



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Thursday 24 March 2022

Session 6



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Thursday 24 March 2022

CONTENTS

	Col.
INTERESTS	1
DECISION ON TAKING BUSINESS IN PRIVATE	2
CRISIS IN UKRAINE	3

CONSTITUTION, EUROPE, EXTERNAL AFFAIRS AND CULTURE COMMITTEE
10th Meeting 2022, Session 6

CONVENER

*Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab)

*Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con)

*Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)

*Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Alison Byrne (Scottish Government)

Neil Gray (Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development and Minister with special responsibility for Refugees from Ukraine)

Marie Hayes (British Red Cross)

Graham O'Neill (Scottish Refugee Council)

John Primrose (Scottish Government)

Andy Sirel (JustRight Scotland)

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab) (Committee Substitute)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

James Johnston

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Thursday 24 March 2022

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:00]

Interests

The Convener (Clare Adamson): Good morning and welcome to the 10th meeting in 2022 of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee. I am delighted to be here this morning and I want to put on record my thanks to members, especially the deputy convener Donald Cameron, for their sterling efforts over the past few weeks during what has been a particularly busy time for our committee.

This morning, Dr Allan will be joining us remotely, and we have received apologies from Sarah Boyack. I welcome to the meeting Paul Sweeney, who is substituting for Ms Boyack, and invite him to make any relevant declarations of interest.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I have no relevant interests to declare.

Decision on Taking Business in Private

09:01

The Convener: Agenda item 1 is a decision on taking several items of business in private at future meetings. Do we agree to take in private our consideration of the draft report on the Scottish Government's resource spending review, the draft report on our inquiry into the Scottish Government's international work and the committee's work programme?

Members indicated agreement.

Crisis in Ukraine

09:01

The Convener: Item 2 is further consideration of the humanitarian impact of the crisis in Ukraine. We are joined this morning by an online panel of witnesses: Graham O'Neill, policy manager, Scottish Refugee Council; Andy Sirel, legal director and partner, JustRight Scotland; and Marie Hayes, Scotland director, British Red Cross. Thank you all for joining us. I am sure that you are all extremely busy at the moment, and we appreciate your taking the time to be with us this morning.

I have a niggling concern. As I am from North Lanarkshire, I have been involved in a couple of resettlement schemes for refugees, the most recent of which was the Syrian resettlement programme—indeed, I think that North Lanarkshire is regarded as a success in the area of refugee resettlement—and I know that, once they had come to Scotland, the refugees needed time and space as well as support in that process.

I am therefore somewhat troubled by some of what I have seen in the media coverage of the current crisis. Although we all welcome the Dnipro Kids children in particular, who are due to arrive in Scotland today, the fact is that these refugees need privacy and must be treated with dignity and respect. I have some concerns in that regard, but I would like to know our witnesses' thoughts on this matter. Mr O'Neill, would you like to start?

Graham O'Neill (Scottish Refugee Council): Good morning. Thank you for inviting the Scottish Refugee Council to give evidence, which I will do on its behalf.

I am glad that you have raised this issue, as it has been troubling us, too. There is always a balance to be struck when there is huge public interest in an issue, as reflected by the media and, to an extent, in social media. People want to understand what is happening and how it is affecting others—that is a very human reaction—but we are a bit concerned about, for example, the Dnipro Kids children. They are coming from an absolutely horrendous situation, and I cannot imagine what it must be like for them to have to deal with such disorder in their lives. They are children first and foremost and, as a result, there must be an extra layer of respect, particularly with regard to their privacy.

I would say that the level of media interest has been high, which is understandable; however, we must bear in mind that we are dealing with children who are coming from a difficult situation. As I understand it, they are travelling from Poland, where they have found relative safety, to another

safe country—Scotland—and are being accompanied by legal guardians. Now, we do not need images of those children on, say, social media; they must have their privacy respected and maintained. To be honest, I would say that they needed that before, but we are where we are. I therefore make a plea for people to empathise with those children and their legal guardians from now on and to let them settle with the privacy that they deserve and desperately need.

