

# Focus Group Research with Ukrainian Guests and Hosts



**Commissioned by The Executive Office**

July 2022

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“From the moment we stepped off the plane, we were taken care of by the host family.

I am impressed by hospitality of people around, their willingness to help and we always receive offers from everywhere.”

Ukrainian focus group participant

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## DOCUMENT SUMMARY

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background

In May 2022, Business Consultancy Services (BCS) supported by research colleagues in the Innovation Lab in the Department of Finance (DoF), were commissioned by The Executive Office to complete four focus groups – two with Ukrainian guests and two with hosts from The Homes for Ukraine Scheme. The Research Team have experience in completing independent qualitative research with vulnerable groups.

## 1.2 Context

Northern Ireland and its people have responded with great generosity to the humanitarian crisis that has followed the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This has included:

- Over 6,500 people registering an interest in providing accommodation for people from Ukraine;
- Over 1,000 people have now come to Northern Ireland from Ukraine.

Members of the public, public sector agencies, charities, churches and community organisations have worked together to provide a safe and supportive welcome for the Ukrainian people who come here.

The Assistance Centre model, which has been developed in Northern Ireland, aims to make sure new arrivals can get help with their immediate needs such as applying for benefits, registering for doctors and dentists, registering for school places for their children, and seeking housing and legal advice. It is unique in the UK. The locations of assistance centres are listed below and are open two days a week in Belfast and one day a week in the remaining locations:

- Belfast;
- Newry;
- Craigavon; and
- Ballymena.

Those arriving from Ukraine are provided with an immediate £200 support payment, administered by Bryson Care on behalf of TEO. Initially these payments were made directly at the assistance centres and they are now provided using an online system.

TEO are also working with a wide range of stakeholders to design and develop further support arrangements beyond the assistance centres, for those Ukrainians arriving here.

Given it is now more than three months since the first people from Ukraine arrived in Northern Ireland, TEO want to review the initial arrangements put in place to see whether they meet the needs of Ukrainian people and their hosts. In addition to this, the research will also consider whether the arrangements are working as well as they could, whether adjustments can be made to help improve the experience for future arrivals, and to make sure that something important has not been missed.

Adjustments to services are continually being made, informed in part on feedback provided by guests and hosts. By reflecting on services and making these changes, it is hoped that the experiences of more recent and any subsequent arrivals and their hosts, will be as positive as they can be under the circumstances. These focus groups are part of this continuum of reflection and adaptation.

The feedback will also be used to inform the aforementioned design and delivery of support given to Ukrainian people who have come to Northern Ireland and the people who are hosting them.

### 1.3 Approach

The focus group methodology was used in this project to get qualitative data providing rich insights into the experiences to date of some of the residents of Northern Ireland who are currently hosting a Ukrainian individual or family, as well as the experiences of some of the Ukrainian guests currently living in Northern Ireland. **Appendix 1** provides background details of the group participants.

The discussion guide used in each of the groups is provided in **Appendix 2**. Section 2 details the themes and examples that emerged during the focus groups with guests, and Section 3 details the themes and examples that emerged during the focus groups with hosts. Anonymised direct quotes that formed part of the group discussions are contained within these sections.

As this consultation was with a small non representative sample, the information provided in this report should not be used to assume that the experiences and opinions outlined are representative of all hosts and Ukrainian guests based in Northern Ireland, only those attendees at the focus groups.

The following table provides a summary of the administration of the Focus Groups.

**Table 1: Summary of Focus Group Administration**

Area	Description
<b>WHEN</b> When did the Focus Groups take place and how long did they last?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The four focus groups took place in June 2022 and were conducted at various times during the day between 9.30am and 4pm. Participants selected a day and time that best suited them.</li> <li>The groups comprising hosts lasted for 1.5 hours whilst the groups with guests were convened for two hours, to allow extra time for translation.</li> </ul>
<b>WHO</b> Who attended the groups?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Guests: There were five participants in the first focus group and six in the second. Two participants were male and the remaining were female. A translator attended the groups and was responsible for translating the moderator questions from English to Ukrainian, together with the participant responses from Ukrainian to English.</li> <li>Hosts: There were seven participants in each of the host focus groups – eight male and six female.</li> </ul> <p>See <b>Appendix 1</b> for profile of participants.</p>

Area	Description
<p><b>HOW</b> How were participants recruited?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The TEO Client Team contacted potential respondents by e-mail to invite them to attend one of the focus groups. The invitation contained background information about the BCS team and rationale for the research.</li> <li>Follow up invitations and a reminder were issued by the TEO Client Team.</li> </ul>
<p><b>WHAT</b> What questions were asked?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In consultation with the Client Team, two question sets were developed by the BCS team – one for Ukrainian guests and one for hosts.</li> <li>The discussions were structured around: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>pre travel/ arrival in Northern Ireland;</li> <li>arrival in Northern Ireland; and</li> <li>considerations of the future.</li> </ul> </li> <li>Participants were asked to describe their experiences and make suggestions for improvements (See <b>Appendix 2</b> for full details).</li> </ul>
<p><b>FORMAT</b> What was the format of the groups?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All groups were administered virtually using ‘Microsoft Teams’ in order to ensure equal access for all potential participants, regardless of location.</li> <li>A BCS moderator provided an introduction and background, and assurances of confidentiality were given to participants. An additional DoF notetaker / moderator was also present.</li> <li>A ‘welcome and thank you’ video was prepared by the Head of the Ukrainian Refugee Operational Support Team and played for participants after the initial introductions. Ukrainian subtitles were included in the Ukrainian guest focus group video.</li> <li>The BCS moderator introduced topics / questions and invited participants to provide their views and share their experiences.</li> <li>Upon discussion of topics and AOB the BCS moderator thanked the group and closed the meeting.</li> </ul>
<p><b>OUTPUTS</b> What were the desired outputs?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The purpose of a focus group is not to elicit a consensus from a group of participants but rather to allow participants time to provide details of their experiences and give their opinion on the topics as they are introduced.</li> <li>All data captured was qualitative.</li> <li>Quotes were recorded in the moderator notes to use in the report as appropriate.</li> </ul>

#### 1.4 Acknowledgements

The authors of this report wish to express their thanks to the focus groups’ attendees for their valuable contribution to the completion of this research.

