

**Report to:** Cabinet

**Date of meeting:** 19 April 2022

**By:** Chief Executive

**Title:** Ukraine Situation

**Purpose:** To provide an overview of the impacts of the current situation in Ukraine on the County Council and East Sussex more broadly, and the actions being taken by ESCC in conjunction with partner organisations.

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## **RECOMMENDATION**

**Cabinet is recommended to note the local implications of the current situation in Ukraine and approve the actions being taken in response by ESCC in conjunction with partner organisations.**

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## **1 Background**

1.1 The current war in Ukraine has led to a humanitarian crisis. Recent United Nations (UN) estimates indicate that around 4.5 million refugees have left the country with those numbers continuing to rise. Many more are displaced from their homes within Ukraine. Refugees have dispersed to a range of destinations, particularly neighbouring countries such as Poland, but also further afield, with some looking to come to the UK. The situation has also generated significant wider economic and security issues and risks which are being felt across the world.

1.2 The Council and many residents across the county have indicated their solidarity with Ukraine and its people. Members expressed this at the recent County Council meeting, during which the Ukrainian flag was flown at County Hall and displayed in the Council Chamber as a demonstration of support. The Leader has also written, on behalf of all group leaders, to the Prime Minister and the Ukrainian Ambassador to the UK to signal the Council's support for Ukraine and readiness to do whatever we can locally to contribute to the national response.

1.3 In recognition of the humanitarian crisis, the Government has established schemes to enable Ukrainian citizens to come to the UK, either to join family members already in the country, or to be hosted by a UK-based sponsor. Given the rapidly evolving situation, details of the schemes continue to emerge but it is clear that there is a significant role for upper tier local authorities to fulfil, working with partners in district and borough councils, health services, other public sector organisations and the voluntary and community sector, as well as local communities. There are also wider implications to consider in terms of risks and issues arising from the situation which we need to take into account. This report provides our latest best assessment of the impact on ESCC and East Sussex more broadly and the actions we are taking to respond, in conjunction with our partners.

## **2. Economic and security issues**

2.1 Nationally and internationally the impact of the war in Ukraine is being felt in economic and security terms. In Europe, historic reliance on fuel supplies from Russia, coupled with the economic sanctions introduced by governments in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, have impacted further on the steep increases in energy costs and

inflation experienced in the UK over the winter. These further rises are exacerbating the cost of living issues being experienced by many households nationally and in East Sussex, which is likely to create further need for support from local statutory and voluntary sector services.

2.2 Additional measures announced in the Chancellor's Spring Budget Statement in response to the cost of living pressures included an additional £500m for the Household Support Fund from April 2022, designed to provide support to the most vulnerable families and administered by local authorities. The Chancellor also announced an increase of £3,000 in the threshold at which individuals begin paying National Insurance contributions to £12,570 from July 2022, a 5p per litre cut in fuel duty for the next 12 months and reiterated previously announced support to households with their energy bills in 2022/23 (including a £150 non-repayable Council Tax rebate for most households in bands A-D, a Discretionary Fund of £144m nationally for billing authorities to support households who are in need but are not eligible for the Council Tax rebate, and a £200 discount, repayable over five years, on energy bills this autumn for all households).

2.3 As well as the economic impacts on local residents, and the potential additional demand for support this creates, increases in the cost of energy and fuel and overall rates of inflation impact directly on ESCC as an organisation. Whilst the 2022/23 budget and Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP), approved by Full Council in February 2022, included forecasts for inflation and additional cost pressures, the inflation models and MTFP will be updated regularly to assess the impact of the challenging economic environment. At this point, there is sufficient contingency and reserves to address revenue budget risks in 2022/23. For the Capital Programme, there remain challenges in the supply chain for materials and price pressures within existing contracts. Further significant pressures may materialise as new schemes are developed and go out to tender. The Capital Programme holds a contingency of £7.5m to meet these uncertainties.