Andy Sirel (JustRight Scotland): Good morning and thank you for asking us to give evidence.

I agree with Graham O'Neill. When I reflect on my work with new clients—women and children who have just arrived in the United Kingdom after fleeing persecution—I can see that the initial point of entry is one of the most challenging points of their entire experience. It can be absolutely overwhelming; after all, we are talking about a new country and a new language, and they are already dealing with loss and grief. There are many confusing processes for them to navigate—housing, employment, benefits, education and social work support, too, if it is involved. To be honest, those processes are fairly confusing for those of us who live here, never mind for individuals who are coming from a place of conflict. Most important, such people are usually very worried about other family members.

We know that the majority of the Ukrainian nationals coming will be women and children—indeed, the Dnipro Kids is an entire cohort of unaccompanied children—so we need to be very careful. We need to think about safeguarding, which I hope I will be able to say a bit more about later. There are ethical considerations about publicity and the sharing of images and locations. Where in Scotland the children from Dnipro are coming to has been mentioned in the media, and as someone who works almost exclusively with children in care, I can say that it is not ethical to share the locations of specific, identifiable children in our care system. That is a safeguarding issue. We definitely need to think about those things, respect people's privacy and the experiences that they have gone through and let them get their feet on the ground.

The Convener: I invite Ms Byrne to speak.

Marie Hayes (British Red Cross): I am sorry, convener, but did you mean me? I am Marie Hayes from the Red Cross.

The Convener: I am extremely sorry—I was looking at the wrong panel list.

Marie Hayes: That is okay.

Thank you for the opportunity to give evidence. As part of the Red Cross movement, we are

involved at different stages in people's journeys with our fellow societies in the Ukraine, border agencies and so on. We have to recognise that arriving here is a stage in what is a traumatic journey for people. As you have pointed out, convener, we have experience of people coming and resettling here, and we need to learn lessons from that and find out what has worked. It would therefore be good if the committee had an opportunity to hear about that from people who have come through the system.

The role of the media presents a big challenge. It has worked well in raising the profile of the issue and helping raise funds, but the fact is that we have to treat people with the dignity that they deserve. What would we ourselves expect if we were coming here? People are very traumatised on arrival—we will come on to discuss the core elements for arrival and support—and we need to work with the media on respecting people's dignity and their need for a bit of space and support to deal with their trauma.

The Red Cross's emblem is often a reassuring, recognisable symbol of what people can expect. I know that Scotland wants to be humanitarian, but we need to work with the media and what that means for people's lives.

The Convener: My colleague Ms Minto will ask about the learning on the matter but, before that, I will bring in Dr Allan, who joins us online, for a supplementary question.

Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I have a question about some of the many complexities that people who come here will face with regard to information that they have or do not have.

The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has pointed out that people might have different immigration statuses depending on the different schemes under which they come into the UK. I do not know whether that perception is accurate but it cannot contribute to making life easy for people who come here. Does Andy Sirel or Graham O'Neill have anything to say about what could be done to simplify that situation or, at least, to provide a clearer flow of information to remove at least some of the worries that refugees might have?

Andy Sirel: It is critical that members of the committee and the Scottish Parliament understand the situation. It is tempting to say that the schemes are a reserved issue, but their impact is felt at the devolved level.

The schemes that have been put in place are long, bureaucratic and fundamentally insufficient. They are visa schemes, which is the first problem; they are not humanitarian schemes. As a result, people are required to make online applications,

submit evidence online and register biometric information, often before coming to the UK, and the application is then decided by a decision maker in the UK. That sort of response is insufficient.

The statistics that we have from 22 March show that, so far, just over 66,000 applications have been made and 15,800 visas granted under the two main schemes that we have. That amounts to 0.4 per cent of the people who have fled Ukraine, although we should also think about the diaspora beyond the borders of Ukraine that was already in existence prior to the conflict.