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## 2. FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS - GUESTS

### 2.1 Introduction

The guest focus group findings are structured as follows:



### 2.2 Pre-arrival

**Key finding:** Participants detailed that arrival to Northern Ireland was largely unplanned. ‘Matching up’ online with a suitable host family was for many participants the most important determining factor in choosing a destination. Some used trusted friends who had established links to families in Northern Ireland. For some the choice was influenced by the need for an English speaking country.

#### Why NI?

The focus group attendees’ reasons for choosing Northern Ireland were varied. The participants in the focus groups outlined they were mainly looking for host families within the UK as their main consideration was to find a safe place to stay, and it did not really matter whether it was Northern Ireland or any other part of the UK.

However, one person specifically mentioned that the physical remoteness of Northern Ireland was important, as she felt safer being further away from the war zone. Furthermore, family considerations also mattered, and one woman commented that she chose Northern Ireland because the level of education here is higher than in other parts of the UK.

*“We came to NI by chance. We just put in google host and that’s where I found my host, and all the paper work...organisation was settled by family.”*

*“I chose Northern Ireland because I wanted to be as far away from Russia as possible”*

*“I got 15 invitations. I chose NI...it is not about the country, it is about the host, the best system of education is in NI and it influenced my choice”*

Some participants also indicated that they had not wanted to leave Ukraine but circumstances became so dangerous that they had to. One participant indicated that medical supplies were running out and she feared for the health of her family, this was when she decided to leave.

#### Communication / Source of Information / Meeting Hosts

Many participants indicated that they relied on the “Opora” website and other social networking websites, including Facebook and Telegram. They also mentioned using other websites set up by volunteers from different parts of the UK who connected guests with hosts. These included ‘Sunflower Sisters’ and ‘Foyle Friends of Ukraine’.



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Furthermore, some participants relied on word of mouth and they found their hosts through people they knew who had friends in Northern Ireland.

*“My friend suggested it, and he suggested a host family. He knew them and said you would be happy here.”*

When deciding who to match up with, some respondents mentioned that they followed their host’s twitter and other social media accounts to find out as much information as they could about them.

Many people also commented that they would set up initial conversation with the host via digital technologies to get an idea of who the person was and try to establish if they would be suited to each other.

*“I live near Kherson (...). the convoys of Russian military vehicles were arriving and there were missiles blowing up in the neighboring buildings, so it became dangerous to stay. (...) I left from Mikolaiv, it was risky and no safety was guaranteed. I wrote my story and posted it on Facebook and people started commenting there, and that’s how my hosts found me.”*

*“I was looking for accommodation on my own and I found a host who was looking for one person, and my host was looking for someone who was a professional in digital field. We communicated for some time, I was checking him if he was reasonable person.”*

#### Travel Arrangements / Visa

Whereas many participants in the focus groups were able to flee Ukraine almost immediately the war broke out, several participants from occupied areas, including Bucza, Kherson, and Mariupol found it difficult to leave. Travel arrangements varied, depending on individual circumstances and visa issues. Some guests, who did not have biometric passports, had to travel through Poland to attend an appointment to provide their biometrics.

Some outlined that due to delays in visa application processing, they decided to travel via Dublin in order to avoid difficulties with Immigration while entering the UK. These arrangements were often decided after discussions with the hosts. One respondent initially fled to Italy, where his relatives lived.

*“I am from Bucha, we were there during occupation, bombs destroyed our house. We were trapped, we didn’t have any Telegram or any electronic means of communication. We could not get out of place where we were. Our friend transported us to the west of Ukraine. That was there when I found people who helped us there...family from Belfast contacted us and gave us help. All formalities were arranged by them.”*

*“When we were in Ukraine I was thinking of safe place, I was afraid of nuclear weapons. I was searching information on internet, Facebook about Ireland. My mum doesn’t have international passport. (...) We went to Poland, we stayed there for a month, my mum had to wait one month until visa was ready.”*

*“Initially we arrived in Italy, we have relatives, we stayed in hotel for one month, we were supported for one month. We found out about this programme through Telegram chat. They helped us to get tickets and we came to Dublin.”*

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During these discussions some participants were visibly upset and others in the group empathised and offered support.

### 2.3 Arrival

**Key finding:** Many participants were heavily reliant on their host family for aspects of their settling in and day to day living. The importance of the support received at the Assistance Centres was emphasised. The ease with which guests were able to gain access to services varied. Overall the current levels of service provided were very much welcomed.

A key theme to emerge from the discussions was the fact that many of the guests expressed that they were grateful to their hosts for hosting them and that they were happy to be living somewhere safe. Many emphasised the hospitality of local people and their willingness to help them. Overall guests expressed that they were happy with the local community and neighbourhood.

*“The neighbours are amazing they’re elderly people and they come with sweets too for the children...they come to say hello they ask if it will be okay if they bring clothes for us. We are delighted to get them as we had to leave with nothing - it is very much welcomed.”*

*“They came to help with a food parcel every week but we had to say just bring one every two weeks as there is so much food.”*

*“My host family are like my second parents...they see us as their children. They have fed us and look after us...they’re very good and take us anywhere we need to go.”*

#### Reliance on Hosts

Guests commented that they are financially dependent on their hosts. Hosts provide them with basic necessities including food, clothes and toys for their children. Hosts also help guests with practicalities, such as setting up bank accounts and applying for benefits as many are unable to do it themselves due to the language barrier.

*“The £200 was good and as we came with nothing but my host family bought the baby seat they bought so much for my children...it was all here.”*

*“I’m very lucky with my host...brings things for me and without that support I wouldn’t know what to do and I would find a very difficult.”*

Furthermore, many participants stated that they are totally reliant on their hosts when it comes to transport, particularly in remote areas of Northern Ireland (although some did travel over in their own car).