2.4 In light of the actions of Russia in Ukraine, local authorities have been asked by Government to take steps to identify any exposure to investments or contracts with Russian companies. In common with other councils, ESCC has undertaken checks which have indicated that for the Council's Treasury Management activity there is no exposure to Russia or Belarus; in fact the Treasury Management Strategy would not enable such investment given the rating of these countries' financial institutions. The East Sussex Pension Fund, for which ESCC is the administering authority, has negligible direct investment exposure to Russian markets representing no more than 0.07% of the Fund's assets (further information can be found on the Fund's website: [East Sussex Pension Fund - exposure to Russian investment](#)). For contracts, due diligence has been undertaken by the Procurement Team across our key suppliers and the top 25 suppliers by spend, and none have been identified as being either a Russian company or subsidiary of a Russian company.

2.5 In terms of national security, the conflict in Ukraine has triggered a heightened risk in relation to cyber-attacks on UK services and companies. The National Cyber Security Centre has called on organisations in the UK to bolster their online defences in the wake of Russian actions in Ukraine in line with updated guidance issued by the Centre in January. Advice has also been provided by Government to local authorities to check and, where necessary, strengthen protections against such attacks. ESCC has increased monitoring of Information Technology (IT) services and additional measures and controls have been put in place in response to the increased threat. New IT services and projects are already subject to robust technical, business and governance risk assessment before deployment but these measures now have additional checks. ESCC is a member of numerous cyber security threat sharing groups that highlight likely cyber-attacks and risks. These are evaluated by ESCC and acted upon as a priority.

2.6 There are a range of potential risks and issues for the Council arising from the current situation, both economic and security risks as outlined above, and those specifically from new ESCC responsibilities in relation to the Homes for Ukraine scheme (outlined below). Many of these issues amplify existing risks already recorded on our strategic risk register; where necessary these entries will be amended to reflect changes in the nature of the risk, heightened risk status and mitigations. We will continue to monitor, assess and mitigate risks wherever possible according to the latest information and guidance and update our risk registers accordingly.

### **3. Ukrainian refugee schemes**

3.1 In response to the refugee crisis, Government has established two routes through which Ukrainian refugees can enter the UK:

- Ukraine Family Scheme
- Homes for Ukraine

3.2 The Ukraine Family Scheme is an extension of the existing family visa process which has been amended to extend the definition of 'close' and 'extended' family member and to remove the income test and the requirement for payment to apply. Families are expected to live together and Ukrainian nationals will have immediate access to benefits and public services, and the right to work and study. Local authorities have not been allocated a formal role in this scheme, are not in receipt of information on the number of refugees arriving in their area under this scheme and are not being funded to support refugees arriving through this route.

3.3 The Homes for Ukraine scheme was launched on 14 March 2022 by the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and opened to applications on 18 March. This scheme is open to Ukrainian nationals who were resident in Ukraine prior to 1 January 2022, and also to their immediate family members who may be of other nationalities, to be sponsored to come to the UK. Applicants can apply from Ukraine or from any other third country. Phase one of the scheme allows private individuals to sponsor named Ukrainians. In later phases organisations and community groups will be able to sponsor multiple guests. Government is carrying out work on safeguarding processes for group sponsors and will issue further guidance on this part of the scheme in due course. The number of people who can come into the UK through the scheme is uncapped. The scheme has attracted over 200,000 expressions of interest to date from potential private sponsors across the UK. Indications are that a clear majority of refugees are women and children.

3.4 To complete the required visa application Ukrainians need a named individual in the UK to sponsor them. The process of matching refugees to sponsors is undertaken by individuals themselves. This can be through an existing connection, via a voluntary organisation or via other channels such as the internet or social media. Sponsorship must be offered for a minimum period of six months and individuals from Ukraine can stay in the UK for up to three years.