The visa schemes are insufficient from that perspective but the most important point is that the eligibility criteria are quite strict—in fact, I would say that they are very strict. They do not capture individuals who are already in the UK in precarious situations and are concerned about their family members, and they do not capture individuals who are already in the UK on visit visas. Those people cannot sponsor family members and cannot apply to either scheme.

Moreover, the schemes do not capture individuals attending Scottish universities on student visas, which are time limited and have restrictions on the right to work. We understand that those students are very concerned about their family members and their inability to sponsor them and, indeed, their own situation. Because there is no recourse to public funds with such visas, those individuals are burning through their own resource and will be at risk of destitution.

It is also important that we talk about seasonal workers, and I hope that we will do so in the meeting. I would just note that in 2021 67 per cent of all seasonal worker grants in the UK were for Ukrainians, which makes the scheme predominantly Ukrainian; however, seasonal workers are not eligible for either of the visa schemes that are in place, and they cannot sponsor family members from here. They are stuck on specific visa routes in the sense that they cannot change employer, which means that, if they wanted to send more money back to family members in Ukraine, they would not be able to do so. Again, they have no recourse to public funds, and there are all sorts of other problems, including accommodation and what they will do when their visas expire. These people are falling through the gaps, and they live here in Scotland.

09:15

The advice that requires to be given to these individuals is extremely complex. We are grateful to the Scottish Government for providing JustRight Scotland with funding to establish Ukraine advice Scotland, which is an advice service that we

operate for Ukrainian nationals in Scotland and those seeking safety in Scotland. Our experience of that project and our previous pro bono experience of another similar project tell us that the complexity of the advice that we need to give is challenging. For example, a seasonal worker on a farm in Scotland to whom we gave advice earlier this week required advice about six different and complex levels of immigration routes, about changing jobs, about applying to existing schemes but outwith their usual remit, about securing a lawyer, about obtaining evidence, about claiming asylum and so on. All of those issues are part of the picture.

If people cannot understand their status—or cannot access advice in order to address their status—they will fall into destitution. The services in Scotland need to be aware of that and need to understand how to react in order to deal with that. It would be preferable if they used their influence to advocate for those individuals to be brought inside the schemes because, if they do not do it, we will not be offering a thorough protection-based response to this conflict. Instead, we will be offering something that is piecemeal and complicated.

Dr Allan: Without putting words in people's mouths, I would suggest that it sounds as though the type of process associated with a work visa is being conflated with the type of process associated with a refugee programme in a war. My question, which is for Andy Sirel and Graham O'Neill, is: do you think that the process that we have is fitted to the current situation with refugees, or are we just retrofitting a process that has been designed for another purpose, such as providing visas for workers?

Andy Sirel: I would say the latter. The visa schemes are not designed and are not sufficient to deal with a refugee crisis. We are seeing that purely in the numbers, but the fact is that, when we look across Europe, we will see that we are the only country operating a visa scheme. Why is that?

In previous resettlement schemes, such as the Syrian scheme, which the convener mentioned earlier, and the Afghan scheme, for all its challenges, we offered protection-based routes in keeping with our international obligations, human rights law and the refugee convention. We are not doing the same for Ukraine. Some Ukrainians might not want refugee protection, because they hope that this dreadful war will end and they can go back to their families and homes as soon as they can. Fundamentally, though, we need to offer some level of flexibility instead of trying to cram a square peg into a triangular space and using these visa schemes inappropriately in order to meet need.

A few days ago, I advised an individual who was stranded in Ukraine that he needed to demonstrate residence in Ukraine on 1 January as well as a relationship with his mother. He had no birth certificate and, even if he had had one, it would have needed to have been translated. That is the level of detail that needs to be given to meet the eligibility criteria for a visa application. JustRight's position is that we should not have that visa application process; instead, we should be doing what our European colleagues are doing.