*“The host family did everything; they have taken us everywhere by car...it is up to the goodwill of the family.”*

Some of the guests observed that this reliance on hosts makes them feel uncomfortable as when they were at home they worked and were self-sufficient. For these participants they were uncomfortable accepting what was perceived as ‘handouts’ from their hosts and others in the community, even though they were very grateful for this.

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*“We are receiving help...not everybody feels comfortable to accept help. In Ukraine we were independent but it is difficult to accept on a temporary basis.”*

A few discussed that they had felt they had lost control over their own matters. This was in relation to speaking about their personal health in front of hosts or the fact that the hosts appeared to take decisions relating to finance that the guests did not feel wholly involved with or totally understood.

*“The host wants to do anything for us but there is no communication. We don’t know what she is doing, it is our lives. Where our personal data goes to? It would be good to have help with translation outside the host.”*

### Role of Assistance Centre

Guests felt that it was very important that they could get help at the Assistance Centres. They were happy to be able to go to one place where a range of advice on living in Northern Ireland can be accessed.

*“Visiting the Ukrainian advice centre is very important. A person can ask all the questions in one place. I got all the information that I needed.”*

*“Assistance Centres are so key to it all and they solved the problem straight away and helped me get a GP.”*

*“My hosts stayed with me and brought me around all the different part in order that I could get information and fill in forms.”*

A further key benefit that they recognised relating to the Assistance Centres was the fact they were able to meet other guests.

*“I meet other Ukrainian people (living nearby) and they asked if I wanted to join a WhatsApp group.”*

Some participants commented that there had been some issues surrounding the interpreters at the Assistance Centres, with several commenting that the interpreters did not translate accurately what was being said. As well as this, several guests commented that having a Russian interpreter on site had caused them distress.

*“I was at Ballymena Assistance Centre. We are Ukrainians. (The interpreters had) very strong Russian accent...Russian person interpreting for us. We are offended because we don’t want this.”*

### Access to services

The ease with which participants in both guest groups gained access to local services including banks, schools, GPs and public transport varied. In terms of access to banking, participants registering with online banks appeared to have found opening an account to be straightforward whilst some who attempted to open accounts with local banks had struggled. This had a negative impact on their ability to receive benefits and therefore they had to rely on host families for money. A point was raised that all the bank forms were in English and so participants found this to be an additional barrier.

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*“I finally managed with the bank account...that was very difficult.”*

Accessibility to school places was also varied. Some guests commented that it was difficult to get their children enrolled into schools where they were living (particularly in Belfast / Lisburn area).

*“We were on a waiting list for over a month for school.”*

For one participant when a school place became available it was five miles away from where they were living and therefore difficult to access, so the host family had to transport the children to school.

Other participants indicated that their children were able to enrol in a school within a week of arrival in areas which included Ballymena and Carrickfergus.

*“My son went to school within two days of arrival...he was treated like a celebrity.”*

*“School for my son is amazing they have treated him so well. They realised my son had psychological problems and have arranged for an art therapist to work with him.”*

In terms of healthcare, many guests had positive experiences with their GPs and the specific specialist services they required.

*“When we arrived from Poland, we were totally sick with high temp with cough. My host family called the surgery and we got antibiotic – without registration. My mum was invited for blood tests.”*

*“On a positive side is the health care my son has received. He has epilepsy and it was arranged very quickly that he got his medication.”*

However, access to the GP was difficult for some if they did not have support.

*“I tried to visit a GP, they gave me lots of forms, it was difficult to know what to fill in. Without help it...was time and effort consuming.”*

Whilst not all participants had tried to access public transport (as their host families were taking them where they needed to go) those who had were put off using it by how expensive it was.

*“I am really shocked by the prices of public transport that is very prohibitive from us travelling anywhere and trying to become less dependent on the host family.”*

Finally, guests mentioned that they were experiencing difficulties with finding and accessing free English language classes and it was discussed that this could help them with integration with the local community as well as assisting them to communicate with their hosts.

### Employment

Few of the participants were currently working and some of the barriers to employment were discussed. For those who do not speak English, the language barrier was critical. Childcare arrangements and lack of accreditation of Ukrainian qualifications also were perceived as barriers to gaining employment. One participant (who travelled alone and understood English but did not

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feel fully comfortable speaking in English) was working in the IT sector for her host family's business.

## 2.4 Future

**Key finding:** Whilst many participants indicated they would like to stay and work in Northern Ireland, others were keen to return to Ukraine and for some the process of planning for the future had not begun. Finding and affording suitable housing together with English language support were the two things that were foremost in the minds of the participants. It was also suggested that help to get Ukrainian qualifications recognised would aid their ability to get work.

### What country do you think you will live in?

In terms of planning for the future, guests' responses varied. It was acknowledged in both groups that the first thing they do every day when they wake up is to see what has happened back home in Ukraine as this was their constant worry. Some guests said they were still in a state of flux and were simply trying to get settled in Northern Ireland and could not plan for the future.

*"I'm not planning anything at all I'm living today and this moment."*

Several participants stated that they wanted to go back to Ukraine when it is safe to do so and one was determined to leave as soon as possible.

*"Personally I have definite plans for going to Ukraine. I have my life left there. I have family there. I plan to go there after six months in Northern Ireland, if I manage to get strong again."*

Many guests, particularly from regions where the most destruction had occurred, were considering staying in Northern Ireland or moving somewhere else in Europe. Some mentioned speaking with their family in Ukraine who advised them that they should stay in Northern Ireland as it is not safe to return.

*"We have been thinking a lot about this, we are planning to have family, to have children. We are from Mariupol. We lived through terrible things. We lost a flat and second flat. We don't want to go back and expect that in ten years' time there might be another invasion. So we are thinking of staying here and find a job. We both work in IT so we are planning start our life here from now. Or alternatively go to other countries."*

*"I would like to go home eventually but it is not safe."*

*"My husband is in the military and so he's telling me it's very dangerous and he's telling me to be strong and he's telling me to stay here. It's very tough."*

Some participants did indicate that they were becoming quite settled in Northern Ireland and felt that they were beginning to integrate successfully. One participant whose host family were from Derry indicated she was starting *"to feel like a Derry girl"* making reference to the TV show.

