coutinho was instrumental in supporting our ‘encouragement’ of the Secretary of State for Education to provide guidance to local councils and county councils on applying the relevant policy in matters relating to the education rights of Ukrainian children.

One of our volunteers, equipped with knowledge from his own career in the education system, kindly assisted with an individual appeal case related to a school place application.

Activities and initiatives

From the outset, we recognised the need to support displaced Ukrainians, but also the host families. We also recognised the potential for host/guest relationships to break down. Simply put, having a stranger(s) in your family home for 6 months, often with very limited knowledge of English, is always likely to be challenging. Our Groups activities have evolved over time, as the needs of guests and hosts were better understood.

Coffee Mornings

These were an instant success for Ukrainians and hosts and took place in the Parish Room every Friday. They enabled the Ukrainians, some of whom were bewildered and lonely when they first arrived, to meet fellow Ukrainians, build mutual support networks. Hosts met and exchanged views, concerns, information and invitations with other hosts. The cakes were popular too.

Nowadays, these coffee mornings seem now to be scarcely necessary. Local Ukrainians have established themselves more confidently in our local community. Despite the ongoing tragedy, most seem to be determined to make the best of their stay with us and adapt to life in the UK.

Free SIM cards

Vodafone provided us with 95 free SIM cards for Ukrainian guests, which provide 6 months' free UK calls and messages and enough data to facilitate video calls back to Ukraine. Most of these have been distributed.

A Welcome booklet

An extensive Welcome booklet was created and published. The booklet includes essential local information and links including: medical services, schools/nurseries, churches, transportation and social activities. Translated into Ukrainian by a kind Ukrainian lady resident in Tandridge for many years, the booklet is issued by Tandridge Council to all Ukrainians when they go to register their arrival.

Finding School & Nursery Places

Most of the children now have school places and are making friends and learning English very quickly – the playground is a very effective language teacher. Another small success, not at all down to us (but we helped via our MP), was to have a policy decision made that childcare costs for Ukrainian two-year olds could be reimbursed by the state. This facilitated access to local nurseries, allowing mothers to seek part-time work if they wished, which several did.

Jobs

Most Ukrainians want to be self-sufficient and are keen to find work. Many have come to the UK with professional skills they cannot use, for want of language knowledge or equivalence of qualifications. Many take jobs way below their level of ability and one can only admire their courage in doing so, especially those with children.

Many from Ukraine also have very individual skills: for example, one lady is an artist specialising in murals such as one might require in child's bedroom with spacemen, stars and planets. Or in a garden summer house, with pixies, woodland animals and trees.

The Oxted Job Club has worked with several Ukrainians to help them understand the UK job market, its application and interview processes and to find employment. Their volunteers have helped quite a few Ukrainians to find jobs and their support work continues.

English Lessons

Learning English was a priority for most Ukrainians and our English lessons have been popular. We provided evening English language lessons in the Parish Room, then also in Tandridge Leisure Centre, which provided free space for Wednesday lessons. (They also kindly agreed to our request for a 3-month free access pass for Ukrainian guests). All of the lessons were planned and provided by volunteer teachers and helpers.

Since September, with proper classrooms provided (for free) by Oxted School, we offer lessons from beginners through to advanced levels. We have space for children's activities whilst the parents learn. All these lessons are once again provided by volunteer teachers and helpers – truly heartening. We now also have a free bus, courtesy of Buses-4-You, to transport students to and from the lessons.

We also applied for and received 100 free access codes for Duolingo Plus (the advanced subscription version) to support any Ukrainians with their language skills.

We have applied for language packs, courtesy of The Literacy Trust. Yet another kind person has given illustrated children's storybooks with the texts in English and Ukrainian – not easy to find.

Trauma

Beyond the trauma of suddenly having to leave home and family due to war, many of our Ukrainian friends have experienced shocking events. Hosts tend to be wary about how or whether to broach a conversation on sometimes exquisitely poignant topics. Some guests, feeling relieved to feel safe but being so far from loved ones, are still crying every day.

We created a guidance paper for hosts, informed by a local psychologist, looking at the nature of trauma and the how to deal with it. At its core is the concept of patient, caring listening over an extended period – not always easy. The paper has so far received very positive feedback.

Working with other Groups

There are several other support groups working in Tandridge and we have built cordial relationships with them (including: Oxted, Hurst Green, Caterham, Outwood). This has enabled us all to share our knowledge, experiences, resources and activities.

We have also established good working relations with Tandridge District Council (TDC), which, after a shaky start, really works very hard indeed in the interests of both hosts and guests. Indeed, many of their staff worked voluntarily to inspect host's homes so that they could be approved in good time. TDC also facilitated meetings with other local help groups, several of whom use social media to help those in their area, so that we could swap ideas.

Looking ahead...

Most Ukrainians expect to be able to go home and many hope that can happen soon. The grim reality is that such a prospect may only happen in the longer term. For the sake of their self-respect, their happy integration into our community and their own well-being, almost all will need to find jobs and their own homes. **For this reason, Jobs and Homes continue to be priority areas.**

- The Oxted Job Club has already helped a number of Ukrainians in seeking work and will doubtless have more clients to help.
- The Homes for Ukraine scheme provides for just 12 months hosted free lodging. Half of that period has expired already. The best medium-term option for Ukrainian guests will be to rent somewhere suitable.... which is why work is a key priority. However, we also need to think long and hard about this challenge, working with others to find solutions.

We are also constantly looking for new volunteers. Email if you'd like to know more.

If we are to do more to help our Ukrainian friends, we need more people to get more done. It's not at all gloom and doom. In fact, it's quite fun to work with like-minded local people with a good sense of humour, from all walks of life.

Many thanks to our stalwart and kind-hearted volunteers, as well as to the many organisations and individuals who have provided free support and resources. It truly is heart-warming and richly appreciated. We still have more to achieve, with their continued help and with the encouragement and prayers from everyone else, to whom many thanks too.

Damian and Nick

Joint co-ordinators

Oxted and Warlingham Ukraine Support Group

Contact us at: humansighs@gmail.com