Graham O'Neill: Andy Sirel has covered all the points eloquently and comprehensively, but I would just stand back a bit and say that there has been a deliberate choice by the UK Government—the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister—to apply, predominantly to women and children, a deeply inappropriate visa-based approach to the largest and fastest-growing refugee crisis in Europe since the second world war. I am sad to say that it is no surprise to us that only 15,800 visas had been issued as of Tuesday this week through the Ukraine family scheme, and we do not know yet what the situation is with the homes for Ukraine scheme.

Perhaps I can use a football analogy. At the moment, there is a lot of pressure in Europe with regard to very vulnerable people. If we think of the UK Government as a football manager, we could argue that it is taking off its strongest and most experienced player—the Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees—by signalling in votes this week in the House of Commons on the Nationality and Borders Bill its intention, after 70 years, to sever the link with the refugee convention. Those provisions could be brought into effect in a couple of weeks' time. In its place, it is putting on perhaps one of its most inexperienced but potentially quite good players by asking very kind-hearted, well-intentioned people who are desperate to help in any way that they can to take on the responsibility of housing people at their most vulnerable, many of whom are likely to have complex psychological trauma, because of the repeated episodes of serious issues that they have had to deal with.

The name of that inexperienced player is, in essence, the homes for Ukraine scheme, in which people are being asked to do what the state should be doing. However, by putting through the Nationality and Borders Bill and withdrawing from the refugee convention, the state itself is withdrawing and is putting in its place visa-based schemes in the midst of the fastest-growing and largest refugee crisis in Europe. That is deliberate, inciteful and deeply worrying. If this sort of thing can be done when what is happening in Ukraine is taking place and with all the overwhelming public generosity and empathy that is evident in Britain and other countries towards people who have

been displaced from Ukraine and who are still in Ukraine, what does that portend for later on, when the Nationality and Borders Bill is enacted and its arrangements are put in place?

Your question is pertinent, because something deeper, more insidious and concerning is going on. As Andy Sirel has said, this is a visa-based response to a refugee crisis and as we are seeing in the horror stories of delay across Europe and elsewhere, it is traumatising people.

I will stop at that point. Perhaps we will get into a bit more detail about the supersponsor and some of the other issues, but something deeper and more insidious is going on. It is very concerning and it needs to be named, as I am trying to do. I hope that that will help increase the pressure for, among other things, visa requirements to be lifted off people's shoulders. At the moment, the UK Government is putting visas on to the shoulders of already desperately vulnerable people at their greatest time of need. To be frank, that is unacceptable, but it is what is happening.

The Convener: I will bring in Ms Hayes in a moment, but I know that Mr Ruskell has an interest in this area. Did you have a question, Mr Ruskell?

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I would like to ask a bit more about seasonal workers, as we have opened up that topic. Andy Sirel mentioned some of the visa restrictions on such workers, and Graham O'Neill sent a useful briefing to the committee. Could you say a bit more about the plight of seasonal workers, particularly when it comes to housing and the challenges around having no recourse to public funds?

Andy, you spoke about the support and advice that seasonal workers need. What should that look like on the ground? Are there concentrations of seasonal workers around Scotland? Is there a way that we can effectively deliver that support in areas where significant communities of Ukrainian seasonal workers work in the agricultural sector?

Do you think that there is any exploitation of those workers happening in Scotland? That might be a difficult question to answer, but the tied nature of the work concerns me a bit. Could I go to Graham O'Neill first?

The Convener: Could we bring in Ms Hayes on the previous points first?

Mark Ruskell: Sorry—yes.

Marie Hayes: I echo and therefore will not repeat the points about the existing visa scheme. However, I highlight the need to think about family reunions. Families are separated, and the schemes that are in place may make it quite

difficult for families that have ended up in different parts of Europe or other places to join or reunite.