### What will support you to live in Northern Ireland?

The most pressing concern for participants was being able to find suitable accommodation that they could afford to live in. This was linked with the overall rising cost of living and the fact that

many of them were single income families (as partners remained in Ukraine). Concerns were also raised regarding the ability to get a good Credit Score to secure private rented accommodation as they would not be living and working here long enough.

*“The most challenging time will be after six months, we will have to relocate again. I don’t know situation with renting here. What is it like here?”*

Those who wanted to stay and work voiced concerns about having their qualifications recognised and finding suitable employment.

*“I would really like to get a job. I am an accountant and I’d like to get my qualifications recognised in the UK”.*

A further key issue is the need for English Language classes. Many participants thought that this was crucial to their ability to settle and also to get work.

*“I think it’s very important to get an English course and find a job and work.”*

*“Back home I was working as a lecturer in special needs education. Here I was told that once I get my English, I will be able to find work here.”*

*“There is an issue of (English) language and learning. I know French but I don’t know English. I would like to attend English classes.”*

*“I think the most important thing for me would be to get English courses that would be very critical.”*

## 2.5 Suggestions from Guest Group

Participants were asked to provide suggestions for how guests arriving in Northern Ireland could be better supported together with suggestions as to how host families might be better supported. These **16 suggestions** are listed below:

Theme	Suggestions
Arrival	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Customer Journey Map/ Flow chart outlining the key stages in the process of accessing necessary services in Northern Ireland. <i>“I feel as all the (government) services here are not connected and they ask the same questions and offer similar services it’s very confusing.”</i></li> <li>2. Provision of a basic care package on arrival for food staples, toiletries and cleaning products.</li> <li>3. Re-visit written translations of Government documents. Participants discussed that the current translation contained many ‘legal’ and ‘jargon’ words that few non legal professionals would understand. <i>“It is a very bad translation...it is written in legal language.”</i></li> </ol>
Settling In / Integrating	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. English language classes set up on arrival</li> </ol>

Theme	Suggestions
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. Support in getting Ukrainian qualifications recognised to allow for work in their own profession</li> <li>6. School places more readily available</li> <li>7. Raise awareness of the role that the Red Cross can offer to support with mental health and other support for guests <i>"I really appreciate the Red Cross and would recommend anybody contact them."</i></li> <li>8. One participant arrived on the Jubilee Weekend and no services were available – offer out of hours support.</li> <li>9. Availability of translated Bank Application forms.</li> <li>10. Impact of having Russian accents / translators in Assistance Centres.</li> </ul>
Meeting other Ukrainians for support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>11. Informal area for meeting with other Ukrainians living in Northern Ireland.</li> <li>12. Independent phone line for Ukrainians to phone in order to keep some privacy with hosts.</li> <li>13. Ukrainians who have been living in Northern Ireland for a while being available to talk about what life is like and key differences.</li> <li>14. A representative from the Ukrainian Embassy to travel to Northern Ireland to support guests.</li> </ul>
Support for the future	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>15. Clarification on travel arrangements for enabling other members of their family to join them in Northern Ireland.</li> <li>16. More information on applying for Social Housing.</li> </ul>

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## 3. FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS - HOSTS

### 3.1 Introduction

The host focus group findings are structured as follows:



### 3.2 Pre-arrival

**Key finding:** Participants indicated that all travel arrangements had been made online and some hosts felt vulnerable that they had broken the law in assisting guests to travel. During this stage participants indicated that they were able to access limited support from official sources.

#### Communication / Sources of Information / Meeting Hosts

Many of the participants in the host groups indicated that they had registered on the Government website whenever the initial call for host families was issued in March. However, none of the participants had received a response and instead decided to establish contact with Ukrainian families in need through a range of online sources (mostly Facebook) or through friends. One participant was part of a Christian organisation that had been working in Ukraine for 20 years. That organisation has developed its own website to help people leaving Ukraine to find a host family in Northern Ireland (“Starfish”).

*“We found our guest via Facebook, we had no input from government and it seems to be a very poorly run scheme”.*

*“We didn’t get any contact from the government. We signed up with the UK government scheme but if you do nothing else after that no one will ever be in contact with you.”*

Participants discussed having to search through a range of online sites and contacts in order to ensure they were getting correct information in order to identify a match and many stated that this was challenging.

*“You cannot believe what’s on Facebook, there are lots of mixed messages.”*

After a potential match was identified host participants discussed the process of trying to build rapport in order to ensure that applicants were genuine, as well as persuading potential guests that they were genuine. For many participants this process was done in isolation from outside support.

*“At the very start, it was done in vacuum. It leaves you feeling exposed...and not sure if it’s done right”*



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### Concern surrounding arrangements for travel

Participants indicated that the guests they were hosting experienced significant delays in visa processing times and visas for different family members came at different times. Participants discussed how the effect of delay and uncertainty on people fleeing from a war zone, added to the stress for both guests and their hosts.

*“There is a lot of conflicting information out there it was very distressing for us but the effect of the delay on the people coming was far more distressing.”*

Some participants indicated that they had been asked by their guests to provide a lot of personal information in order that their visa application could be processed e.g. photo of passport and home address.

*“But I didn’t want to give them our full address; it’s still a matter of trust.”*

As a result of delays in visa processing, some hosts discussed that they arranged for their guests to come in through the Republic of Ireland (Dublin Airport, Shannon and Rosslare) due to the different entry requirements.

*“We read online that refugees who cross the Irish border will be treated sympathetically that they (the authorities) were turning a blind eye over people arriving in Northern Ireland from Dublin”*

Nevertheless, some hosts were worried about breaking the law, and were very uncomfortable about the process.

