

Briefing for the Senedd Local Government and Housing Committee

Subject: The Hosting Schem 'Homes for Ukraine'

Written by: Bonnie Williams, Director, Housing Justice Cymru

Date: 8 April 2022

Context: The role and involvement of Housing Justice Cymru

[Housing Justice Cymru](#) is a national homelessness and housing need charity, working across England and Wales. In Wales we run projects which help to end homelessness at an individual level by working with those in crisis and at a local and national level by increasing the supply of truly affordable homes. Our main three workstreams are:

1. **Citadel** A successful, volunteer-led, rapid rehousing and tenancy sustainment project, which uses trained volunteers to support people experiencing homelessness to find and sustain a home.
2. **Faith in Affordable Housing** We work with churches and chapels across Wales to help them to identify redundant land and buildings for the development of affordable homes. We broker sales between all denominations and suitable housing associations.
3. **Seeking Sanctuary** We run an all Wales collaborative project to develop accommodation solutions for people seeking sanctuary in Wales. We receive funding from Comic Relief and Welsh Government for this work. We use some of this money to grant fund eight other organisations.

Background: Hosting in Wales

Hosting has been running in Wales for many years. As immigration as a policy area is retained by Central Government, there is a lack of funding available and it has largely been achieved through informal, voluntary efforts.

However, in January 2019 the Welsh Government committed to becoming a Nation of Sanctuary. This required us all to better understand the accommodation needs of asylum seekers and refugees in Wales and to identify ways in which we could increase the provision of accommodation. Consequently, Welsh Government commissioned a feasibility study on '[Providing Accommodation for Refused Asylum Seekers in Wales](#)' published in April 2020.

The report recommended that Housing Justice Cymru took the lead in building on existing hosting networks and expanding hosting into other areas in Wales, with a focus on the four dispersal areas of Cardiff, Newport, Swansea and Wrexham.

As a result we started our work, leading the sector in Wales, to develop a comprehensive pathway of accommodation provisions, with the main focus being hosting. In addition to the understanding and expertise we have of this policy area in Wales at both an operational and strategic level, we also have the corporate knowledge of hosting from our long standing, successful hosting project in London.

Hosting, whereby a private household welcomes another individual or family who are seeking sanctuary to reside at their home address, is a complex situation. There are many factors which need to be considered before a placement should take place.

Part of the work we already do for Welsh Government, commissioned and funded by the Equalities Division, is to improve the standards, particularly in relation to safeguarding, of hosting in Wales. Therefore, one of the challenges to consider with the Homes for Ukraine scheme is the standards which we will expect for the hosting placements. Particularly, how we balance the need of getting people into hosting places quickly, versus requiring the same level of safeguarding we would with other hosting schemes running in parallel in Wales.

We are currently using funding received from Welsh Government to set the standards for hosting in Wales (outside of the Homes for Ukraine scheme). Therefore, we are working to embed minimum standards to ensure hosting placements remain safe for everyone involved.

If appropriate, we would attend a committee session to provide evidence and answer any further questions the committee may have.

Considerations: For the design and delivery of the Homes for Ukraine Scheme in Wales

A key requirement is a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check for each adult in the hosting household. It is envisaged that the Homes for Ukraine scheme will require hosts/sponsors to undertake a DBS check. However, the current legislation for DBS checks does not recognise the vulnerability of people fleeing war. People seeking asylum are often traumatised from the conflict they have experienced and from their journeys to the UK. Furthermore, they often arrive without family or a support network, without possessions or money, without employment or access to benefits (at least not immediately) and without a home.

They will be immersed into a different culture and possibly unable to communicate in English. There is a risk of destitution and susceptibility to sexual exploitation, human trafficking and modern-day slavery. Some of the registrations of interest we have received from prospective hosts clearly demonstrate the ill intentions of some people and the highly unsuitable and potentially very damaging hosting placement being offered.

Despite this clear vulnerability, the current DBS legislation does not recognise these individuals as vulnerable or the role of the host as a 'Home Based Role'. Therefore, we would recommend close monitoring of how the safety checks associated with this scheme are undertaken. Particularly given the potential role of Local Authorities (LAs) to roll out the hosting scheme in their areas. This could be more challenging for some local authorities than others. For example, the eleven LAs with housing stock may have the skills and resources to undertake the required safety checks but this may be much more challenging for those who no longer own their housing stock.

Further considerations which should be undertaken, to ensure the safety and success of hosting placements, include:

- A risk assessment to ascertain if the person offering to host is appropriate to do so. This includes a home visit by an experienced professional as an essential safety measure. This is recognised by the existing hosting sector as the most vital step in assuring the safety of a placement.
- Property safety measure checks such as a gas safety certificate, a carbon monoxide monitor, a smoke alarm and consideration of fire exits.
- The location of the house and accessibility of local services.