3.5 Successful applicants will receive full access to public funds and services in the UK and will have the right to work. An interim payment of £200 per guest will be provided by councils for subsistence costs. Each sponsor household will be entitled to an optional £350 'thank you' payment per month for up to a year, administered by local authorities, which does not impact on wider benefit entitlement, including single person Council Tax discount. There will also be a 50% Council Tax discount for empty or second homes that are used to house Ukrainians on the scheme. Sponsors in the UK can be of any nationality, with any immigration status, provided they have at least six months' leave to remain within the UK and pass relevant background checks. They are required to provide suitable

accommodation for a minimum of six months and to signpost the guest to public services and assist them with tasks such as registering with a local GP surgery.

3.6 To obtain a visa an applicant needs to provide full details of all adults in the house they will be residing in. All adults (aged 16+) in the household are required to have a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check and if child refugees are arriving, this must be an enhanced DBS check. Government has committed additional resource to the DBS process, but it is acknowledged there may be difficulties in undertaking and receiving these checks prior to refugees' arrival. Refugees will undergo the usual visa security checks prior to receiving a visa and at the point of entry. Sponsors will also undergo a security check prior to a visa being issued.

3.7 The Homes for Ukraine scheme is not a resettlement programme, and as such refugees travel at their own expense, to their own timetable, by whatever route they choose. It is therefore not possible to know details of arrival locations and timings. Sponsors are required to stay in regular contact with their guest prior to their arrival to help organise and coordinate their arrival in the UK, meet them on arrival and facilitate transfer to their accommodation. Government is also working with local authorities which have major points of entry to the UK to develop appropriate reception arrangements for welcoming and providing immediate support to refugees. From 20 March, guests arriving in the country have been eligible for a single, free onward journey via national rail, bus, light rail, and coach.

#### **4. Impacts on local services**

4.1 Latest data (as at 11 April) indicates that 902 Ukrainian individuals have been matched to 368 sponsors located in East Sussex through the Homes for Ukraine scheme. Data is not currently available on how many of the 200,000 sponsor expressions of interest on the Government website are resident in East Sussex. Visa applications are processed by the Home Office and Government aims to transfer data rapidly to local authorities, including information on both the sponsor and guest(s), to enable councils to respond locally to anticipated arrivals. Data on visas issued to date indicates that 204 have been issued to refugees with a sponsor located in East Sussex (as at 11 April).

4.2 Local authorities, other public services and the voluntary sector are expected to play a number of roles in relation to Ukrainians arriving in the area:

##### Arrivals

4.3 Relevant councils have been asked to establish reception arrangements at particular ports of entry to support any short-term arrival needs. Contact has been made with Newhaven Port and appropriate arrangements have been established. Government has provided £20,000 to sustain this arrangement for a minimum of two months. We will continue to work with Government to understand emerging demands and any further funding that may be required.

##### Safeguarding

4.4 On receipt of details of new arrivals from Government, local authorities are required to arrange DBS checks of adults (aged 16+) in the sponsor household as soon as possible. Recognising the short timescales involved, Government guidance indicates that 'best endeavours' should be made to conduct the checks before the arrival of the guest(s) but recognises that this will not be possible in all circumstances. In East Sussex this is an ESCC role and additional staff have been recruited, inducted and trained to support the administration of additional DBS checks.

4.5 In addition, we will check our own databases to establish whether there is anything which could indicate that the sponsor or household members might pose a risk to refugees. We have notified hosts that we will check our own systems for this purpose. If the DBS or council database checks reveal information which indicate the household may pose a risk to refugees appropriate action will be taken on a case-by-case basis. Safeguarding and data policies are in place which set out the procedure that will be followed in more detail. Decisions regarding suitability and what, if any, action to take will be made carefully by the Director of Children's Services or the Director of Adult Social Care and Health as appropriate, drawing on expert safeguarding and information governance advice.

4.6 Guidance indicates that councils should also consider the provision of social care staff to respond to any safeguarding concerns that may be flagged by Border Force officers.