*“I struggled definitely with the concept of breaking the law...this all being somewhat illegal.”*

*“I am law abiding but we actually felt as though we had to break the law to get our guest in.”*

One host sought advice from a friend in the legal profession in Northern Ireland who advised them not to go to Dublin to pick up their guests.

*“I was advised that I would could be prosecuted for trafficking and facilitating illegal entry into the UK.”*

However, this host and others recognised the potential dangers associated with women and children arriving into Dublin airport alone *“in case they become in danger of being trafficked...it is a very difficult situation.”*

### Pre arrival checks

Hosts in the groups discussed their concerns for guests arriving in Northern Ireland who were going to homes where there had been no background checks undertaken. For many in the groups Access NI checks and home visits carried out by Barnardos and Extern happened weeks after the guests arrived, particularly for the hosts whose guests arrived in April.

Several hosts whose guests came more recently (June 2022) mentioned that pre-arrival checks have improved over time.

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*“Prior to anyone arriving someone came from Barnardos and did a lot of surveys with us to see whether our house was suitable and obviously to get background information about us.”*

However, in both groups it was discussed how visits from either Barnardos and / or Extern had caused the guests a great degree of concern as they thought that something was wrong and were worried that they would be deported. Hosts found it very difficult to explain the purpose of the visit to their guests and suggested a short leaflet be produced in Ukrainian to provide an explanation and reassurance.

*“We had to try and explain to the guests why Barnardos were coming...we said it’s a check that we were looking after you...that our house is clean and our guest immediately said we’ll clean now...I was no that’s not what I meant!”*

*“We got notice of our second visit (from Barnardos)...it is an issue of concern...they are so alert to danger and risk.”*

### 3.3 Arrival

**Key finding:** Hosts felt that they had been left to manage the arrival process with limited support, and no one in the groups had received any financial support. Many did find the assistance centres to be beneficial and would welcome more access to this support. Hosts described wide variation in ease with which their guest gained access to local services.

#### Hosts left to manage alone (without official support)

Hosts described the immediate needs of their guests and these were varied and often challenging. A key theme to emerge was that hosts felt they were solely responsible for providing help to the guests without any formal support in place.

*“We are halfway through our six months we have not had one communication from the government...no communication from Northern Ireland Executive.”*

*“The focus is getting people over, but for us we are like guinea pigs...no help...sort it yourself.”*

A further area of concern is the fact that many hosts were financially responsible for guests and felt that delays with monthly payments has been a huge burden on host families. None of the participants in the groups had received any financial support to date.

Hosts also commented that whilst many of the guests had received the £200 payment this had been spent very quickly to purchase necessities, as many had left home with only one suitcase. Many participants also indicated that guests had received a lot of support from the local communities and churches in providing food and clothes etc.

*“The church has been fantastic in organising get togethers, toys and clothes drops.”*

However ultimately many participants indicated that the day to day costs had to be met by the host. Whilst no one in the group stated that they were currently in financial difficulty some anticipated that they might be and others indicated that they knew families who would have been willing to host a family but could not afford to.

*“If somebody doesn’t have a cushion they are feeding a family...it is a big burden.”*

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Further examples of this involved assisting the guests with opening bank accounts, applying for benefits, and giving them lifts, for which some needed to take days off work to facilitate.

*“When you are in welcome centre, it was great...but there’s no point of contact to follow up...I had to take day off work to go back...especially with law centre, we have to go back to the centre...you can’t get through on the phone”*

A further area where hosts felt they had to cope unsupported was in helping their guests to deal with the mental health trauma associated with their current situation. Many discussed that it would be important that this support was available immediately upon arrival.

*“I am ill equipped to support my guests...she’s a forty year old woman who just bursts into tears with no apparent reason...there should be counselling available.”*

### Assistance Centres

Many of the hosts discussed attending the Assistance Centres with their guests and found that this was a very useful source of information. There were suggestions that these should be opened for longer and that there should be centres opened in more locations however, it was generally agreed that they were a useful source of information for both host and guest.

One participant stated that they went to their local centre prior to the guest arriving and found this was very helpful and enabled them to prepare more easily.

There was also a discussion that some of the translation services being used in the centres were not accurate and some translators were Russian or had strong Russian accents. Some of the government documents that had been translated to Ukrainian had used very formal legal language that their guest had found hard to understand.

*“They said it was like formal legalese language...hard to understand...could it be simplified?”*

### Lack of consistency in ease of access to services for guests

Hosts described their experiences of getting their guests access to services such as banking, schools, GPs and public transport. For each of the services listed there were examples where it was very accessible and straightforward but also examples of the process being unnecessarily complicated and in some cases simply not available in their area.

*“We had a choice of school (in Ballymena) they’re very accommodating...the schools provided the uniform, books, bags - everything.”*

*“There’s no places in Lisburn and Belfast. It’s stressful for the Ukrainian family...not fair on the host family if they have to have the people in the house and try to organise schools for them...a lot of effort.”*

*“They had an account with an online bank after 15 minutes.”*

*“We had so much trouble getting the (Bank) account set up.”*

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There was also variation in access to free public transport. Some participants described that their guests could access this for one or two weeks, whilst others didn't get access to any free transport. Some in the group said their guests were still able to access free public transport by showing their passport. One participant had trouble accessing an "Over 60s" Bus Pass for her guest as the criteria stipulated the photo had to be counter signed by a non relative that had been known to them for over two years which in current circumstances would not be possible for any Ukrainian in Northern Ireland.

One participant discussed how their guest was in need of an urgent operation but the waiting list here was so long they were considering moving elsewhere or returning to Ukraine to help their child. Many other participants indicated that their guests had a positive experience with GPs and the NHS. Registration with a dental practice however posed a challenge for many participants.

One participant suggested that some of the confusion in accessing banks was due to the guests wanting to use the English spelling of their name to 'fit in'; however, their official documents specified the Ukraine spelling and so did not match.