We have quite a lot of experience of the trauma of separated families during war. When we are considering the issue, we should think about the challenges of family reunions and the lessons that we have learned about that. We should try to build into the process at a much earlier stage the right of families to be together, and should advocate on their behalf.

As has been pointed out, many people will want to go home, but the issue is when they will be able to go home and when they will be able to have a house. That means that families that are separated may want to come together. The sponsorship scheme accommodation will make that challenging, but we could learn lessons. I am happy to share offline with the committee some of the work that we have done.

I simply want to put down a marker that family reunion will be an important step in the process once families are here and an important part of people being able to recover from trauma.

Graham O'Neill: We have submitted supplementary written evidence on the issue. To be honest, we have been really hammering the issue of the plight of seasonal workers across the UK who are Ukrainian nationals.

I refer to what Andy Sirel rightly said. As many of us know, the UK Government's seasonal worker scheme is basically for fruit and vegetable picking on farms in different parts of the UK, particularly the south and east of England, and disproportionately in the east of Scotland. We think that the scheme is problematic anyway, because of the tied nature of the work and the fact that very severe restrictions are placed on individuals. Essentially, they get a certificate of sponsorship from a sponsor employment agency that is contracted by the UK Government. That certificate has very tight restrictions on what the worker can do. They need to work in a particular form of work—in practice, that means on the farm on which they are placed by the agency—and they have no recourse to public funds, as Andy Sirel rightly said. They cannot take the supplementary employment of up to 21 hours a week that is available to those on some other visa routes, and their accommodation is almost always a farm caravan, which is often shared.

There are other nationalities from central Europe in much lower numbers compared with Ukrainians, such as Russians, Belarusians and Moldovans. People come here on six-month visas, and they need to go out of the country before they can apply for another visa.

To put it bluntly, the scheme is not set up with workers' rights in mind. It is not what we would do if we were designing a workers' rights scheme.

We think that that is a hidden scandal, and I am really glad that Mark Ruskell has asked about it. We estimate that Ukrainian nationals in the low thousands across the UK are stuck on farms, having been placed on them by sponsor employment agencies. Among other restrictions, they cannot bring their family over. They do not have their own accommodation, so they cannot go to the homes for Ukraine scheme. They do not fall within the scope of the Ukraine family scheme, and we ask that they be urgently brought within its scope by the UK Government, as articulated in our supplementary written evidence.

Those people are basically trapped at the moment. I am sure that their mental health is suffering and that they are suffering in silence. There is also a risk—Andy Sirel might be able to speak to this—of a growing number of people falling into destitution, because the work is not there or because it has become intolerable for them. If somebody leaves a farm or sponsoring employment agency, they immediately breach the terms of their visa. That might not result in them being returned to Ukraine immediately, thankfully, because that would be egregious, but they would nonetheless fall into destitution. I have dealt with such cases myself.

09:30

The Home Office knows more about those workers than pretty much any other category of person, because of the level of restriction and intrusion into their lives. The Home Office is condoning that. There is no other way to put it. The invasion has been going on for about a month now, and the Home Office knows exactly where those workers are. It knows that they are Ukrainians and that restrictions mean that they cannot bring family over, and it is deciding not to move those families into the position of having a set of rights. We have recommended the Ukraine family scheme, so that they can bring family over, they can have freedom to work and they can start to do what anybody in this situation would do. They are refugees—that is what they are. Their circumstances have changed drastically at home, and they should be able to try to rebuild their lives and the lives of their families here in the UK so that they can get on and start to cope with some of the issues that have affected them.

All that should have been done yesterday, but it has not been. The UK Government needs to do it now, and I urge the committee to write in the next day or so on the issue to the Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities—and, ideally, to publicise that

letter—to say, “Please act now on this.” If they do not, we will see more people suffering from severe deterioration in their mental health, more people falling into destitution and more people suffering the loss of their family members in real time because they cannot do anything about it.

