



SJOG Homes for Ukraine Scheme: Addressing Human Trafficking and Exploitation

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Introduction

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the war sparked the fastest-growing refugee situation in the world. At present, over 8.5 million refugees from Ukraine have been recorded across Europe, while it is estimated that the number will increase by the end of 2023¹. (UNHCR, June, 2023)

There are understandable concerns that this will lead to increasing trafficking and exploitation². Particularly vulnerable being women, unaccompanied or separated minors, older persons, belonging to a minority ethnicity group (e.g., Ukraine has a large Roma population), having a disability, being LGBTQ+, and lacking access to safe routes and settlement (something particularly affecting non-Ukrainians fleeing the war).

In occasion of the Refugee Week 2023, the SJOG and CSAN Homes for Ukraine Matching Scheme aims to discuss some of risks identified in the UK, as highlighted by the roundtable organised by the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner³.

Our Homes for Ukraine project is a partnership between SJOG (Saint John of God Hospitaller Services) and the Caritas Social Action Network (CSAN). The project creates a matching pathway to support those who are displaced by the Ukraine war to find homes in the UK.

Risk of trafficking identified in the UK

In April 2022, the UK's Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner and relevant specialists from a variety of sectors including healthcare, lawyers, charities, law enforcement, policy makers and academics, participated to a roundtable addressing emergent issues, key concerns and recommendations about the diversity of trafficking risk, with a particular focus on the UK's response to people fleeing Ukraine.

The outcomes resulted from the roundtable can be summarised in five main key concerns:

1. Conflict can create and compound opportunities for trafficking and exploitation;
2. The UK's visa-based response to Ukrainian refugees lacks clarity, resourcing and accountability;
3. Information gaps and overloads, both for people seeking sanctuary and those supporting them, can exacerbate risks of trafficking and exploitation;

¹ <https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/situations/ukraine-situation>

² The notions of 'human trafficking and exploitation' rather than 'modern slavery' were deliberately chosen in order to encourage a more inclusive approach to the roundtable.

³ Ella Cockbain & Aiden Sidebottom, 2022

4. Insecurity, fear and the broader political climate around immigration and asylum create challenging conditions to respond;
5. Longer-term strategic planning around displaced Ukrainians is vital but appears lacking

How does SJOG and CSAN Homes for Ukraine Matching Scheme address risk of trafficking and exploitation?

1. Verification of matching scheme and sponsors registration process

Participants to the roundtable suggested that the visa requirement actively exacerbates risks of trafficking and exploitation, due both to the confusion and long waiting times associated with visa processing and the way it can propel people into more dangerous situations and routes. Matching on Facebook, for example, was described by one NGO participant as “an invitation to traffickers.” An academic also flagged examples of specific posts seen on an international matching site, which offered accommodation in the UK on worrying terms.

Additional concerns were raised that the payment for hosting might incentivise sponsorship among people who are not well-intentioned.

Therefore, one way our project is encouraging safe applications is by ensuring direct and constant support both for sponsors and guests during the matching process. Once a sponsor expresses his interest in hosting, alongside an initial assessment, a form is requested to be filled in by a referee, which enquires about the person’s tolerance towards cultural and religious differences or his understanding regarding personal boundaries, conflicts and challenges experienced by individuals/families displaced by the Ukraine war.

2. Supply of welcome box and guidance for people arriving through the scheme

Another concern highlighted during the roundtable involves the deficiencies in the asylum system, such as long waits, limited support payments and no right to work - for them, seeking asylum is the only possible route to regular immigration status.

While sponsors commit to host Ukrainian nationals for 6 months initially, the SJOG Homes for Ukraine team provides extensive support in this direction. As we understand the barriers that people fleeing the war encounter when moving to the UK, the welcome toolkit and box they receive upon arrival deliver necessary information about living and settling in the UK, as well as useful contacts and necessary products such as adapters, sim cards and toiletries.

Once a sponsor is matched, they are also supported to arrive in the UK, being provided flight tickets and welcomed at the airport by team members and hosting person/family.

3. Training providing guidance and information for sponsors regarding boundaries, expectations and available support

Many advocates stressed that sponsors that are willing to host had been inadequately prepared and informed, with a clear lack of expectation management, training, guidance, and support.

Various potential contributing factors were highlighted, including language barriers, differences in cultural expectations, inherent power imbalances, economic constraints, and lack of access to alternatives should things go wrong. The absence of clear boundary setting in the UK Government guidance that sees chores and contributions to bills permissible under this scheme, was seen to heighten risks of hosts exploiting their guests for domestic labour.

The SJOG Homes for Ukraine project aims to address these challenges by providing comprehensive training for hosts and guests to explain the different types of abuse and how to build and maintain healthy boundaries to minimise the risk of exploitation on both sides. Both hosts and guests are encouraged to familiarise themselves with emergency phone numbers in the UK, the types and signs of abuse, and to set up a support network to know what to do and who to contact should the need arise.

In addition to the training offered to hosts before and after meeting their guests, the toolkit created by the Homes for Ukraine team supplies additional information around cultural differences, setting personal boundaries, understanding what does hosting imply and what is not allowed, as well as useful guidance for integration and wellbeing. During training sessions, hosts are also advised to discuss any safeguarding concerns with the local council before hosting to be prepared and have a plan if any issues arise during the hosting arrangement.

Concerns and Challenges

As the participants to the roundtable stressed, it is imperative to ensure that people can make use of necessary 'social infrastructure for integration', for example, via ready access to the labour market, the benefits system, education, and healthcare. In fact, integration was a recurrent theme in the discussions, framed as both an important goal in itself and a way of reducing risks of trafficking and exploitation.

Nevertheless, one of the biggest challenges experienced by the Homes for Ukraine team when supporting long-term integration, are the ongoing existing risks and the poor move-on options after the initial 6 months. As many hosts do not have capacity to extend their support, the process of becoming independent or finding a new host is long-lasting. The

Homes for Ukraine project at SJOG is committed to extend the support during the re-matching and move-on processes by delivering continuous assistance to guests and facilitating the communication with local councils, as there is usually no dedicated contact number to get in touch.

Conclusion and Recommendations

We can conclude that there are growing new concerns about the potential for widespread trafficking and exploitation linked to the ongoing war in Ukraine and their integration in the UK. While many risks related to the matching process or the co-habitation between hosts and guests have been addressed, existing risks could emerge after the 6 months hosting period and move-on towards living independently or finding another host.

SJOG Homes for Ukraine project aims to continue supporting people on their journey and to provide opportunities for integrate into our community in the UK.

We join voices with the participants to the discussion organised by the the UK's Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner and echo the following recommendations in order to minimise the risk of trafficking and exploitation, to all providers and local and national institutions:

1. Prevent people fleeing the war in Ukraine from being left with irregular migration status;
2. Improve safeguarding and risk management for those believed to be at particularly high risk of trafficking and exploitation;
3. Use information more strategically to address risks and facilitate access to support as needed;
4. Build resilience and reducing risk through access to core services, rights and support;
5. Tackle existing systemic issues that produce and exacerbate risks of trafficking and exploitation;
6. Worke toward a more strategic, longer-term response to trafficking and exploitation related to conflict situations;
7. Providing a welcome pack for anyone who's been placed in the UK under the (Homes for Ukraine) scheme so that they can access those rights and entitlements fully;
8. Have alternative pathways to support in the case of trafficking and exploitation.

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