*"My family uses an English name and also a Ukrainian name...there was confusion...sometimes it's difficult to explain to them to use one name."*

### 3.4 Future

**Key finding:** Participants were concerned that an immediate plan should be developed to assist guests transition to independent living. Further clarity was required for guest's families in order that those living here can plan for the future. Going forward it was also discussed that any Ukrainians arriving in Northern Ireland would benefit from immediate access to English language classes (if required) as well as mental health support services.

#### Support to transition to independent living

Some participants stated that as their guest had only recently arrived, they had not given any thought about future arrangements. However, some participants voiced concerns about their guests transitioning into more independent living arrangements. This was particularly in terms of getting housing and securing employment. Many indicated that as the guests have plans to stay in Northern Ireland for more than six months, there should be an immediate support offered to them especially regarding securing housing when current arrangements come to an end. Concerns were raised about the availability as well as the affordability of housing for the guests in the future.

*"Our family is keen to be independent. Money is part of it and the feeling that she is a financial burden. I don't know how feasible it is for a single woman to take on a house...cost of living."*

Whilst many participants indicated that they would be happy to host their guest for longer than six months this was not the case for some who appeared to be struggling with the current arrangements.

*"I wouldn't know where to start with getting them housing."*

*"It is very unsettling for my guests too. We are not going to kick them out."*

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*“In terms of next step, we are half way through that, what happens after six months. We are very rural. They may want to move to a bigger town with access to transport. But we haven’t had communication from Housing Executive.”*

*“Can guests move from one host to another?”*

#### Clarity on guest’s family arrangements

Some hosts also raised the issue of what would happen after three years. They stated that their guests were concerned about the future and also what the plans would be for allowing their family to join them in Northern Ireland. It was discussed that if this could be clarified then the guests would find it easier to plan.

*“My family came from Mariupol. They already decided to leave Ukraine on permanent basis. They are already worried about three years’ time. But I know that three years is a long time but I’d love to know that government is already planning.”*

*“How do husbands come here to join them? Is there a plan for this? They (Ukrainian guests) need to know to plan.”*

#### Access to English language and mental health support services

The provision of English Language classes was discussed as a key aspect of assisting guests in the immediate future. Participants thought that these should be available upon arrival into the country.

Hosts highlighted a need for mental health services for their guests to help them cope with the trauma of what they had been through. It was discussed that this service should be offered to all guests on arrival.

#### Evidence of decline in community support

Whilst participants indicated that they had been receiving help from church groups and neighbours, a number of comments were made regarding the slight, but noticeable drop in support. Participants linked this to the fact that the war in Ukraine was no longer the ‘top news item’ and so was not foremost in people’s minds. There was also the general perception that people were struggling financially themselves and therefore less able to offer support. Therefore it was felt that any future hosts might not receive this extra support.

*“Good will is starting to run out.”*

*“Costs of living are rising...there’s no payment, no certainty. What happens next?”*

### **3.5 Other**

Many described hosting as being a very positive experience and felt a sense of personal fulfilment. Despite the difficulties that they had encountered, many thought it was a worthwhile undertaking and an effective way of helping guests integrate in Northern Ireland.

*“I’d do it again in a heart-beat despite frustration with the process.”*

*“This is most effective model to help people integrate to the host society...this will pay dividends for everyone in the long term.”*

*“Emotional levels have been sky high. I am so happy I took this on. They have done me a favour by being here.”*

*“Everything we discuss is petty when you think of the bigger picture.”*

### 3.6 Suggestions from Host Group

Participants were asked to provide suggestions on how guests arriving in Northern Ireland could be better supported together with suggestions as to how host families might be better supported. These **13 suggestions** are listed below:

Theme	Suggestions
Arrival	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Customer Journey Map/ Flow chart for both Guests and Hosts <i>“The one thing that was missing...people need to be advised this is where the process starts, so we are not going around in circles.”</i> <i>“There needs to be a flow chart, a guide for dummies.”</i> <i>“A crib sheet...list of tasks that need to be completed.”</i></li> <li>2. Financial assistance set up from the beginning.</li> <li>3. More support for hosts at every stage of the process - dedicated helpline for both hosts and guests – participant gave example of phoning the NI Direct number and the member of staff they spoke to (whilst really lovely) was not aware that that number was being given as a support line for queries.</li> <li>4. English classes – available on arrival.</li> <li>5. Single point of contact “case Worker” would be helpful.</li> <li>6. Access to a support group for mental health.</li> </ol>
Settling In / Integrating	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. Provide a leaflet in Ukrainian to explain the purpose of the background check visits from Barnardos and Extern.</li> <li>8. More assistance centres (participants felt that the north and western areas of NI are ‘badly serviced’).</li> <li>9. Open Assistance Centres for longer as many hosts work full time and they are responsible for getting guests to the centres.</li> <li>10. Opportunities for guests to meet informally facilitated by Ukrainians who have been living here for a while.</li> <li>11. Plan for children to have school places.</li> </ol>
Support for the future	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>12. Immediate future plan clarification especially around housing.</li> <li>13. Provide details of plans to allow family members to come to Northern Ireland.</li> </ol>

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## 4. CONCLUSIONS

The Research Team would like to thank and acknowledge the 25 people (11 guests and 14 hosts) who provided some excellent insights into the guest and host experience based on people re-settling from the Ukraine.

The research has identified the following:

- 16 suggestions from Guest Focus Groups across 4 themes; and
- 13 suggestions from Host Focus Groups across 3 themes.

To note, there is some overlap in the suggestions and themes. A customer / host journey map would be a key initial output / suggestion. The research also provided some qualitative insights which can help inform future initiatives.

Based on discussions with TEO, a number of suggestions are already being taken forward and implemented which will support both guests and hosts.