This is no time for working around the edges of how we can deal with labour market shortages—the Government can deal with that. The overarching concern must be to get Ukrainian nationals into the Ukraine family scheme. Anything short of that is not good enough; it needs to be sorted out.

Forgive me for going on a bit, but we need to be really clear about that.

Mark Ruskell: That was very powerful. Andy Sirel, do you want to add anything about practical support and advice for people?

Andy Sirel: I will just add one or two things to what Graham O'Neill said. I agree with the points that he made. There are significant difficulties around the fact that seasonal workers are not eligible for the homes for Ukraine scheme or the Ukraine family scheme. They are Ukrainian nationals in the UK and Scotland, and the only reason why they cannot sponsor family or apply to the schemes themselves is because of the type of visa that they are on. When you break it down to that, it is quite extraordinary.

You asked about specific examples of support that we have seen on the ground. Over the past month, we have provided legal advice. The requests for help have included one from a farmer who sought advice about two Ukrainian couples who work for him. They have children in Ukraine, and have no way of bringing them here. That is extraordinary.

Another example is that of a seasonal worker who fled very poor working conditions and has been offered a job elsewhere, but they cannot take it because of the terms of the seasonal worker scheme. We also heard from a woman who is on a seasonal worker visa on a farm in Scotland that does not have enough work for her for the rest of the year. That is why it is a seasonal worker scheme—the work has peaks and troughs. The Government has extended her visa until December, but there is not enough work, and such people cannot move jobs.

My final example is that of a seasonal worker who is separated from his unmarried partner in Ukraine and who cannot sponsor her. Those are the types of examples that we see.

The scheme traps people inside it, and those people have no access to benefits, such as sickness and disability benefits, and cannot change jobs. Responsibility for their welfare,

accommodation and wellbeing is being outsourced to employers, but even the best-intentioned employer in the world would be having a really difficult time with that.

The level of advice that is needed is fairly high. At JustRight Scotland, we are working to establish a project that will specifically target seasonal workers and address some of the issues that I have mentioned, including exploitation.

I will touch on exploitation before I finish. You are absolutely right to raise that issue. Unfortunately, over the past few years, there have been exploitative practices in the industry. To be honest, the seasonal workers scheme is a bit of a golden goose for exploitative work practices. For employers in legitimate industries that are looking to exploit people, the scheme is, unfortunately, a real aid. The more people are pushed towards desperation, the more likely they are to be exploited. That is not a controversial thing to say; it is common sense. We see that time and again.

The idea that people can exit a situation and claim asylum, for example, is for the birds. Asylum claims are not being registered until June, and people can wait years for a decision, during which time they might be able to keep working on their visa, but we should remember that they might be with an employer who does not have enough work for them and that they cannot change job. If the person leaves that employment, they will be on asylum support, which is £6-a-day territory, and we all know what the story looks like there.

The point about trafficking and exploitation is very important. Seasonal workers are a target in that regard. In a broader context, it is important that the committee understands that it is super important that Scottish public authorities are aware of trafficking, exploitation and safeguarding issues in general. When we think about those issues, a gendered analysis is also needed. For example, the individuals who are coming through the homes for Ukraine scheme are predominantly women and children.

What safeguarding is there? What vetting is there in relation to the sponsors? The supersponsor scheme is great in the sense that it mitigates some of those issues, because the Scottish Government is the sponsor, so we have control. However, more broadly, how do we know who is going where? I hope that the committee will want to discuss the matter a bit more so that I can go into further detail. We do not know exactly how the sponsors are vetted. We do not necessarily know who the sponsors are or whether background checks have been done. Does Disclosure Scotland have a role? How many times can people apply? We need to think about traffickers as business organisations. Can they

just keep applying to the scheme and bring over more people?

It is important that we are aware of those questions at local level because, fundamentally, the obligations to protect, identify and support victims of trafficking are devolved. That is the responsibility of Scottish public authorities. We need to focus on safeguarding during the session.