- The potential for overcrowding.
- Acceptable shared facilities.
- Security of the property.

In order to support the placement and give it the best chance of success, a contract between the two parties should be drawn up to outline expectations and 'house rules'.

Where effective planning has not been carried out, placements can break down. Even with these measures in place, there are sometimes changes in circumstances which lead to the breakdown of a placement. It is vital that the Homes for Ukraine scheme includes emergency options for those whose placement breaks down unexpectedly, for example through dispute, medical emergency or the needs of the host's wider family. Respite hosting by way of a pool of short-term placements could play a role in shoring up longer term placements by providing breaks. Respite hosting can be a contingency plan but can also be an in-built part of planning for a resilient placement.

A fundamental stage of the process of becoming a host is enabling people to understand what hosting will entail, and the impact a six-month placement might have on the household. We have been running Introduction to Hosting talks which are a vital opportunity for people to reflect on whether it is suitable and workable for them, thus reducing the number of people who will go through the process outlined above and then drop out of the scheme or begin a placement which may not be sustainable.

We welcome the Welsh Government's approach to balancing speed and caution by developing Welcome Centres. Welcome Centres will provide time and space for safety measures to be put in place before people go into their hosting placements. We recognise that Welsh Government intend for Ukrainians to move through the Welcome Centres quickly. However, it is worth noting that there remains a significant number of refugee families from the Afghanistan crisis residing in hotels in Cardiff because they have not yet been housed. The two situations are different, but this is nonetheless an example of an aspiration which has been difficult to achieve.

We welcome the fact that Homes for Ukraine has brought hosting to the attention of the public and to statutory agencies. We expect that some of the precedents being set to facilitate the placements will be put in place also for those hosts who welcome people seeking sanctuary from other countries. For example, a single person hosting a Ukrainian person through Homes for Ukraine will receive £350 each month and not lose their single person's council tax discount. We would welcome clarification that single person's council tax discounts will not be affected by hosting people fleeing war or persecution from other countries.

While both Central Government and Welsh Government are having to respond to this crisis with rapid solutions, we would urge consideration of the legislation in Wales which requires us to have one eye on the future impact of the decisions we are making. The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act, outlines that decisions by Welsh Government should be made with the five ways of working and the future prosperity of Wales at their centre. Therefore, we recommend that while setting up this programme and delivering it across Wales, proper consideration is given to the ways in which it might impact the long-term plans for hosting as a key part of the Nation of Sanctuary ambition.

Potential areas for scrutiny: Local Authorities responses to hosting Ukrainian refugees and their role in the Wales Super Sponsor Scheme

- While we need to provide housing at pace to accommodate refugees fleeing Ukraine, we need to ensure we maintain the safety standards we would expect of housing in Wales. Therefore, what measures have Local Authorities taken to ensure the safety of the hosts, the home address and the people being hosted.

Under this question we would want to ensure the safety checks referred to above, such as DBS checks for all adults of 18 and over, any existing links to social services, gas safety certificate, carbon monoxide detector etc.

- It is vital for Local Authorities to work with existing, frontline organisations to make this scheme work. Can they demonstrate how they are using the experience and resources of local, community based organisations to enhance their response to the Homes for Ukraine Scheme.
- While hosting can be an enjoyable and beneficial experience for all involved, it can also be very challenging to share your home with a stranger. Consequently, some hosting placements breakdown. What contingency measures have been put in place to rehouse the people being hosted (sometimes immediately).
- Can the Local Authorities demonstrate effective collaboration between key departments, namely: education, social services and housing, to ensure their role in resettling Ukrainians is effective?
- It will be vital to ensure new refugees are able to integrate into the communities they are placed in. What steps have Local Authorities taken to ensure all children's education needs have been met and the wider language/translation needs of the individuals and families, are being addressed?
- How will we identify vulnerable people on their arrival and how will Local Authorities ensure they remain safe and well during their time in the UK?
- Fleeing war and resettling into a new country can be a traumatic experience. What considerations have been given to identifying any wellbeing concerns of those arriving?
- We recognise there is already significant pressure on our health services, particularly following the backlog of waiting lists, caused by Covid and the increased pressure on mental health services following the impact of the pandemic. Is there sufficient capacity within existing services to meet this new need? Alternatively, are there plans to increase resilience of existing services or develop new ones?
- Resettling people arriving on mass, from a different culture, with sometimes limited understanding of Welsh or English, could lead to some tensions within communities. What precautions have been made to ensure communities remain cohesive.
- While developing responses to the immediate situation, it will be important to ensure we are planning medium and long term strategies for accommodating and providing services for those unable to return to Ukraine, following the initial six months hosting period. What capacity do Local Authorities have to undertake this work and what plans are in place?
- How will the Super Sponsor Scheme and the role of various responsible bodies within it, be effectively monitored.