## APPENDIX I: DETAILS OF GROUP PARTICIPANTS

### Guest Focus Group Participants

Characteristic		Number of Participants*
Gender	Male	2
	Female	9
Location	Urban**	4
	Rural	7
Composition of party that travelled	Single Adult	2
	More than one adult (no children)	1
	Adult/s and child/children under 16	8

\*Total number of participants N=11

\*\*Urban defined as large towns or cities

### Host Focus Group Participants

Characteristic		Number of Participants*
Gender	Male	8
	Female	6
Location	Urban**	6
	Rural	8
Composition of party that they are hosting	Single Adult	4
	More than one adult (no children)	1
	Adult/s and child/children under 16	9

\*Total number of participants N=14

\*\*Urban defined as large towns or cities



# APPENDIX 2: DISCUSSION GUIDES USED IN DATA COLLECTION

## Discussion Guide - Focus Groups Guests

### DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR GUESTS

Topic	Time	Description
<b>Introduction</b>	5 Mins	<p>Good morning / afternoon and welcome. I would first like to thank you for agreeing to participate today. Our team have been asked to undertake Focus Groups with a selection of people / guests who have arrived in Northern Ireland.</p> <p><b>Why we're here today</b></p> <p>In this group today I would like to find out about your experience of coming to Northern Ireland and discuss how you have found living here.</p> <p>We would like to know what you think is good about your experience so far and what you think might be improved.</p> <p>This will help us understand whether the arrangements that have been put in place are working and allow us to better support anyone else who travels to Northern Ireland.</p> <p>Everything you say today is anonymous and confidential so please speak freely.</p>
<b>1.1 Consent and structure</b>	5 mins	<p><b><u>Recruiter to manage consent prior to groups and Privacy Notice distributed to participants beforehand to enable them to understand how information will be processed.</u></b></p> <p>I will now outline how the focus group will be structured.</p> <p>I will introduce an area for discussion and ask you to take turns to respond. You do not have to give your opinion but the more information you are able to give us the better we understand your experiences to date and can review the process.</p> <p>I would be very grateful if you can please be open and honest. There are no right/wrong answers and we would ask that you respect others' opinions.</p> <p>We are not trying to get everyone to agree – differences of opinion are likely within the group. We want to hear your ideas, experiences and opinions, which are all valuable.</p> <p>It is important that don't talk over each other letting one person finish their point before you speak.</p> <p>We will be taking notes of the responses but will not record any name or identifying information. All our findings will be kept in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulations. I would be grateful if you could not discuss what people in the group have said with others outside of this (virtual) room.</p> <p>We are conducting two groups with recent arrivals / guests. We are also holding 2 groups with a selection of hosts. We will pull out the key themes to emerge into a report</p> <p>Before we start I would like to confirm that we will finish by xx at the latest. I would be grateful if you could put phones on silent but I understand that might need to take a call and if this happens can you put your microphone on 'silent' please whilst you do so.</p>

Topic	Time	Description
<b>1.2</b> <b>Explanation of the session format</b>	10 Mins	<p><b>INTRODUCTIONS</b></p> <p>The Senior Manager of the Refugee Operational Team has prepared a short video of thanks and I will play this now before we start</p> <p>We will be asking about your experiences since starting your journey to Northern Ireland in four parts: pre arrival; arrival; initial hosting; and the future. It's important to bear in mind that both the Homes for Ukraine and the Family Host Scheme are UK wide schemes.</p> <p>(Therefore, although we are interested in hearing about all of your experiences, there may be elements which NI have little influence on this is operated.)</p> <p>Before we start I would be very grateful if you could introduce yourself and give the group a little bit of background information on where you are living, what scheme you arrived under, how long you have been here and some details about number and ages of family members who are with you. I will start by introducing myself</p>
<b>Pre arrival Q1</b>	15 mins	<p><b>Thinking back to when you were preparing for your journey to Northern Ireland:</b></p> <p>A: Where did you get information and support on what you needed to do in preparation for your travel?</p> <p>B: How do you think that those preparing to journey could be better supported prior to travelling?</p> <p>C: What information or support did you need that you were not able to find? (Were you able to find the information or support that you needed?) If not, then what media would be the best: internet, phone etc.?</p> <p>D: Tell me a little about contact, if any, with your host family before you travelled?</p>
<b>2. Arrival into Northern Ireland</b>	20 Mins	<p><b>Thinking back to when you arrived into Northern Ireland</b></p> <p>A: Where did you get information and support on what you needed to do?</p> <p>B: Tell me a little about contact with your initial face to face introduction / meeting with your host family?</p> <p>C: How do you think that those arriving in Northern Ireland could be better supported?</p> <p>D: What information or support did you need that you were not able to find? (Were you able to find the information or support that you needed?)</p>
<b>3. Initial Hosting</b>	30 mins	<p><b>Tell me about your experiences of life in NI?</b></p> <p><b>Prompts</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tell us about your experience been with public services like health, schools, the police and the welfare system</li> <li>• Tell us about your experience been of how the community / neighbourhood where you live had responded to Ukrainian people living there?</li> <li>• What are some of the key differences in how things are done in Northern Ireland compared to Ukraine?</li> </ul> <p>A. Tell me what you think can make the host-host relationship work for a 6 month period or beyond?</p> <p>B. Did you attend one of our Assistance Centres? If you did, please tell us about your experience there.</p> <p>C. Is there any information about life in Northern Ireland that you think would be useful for Ukrainians coming here?</p>

Topic	Time	Description
<b>4. Future</b>	30 mins	<p><b>What are your hopes for your future?</b></p> <p>A. Would you hope to stay in NI after your time with your current family finishes?</p> <p>B. Would you hope to return to the Ukraine or go elsewhere?</p> <p>C. If you stay in NI beyond the 6 month period what are you hopes for this?</p> <p>A: What, if any, challenges do you think you will face?</p> <p>B: How do you think you can best be supported in managing these challenges</p> <p><b>Prompts</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hopes for your Children? School?</li> <li>• Hope for your housing options?</li> <li>• Do you have any concerns about housing? (Affordability)</li> <li>• Hope for work opportunities and what would help you?</li> <li>• Have you any concerns about being accepted in the community / neighbourhood if you stay in Northern Ireland?</li> <li>• How would you like to get help and advice about planning for moving on from your host?</li> </ul> <p><b>Further prompts time permitting</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To attain a good level of English?</li> <li>• To have made good friends?</li> </ul>
<b>5. Final comments/ Close</b>	10 Mins	<p><b>A:</b> In a word or a few words how would you describe your experience in Northern Ireland to date</p> <p><b>B:</b> Is there anything you think we haven't covered that would important for us to know?</p> <p><b>THANKS AND GOODBYE</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thank you for giving us your time today. The information you have provided has been really important and useful and we will use the information you have told us to help develop processes for future arrivals.</li> <li>• Reminder of confidentiality.</li> </ul>