The Convener: Thank you for providing specific examples that bring home the human impact of what is happening. We have a session with the Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development later, and I am sure that issues relating to safeguarding and disclosure will be raised with him. I hope that we will get more information on that.

Jenni Minto has questions about previous settled status schemes.

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): As has just been said, it is very powerful when we get specific examples, so thank you for sharing those with us.

I represent Argyll and Bute, and the island of Bute welcomed Syrian families. When I spoke to a third sector organisation about lessons that have been learned from that scheme, mention was made of the additional benefits that the community received. For example, there was an Incredible Edible scheme, where Syrian families came and brought their ways of cooking vegetables. That was a good and cohesive project.

One concern that was raised with me was that, although Argyll and Bute Council did a fantastic job and, for example, provided a lot of support for learning English, there was perhaps a lack of recognition that people learn at different speeds. For example, the younger people learned very quickly, whereas the older people in families were a bit slower. I was interested in Andy Sirel's points about form filling and getting through the different procedures. What are your thoughts on what we have learned and what we can do better? I ask Marie Hayes to start.

Marie Hayes: You are right that we have a lot of learning. Here in Scotland and across the UK, we have run various schemes and had welcomes for everybody. I will leave aside the matching process and hosting, which is a topic on its own, but I will set out the fundamentals. Whether it is a virtual welcome programme or an actual one, different people respond in different ways. It is important to have a space for four or five days for a programme that introduces people to the country, takes them through some of the benefits and gives them a bit of headspace to think about what they need and what their match might be. We are trying to match up people in a traumatic situation, and we need to think about what they want. There is a lot of

evidence that some of the reception centres can work effectively for many people. People who are not going to family members must have choice.

On health, many people who are displaced are vulnerable. Some have very young babies or are pregnant, and others have disabilities or are older people. There is an immediate challenge in responding to people's health needs. There are issues with trauma and meeting immediate needs. We need cash-based systems that give people dignity and choice in meeting their needs.

There are immediate accommodation needs. With host families, we need to consider what support they will get to help people. You have articulated well how people became part of communities. During Covid, people stood up and responded—they want to help, but sometimes the hosting programmes can be a little unrealistic. We have to build in safeguarding elements and support for families. We also need to take into account the fact that people will want to move on, move into their own space and be their own family. We need to consider the short-term and the medium-term solutions. Access to benefits and education and thinking about employment are all things that will happen down the line. We have to let people move at different paces on that.

It is a huge challenge that the Government, local authorities, the third sector and the community sector will have to work together to meet. We will certainly submit some of our learning to the committee. We have run schemes in Northern Ireland and other places, and we have evaluations and lessons from those that we can send to the committee. We are also involved in some of the working groups.

The key points are that we have to recognise the initial trauma, meet the immediate needs, give people a bit of space and recognise that some things will unfold from that, and that some of those first instincts will not be right. Temporary accommodation is a challenge at the moment, with many people from other schemes still stuck in hotels. We do not want a two-tier system, and we do not want to fail to learn that temporary accommodation is only a very short-term solution.

I suggest that we should provide some wraparound support in the initial stages and help people to make their initial plans. That support should be integrated and should include health, benefits and children's education. We should look at cash-based assistance, and people need to have the ability to move on from what is a temporary solution.

As I mentioned, concerns about family will be critical for people. As a displaced group, they need to be able to connect with one another. In particular, when people go to more rural areas,

they may be welcomed by the community, but they will need to have the ability to connect to some of the specialist services and to other groups in order to make their stay work.

09:45

Jenni Minto: Your last point ties into a conversation that I had earlier this week about whether if a rural community welcomes Ukrainian families from a similar setting they will perhaps integrate better. Rather than people going from the city centre of Mariupol to Glendaruel in Argyll and Bute, for example, perhaps we could match people to settings that are similar to those that they are fleeing from. Your point was very helpful.