#### Accommodation and Housing

4.7 Limited guidance for local authorities and sponsors regarding the expected standard of accommodation has been published. When notified of a local sponsor by Government, local authorities are expected to arrange visits to properties to undertake checks in relation to these standards. The Council has been working closely with districts, boroughs and East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service (ESFRS) to develop accommodation checks and arrangements have been made for ESFRS to undertake these checks in East Sussex. If the checks raise a concern, then advice will be given where remedial action can be taken to rectify minor issues. If it is deemed the accommodation is unsuitable for the guests then alternative accommodation will need to be found. Government is currently looking at the feasibility of a re-matching facility and has indicated that in the interim period borough and district councils' statutory homelessness duties will apply.

4.8 There may also be some cases where the sponsor/guest relationship breaks down and the guest is homeless or at risk of homelessness. Government has indicated that district and borough councils' statutory homelessness duties will apply in this instance and further advice will be provided on this in due course. It is currently unclear what provision will be made for accommodation beyond the initial six month period if sponsors are no longer willing or able to accommodate their guests. Further guidance is expected from Government on arrangements to re-match guests to sponsors and the provision of move-on accommodation.

4.9 Sponsors may not charge rent and, as no rent is payable for accommodation under the scheme, Government does not expect councils to require such accommodation to obtain a House in Multiple Occupation (HMO) license.

#### Education

4.10 Councils are required to provide school places for children of school age and will receive additional funding to support this. Refugees arriving with school age children will need to apply for a school place through the in-year admissions process and there will be a need for ESCC to allocate school places and work with schools to support new pupils and their families. The Department for Education (DfE) has written to local authorities and schools clarifying expectations in terms of the need to find places for children.

4.11 The process for refugee families to apply for school places will work in the usual way; the parents/carers will need to apply via the online portal supported by the hosts as appropriate. If there are no spaces available within a reasonable distance, we will ask a local school to take them over numbers via the Fair Access Protocol.

4.12 In terms of early years provision, as families arriving have recourse to public funds, children will be able to access early years entitlements if they meet the existing eligibility criteria. The DfE is working to make sure all eligible early years children who resettle from

Ukraine are able to access provision and will set out more details when they are available. In East Sussex, existing challenges to recruit and retain staff in early years providers may present challenges for securing places for children of families from Ukraine moving into the area. Information on access to post-16 education and training is awaited.

#### Access to services

4.13 Government guidance indicates that, where necessary, councils should provide advice and referrals to specialist public health services as appropriate, for example mental health services, adult social care, and children's services. ESCC is working with partners, including voluntary and community groups, to provide advice and support. Government will provide further advice on this in due course.

4.14 Guidance indicates that councils should support guests to access local Jobcentre Plus appointments for benefit assessments and job-seeking. We are working with voluntary and community sector partners and district and borough councils to facilitate this.

#### Community integration

4.15 Councils will play a key role in supporting the integration of Ukrainian families into their local communities. ESCC is working with partners, including voluntary and community groups, to provide advice and support to hosts and guests. Guidance indicates that integration support might include community events, the use of community champions and interfaith networks, increasing local authority contact/interaction with Ukrainians, access to translation services and working with local voluntary sector organisations and faith groups to help signpost advice and support.

### **5. Funding**

5.1 To support local authorities with the roles outlined above, Government is providing funding at a rate of £10,500 per Ukrainian national arriving under the Homes for Ukraine scheme for the first year. This is intended to enable councils to provide support to families to rebuild their lives and fully integrate into communities. Future years' funding will be considered at a later date. It is expected (but not yet confirmed) that this funding will be allocated to upper tier local authorities. At the current estimated number of 902 arrivals in East Sussex this equates to in the region of £9.5 million in funding to be administered by ESCC in 2022/23.