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR HOSTS

Topic	Time	Description
<b>Introduction</b>	5 Mins	<p>Good morning / afternoon and welcome. I would first like to thank you for agreeing to participate today. I work for The Northern Ireland Civil Service. Our team have been asked to undertake Focus Groups with a selection of hosts who have hosted people / guests that have arrived in Northern Ireland.</p> <p><b>Why we're here today</b></p> <p>We would like to talk to you today about your experiences and reflections of hosting guests under the Homes for Ukraine or Family Sponsorship schemes.</p> <p>We would like to know what you think is good about your experience so far and what you think might be improved. This will help us understand whether the arrangements that have been put in place are working and allow us to better support hosts and guests into the next stage of the integration journey Everything you say today is anonymous and confidential so please speak freely.</p>
<b>1.1 Consent and structure</b>	5 mins	<p>I will now outline how the focus group will be structured.</p> <p>I will introduce an area for discussion and ask you to takes turns to respond. You do not have to give your opinion but the more information you are able to give us the better we understand your experiences to date and can review the process.</p> <p>I would be very grateful if you can please be open and honest. There are no right/wrong answers and we would ask that you respect others' opinions. We are not trying to get everyone to agree – differences of opinion are likely within the group. We want to hear your ideas, experiences and opinions, which are all valuable.</p> <p>It is important that don't talk over each other letting one person finish their point before you speak.</p> <p>We will be taking notes of the responses but will not record any name or identifying information. All our findings will be will be kept in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulations. I would be grateful if you could not discuss what people in the group have said with others outside of this (virtual) room.</p> <p>We are conducting two groups with recent arrivals / guests. We are also holding 2 groups with a selection of hosts. We will pull out the key themes to emerge into a report</p> <p>Before we start I would like to confirm that we will finish by xx at the latest. I would be grateful if you could put phones on silent but I understand that might need to take a call and if this happens can you put your microphone on 'silent' please whilst you do so.</p> <p><b>Any questions?</b></p>
<b>1.2 Explanation of session format</b>	10 Mins	<p><b>INTRODUCTIONS</b></p> <p>The Senior Manager of the Refugee Operational Team has prepared a short video of thanks and I will play this now before we start</p> <p>We will be looking at your experiences of hosting a guest in three sections: preparation for your guest's arrival; the arrival and initial days of hosting; supporting guests to move on to the next stage of their integration journey.</p> <p>It's important to bear in mind that both the Homes for Ukraine and the Family Sponsor Scheme are UK wide schemes.</p>

Topic	Time	Description
		<p>(Therefore, although we are interested in hearing about all of your experiences, there may be elements which NI have little influence on)</p> <p>Before we start I would be very grateful if you could introduce yourself and give the group a little bit of background information on where you are living, what scheme the guests arrived under, how long they have been hosting and some details about number and ages of the people who are currently with you. This will help us to put the comments made in context. I will start by introducing myself</p>
<b>2. Pre-Arrival</b>	15 Mins	<p><b>Thinking back to when you were preparing for the arrival of your Ukrainian guest(s)</b></p> <p>A: Where did you get information and support on what you needed to do in preparation for hosting a Ukrainian guest?</p> <p>B: Tell me a little about contact with your Ukrainian guest before they travelled?</p> <p>C: How do you think that new hosts could be better supported during this stage?</p> <p>D: What information or support did you need or want at that time that you were not able to find? (Were you able to find the information or support that you needed?)</p> <p>E. Looking back, is there anything that you know now that you wish you had known before your Ukrainian guest arrived?</p> <p>F: It is our understanding the sources of information available to hosts have been developed and expanded. Is this something you are aware of or have a view on?</p>
<b>3. Arrival and initial hosting period</b>	30 Mins	<p><b>Thinking back to when your guests arrived:</b></p> <p>A: Do you think that you knew enough about what hosting a Ukrainian guest would involve?</p> <p>B: Where did you get information and support on what you needed to do?</p> <p>C: Tell me a little about contact with your initial face to face introduction / meeting with your guest?</p> <p>D: How do you think that those hosting a new arrival in Northern Ireland could be better supported during the initial period?</p> <p>E: What kind of ongoing support for hosts would be helpful while your Ukrainian guest is with you?</p> <p>F: What information or support did you need that you were not able to find? (Were you able to find the information or support that you needed?)</p> <p>G: How would you like to get information (e.g., documents, websites, videos, telephone helplines, meetings)?</p> <p>H: Did you attend one of our Assistance Centres? If you did, please tell us about your experience there.</p>
<b>4. Supporting guests to transition out of host arrangements</b>	20 Mins	<p><b>Thinking ahead to when your guests move on, for example into a longer term housing solution:</b></p> <p>A: What challenges do you think they will face?</p> <p>B: How do you think they can best be supported in managing these challenges?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What information or support will be useful for your Ukrainian guests?</li> </ul> <p>C: What, if any, do you see as the role of the host?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What information or support will be useful for you?</li> </ul>

Topic	Time	Description
		D. Would you consider taking on another family through the sponsorship scheme? Please expand
<b>5 Final comments, thanks and close</b>	10 Mins	<p>In a word or a few words how would you describe your experience of being a host / sponsor for Ukrainian guests in Northern Ireland to date.</p> <p>Is there anything you think we haven't covered that would important for us to know?</p> <p><b>THANKS AND GOODBYE</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thank you for giving us your time today. The information you have provided has been really important and useful and we will use the information you have told us to help develop processes for future arrivals.</li> <li>• Reminder of confidentiality.</li> </ul>



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