5.2 The funding will not be ringfenced, but is conditional on councils undertaking necessary safeguarding checks and providing Government with relevant data. Further details on funding, including the conditions, is expected shortly. Government is also providing additional funding to councils to provide education services for children from families arriving from Ukraine under this scheme. The DfE will allocate funding on a per pupil basis for the three phases of education at the following annual rates, which include support for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND):

- Early years (ages 2 to 4) - £3,000
- Primary (ages 5 -11) - £6,580
- Secondary (ages 11-18) - £8,755

5.3 The council where the sponsor accommodation is located is expected to provide the interim payment (in line with other resettlement schemes) of £200 per guest for subsistence costs prior to the availability of benefits or obtaining work, which is to be funded from the £10,500 allocation mentioned above. Councils also have discretion within the allocation to top-up or further support guests with interim or additional payments. Councils will also administer the 'thank you' payments at the £350 per sponsoring household per month rate which will be funded separately. Locally, we are working with district and borough councils on the administration of both payments.

5.4 Councils are expected to use the funding allocated for an individual to meet all associated costs (for providing council services, for administering payments and other costs such as fees for DBS checks). Government will consider claims for additional costs on an exceptional basis only. Health funding is not included. No funding is provided for Ukrainian nationals arriving under the Ukraine Family Scheme who are expected to be supported by their family members in the UK and have the same immediate access to benefits, public services and work as those arriving under Homes for Ukraine. However, it is possible that refugees arriving through the Family Scheme may require support if family arrangements are not sufficient or appropriate, including potentially access to district and borough councils' homelessness services if family accommodation is not provided or sustained. Discussions continue with Government regarding the additional support that may be required for people arriving on the Ukraine Family Scheme; this support could include financial support and a re-matching facility where people can no longer be supported by their family members.

## **6. Co-ordinating the East Sussex response**

6.1 The arrival of a large number of refugees into any community will need a coordinated multi-agency response. Refugees are likely to need support with issues such as trauma, language and settling into communities, which will necessitate long term support. The likely needs of the cohort arriving in East Sussex, particularly the number of children, will require a significant response, including appropriate resource to successfully deliver the scheme.

6.2 ESCC officers have liaised with partners in district and borough councils, the voluntary and community sector and health services to develop an effective local response. A partnership group has been established, chaired and administered by the County Council, which is co-ordinating and managing the actions needed, taking account of Government guidance.

6.3 Internally, a cross-department officer working group has been established and additional capacity secured through the temporary appointment of Sean Ruth, a former director at West Sussex County Council, to lead the ESCC response, reporting to the Director of Adult Social Care and Health. Further project support covering a range of areas is currently being put in place, utilising the anticipated funding and/or existing roles.

6.4 Work with voluntary and community sector partners includes ESCC providing one-off grants of £10,000 to each of the local voluntary action groups for providing support to the Homes for Ukraine programme. The one-off grant will be used to deliver support in partnership with the district and borough councils and other public and voluntary and community sector partners from 1 April 2022 to 30 September 2022. This support will include:

- Bringing together a local network of key organisations to assist in the co-ordination of support;
- Managing expectations of host families and individuals and providing training and information;
- Hosting local events, providing information to residents and voluntary sector organisations who want to help, on how they can help;
- Co-ordinating information to host families and voluntary sector organisations locally;
- Facilitating volunteers, providing training to help families and individuals when they arrive with soft support, e.g. on local amenities, GPs, travel arrangements etc;
- Facilitating local native Ukrainian speakers to support and offer guidance; and
- Working with ESCC to ensure education, social care and health provision is delivered.

6.5 In addition to those offering to sponsor people through Homes for Ukraine, many local residents have expressed a wish to help the people of Ukraine through the donation of supplies such as food and clothing, by making financial donations to charity or offering time as volunteers. We have created a dedicated webpage (<https://new.eastsussex.gov.uk/your-council/ukraine-crisis>) bringing together information and sources of advice about how residents can best offer assistance and we are promoting this information through a range of routes. Our Communications Team is supporting communications to sponsors about how to prepare for and welcome guests and help them adjust to life in East Sussex. We have also set up a dedicated helpline and email address for sponsors of Ukrainian refugees. Welcome/briefing guides for both hosts and guests have been published and are being translated. All communication is collaborative work in partnership with other local authorities, emergency services, NHS and volunteer groups in the county.

## 7. Risks and issues

7.1 In relation to the Homes for Ukraine Scheme and the resettlement of refugees in East Sussex, key risks relate to:

- Capacity - the need for a rapid response by ESCC and partner services which continue to be stretched by Covid and other pressures, and the challenge of planning the response in a context where national guidance is evolving quickly and the number of refugees expected to arrive is uncertain.
- Vulnerability – both refugees and sponsors may fall into vulnerable groups and be at risk of exploitation. The short timescales involved may mean it is not possible to complete DBS and other checks before arrival, and delivering all housing checks before arrival may also be challenging. Once checks are completed there may be a need to manage any safeguarding issues that have emerged.
- Support needs – refugees, including children, are likely to arrive with significant health support needs, notably need for mental health support. Schools will need to find additional spaces, and wider support, for newly arrived children.
- Community integration – the need to support new arrivals to settle into communities and to support communities in welcoming refugees who have been through an ordeal and may be traumatised by their experiences. It is possible that community tensions could arise. Language support is likely to be required and this capacity may be stretched nationally.
- Breakdown in arrangements - there may be some cases where the sponsor/guest relationship breaks down and the guest is homeless or at risk of homelessness. Additionally, families who arrived on the Ukraine Family Scheme may encounter problems with their accommodation. They are unable to transfer schemes at present and if they present as homeless will not be eligible for any additional funding. Government has indicated that district and borough councils' statutory homelessness duties will apply in this instance. This would also be the case for any Ukrainian refugees arriving independently outside of either of the recognised Government schemes.
- Longer term planning – ongoing support after the initial six month provision of accommodation by sponsors is currently unclear, particularly in housing. As covered throughout this report, refugees are entitled to statutory support, including homelessness provision, which creates a significant risk for district and borough councils.

7.2 As outlined above, we will continue to monitor, assess and mitigate risks wherever possible according to the latest information and guidance and update our risk registers accordingly.



## **8. Migration and other resettlement schemes**

8.1 The current schemes to offer refuge to Ukrainian citizens displaced by the war come in addition to existing levels of migration to the UK. Previous schemes to offer resettlement to Syrian and Afghan refugees remain in place and require ongoing support. In addition, 2022 has to date seen high levels of cross-channel arrivals of migrants in small boats on the south coast, including in East Sussex, and there is a high likelihood that this will increase. It is possible that some Ukrainian refugees could take this route, outside the recognised Government schemes.

8.2 We are participating fully in the National Transfer Scheme for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) and are almost up to a maximum expected number of 74 children. The expectations of councils through the scheme may need to rise, however, given that we expect a significant increase in arrivals this year.

8.3 The South East Strategic Partnership for Migration (SESPM) is in place to provide a leadership, co-ordination, and advisory function for migration in the South East and to coordinate strategic engagement and the regional delivery of resettlement programmes. The partnership is playing a role in co-ordination and information sharing across the local authorities in the region and with Government. Strategic Migration Partnerships are also expected to play a role in initial reception arrangements at key ports of entry to the UK.

8.4 The combined impacts of the various resettlement schemes and spontaneous arrivals creates significant cumulative pressure on local services, particularly in the context of ongoing Covid-related demand and need related to cost of living issues. There are particular ongoing challenges finding suitable accommodation.

8.5 Close and effective partnership working is essential to ensure best possible use of local capacity and resources to respond effectively across all agencies and our wider communities.

## **9. Conclusion and reason for recommendations**

9.1 Our county already has a proud record of helping people forced to flee wars but this is the largest challenge we have had to rise to. It is heartening to see individuals and communities across the county already stepping up to help. Considerable work is underway across the Council and our partner organisations to respond robustly and positively, and to mitigate the risks arising from the situation as effectively as possible. We are also taking appropriate action to identify and manage risks arising from the wider economic and security impacts of the conflict in Ukraine through our corporate risk management systems.

9.2 Cabinet is recommended to note the impacts of the situation in Ukraine on ESCC, our partners and the county and approve the actions being taken in response.

**BECKY SHAW**  
**Chief Executive**

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