Graham O'Neill: All of what Marie Hayes said made me think of our evaluations of the Scottish refugee integration service, which we will share. It has run for about 10 years and is very much about that phased approach of making sure that people are safe and that their immediate needs are met, and that they have access to their rights and things such as social security and health assessments, and then working on a personal integration plan for each individual, which is co-authored with an integration adviser.

That work has mainly been done through the asylum system, and it has been transferred to take place with people who came over from Syria and people who came from Afghanistan more recently, and it will be the same with people from Ukraine. We are really pleased that the kind of practice that Marie Hayes was talking about and the integration service that we are talking about, as well as the totality of the person-centred legal work that JustRight Scotland specialises in, are at the heart of the Scottish response.

I say that because it is a marker that shows that learning is happening. We have been really encouraged by the Scottish Government's leadership in relation to what is happening in Ukraine. About a month ago, it was noticeable to us that the Government was on it and looking at how to design a Scottish response that was consistent with the new Scottish refugee integration strategy, as best it could, so that there was integration from day 1.

It is about the word "empathy". I raise that because what we see in the Scottish response and in the Welsh response so far is that people are trying to shift the mindset and walk in the shoes of the person in question when thinking about what they need. It is about dialling down what we think—which is often really well intentioned, of course; it is not about criticising that—dialling up the empathy and asking what people need. As Marie Hayes said, we obviously need to take lived experience seriously and talk to

people and learn from them, because they have insights that we do not have because we have not been displaced.

We should use that evidence and learn the lessons from what has gone wrong in the past. We should look at the plight of many Afghan families across the UK—12,000 including about 300 or 400 in Scotland—who are stuck in Home Office hotels that are not temporary, because the families have been there for six or seven months. That is something that we want to avoid in relation to people from Ukraine, so the issue is about all that stuff.

I want to make a point about being a supersponsor, if that is okay. That is a really important intervention because it is coming from a place of empathy. It is coming from a place that asks how we can put in place a system that takes the weight off the shoulders of the new arrivals, who really do not need to be filling in visa forms and all the rest of it. It also takes the weight off the sponsors who want to give self-contained accommodation or rooms. The Scottish Government is saying, “No—we want you to do that, and we will help and support you to do that.”

That is not a political point; it is an empathy point that is grounded in evidence. This how we do it: we work with the community that we are trying to help and listen and learn from them, then we design the response in relation to that. In Scotland, reception arrangements are being constructed right now to welcome people coming in from Ukraine through different entry points. There will be multi-agency services and a provision of temporary accommodation offer if people wish it. We get those essential services in place, then work up a plan with that person and the local authority about how and where somebody can go. People can be involved in the process.

That is really important for integration. It is not okay if you have a whole range of people going to certain areas, because that has impacts on school places, among other things. A lot of children are coming over, and it is important to get children who were in conflicts into education as soon as possible and get that structure into their lives. The evidence tells us to get that relative normalcy into their lives so that they can be children again—not refugees, but children—and play and have the nourishing experiences that we want any child to have.

We commend the Scottish and Welsh Governments’ approach, not at all for political reasons, but absolutely because it is grounded in evidence and empathises with the needs of the people. I think and hope that that will ultimately become the model for the homes for Ukraine scheme across the UK, because we need to do

this together. We cannot have the worst-case scenarios that are at risk of happening elsewhere in the UK. People could be well intentioned in giving their homes or rooms, but as in any human relationship, relationships might break down, or the person who is coming in might feel overwhelmed or paralysed by the need to show gratitude.

To go back to empathy, what they need to do is respect the dignity of that person and the fact that they will want at some point to have their own accommodation where they can have their dinner when they want to have their dinner and can ask their kids to do their homework when they want to do it and not feel that understandable and very human sense of duty, which over time can have an effect.

The serious point is that people will be living with complex trauma and they may be hearing of tragedies as they are living in homes here and now, so it is a bit much to ask individuals who are kindly giving up their homes to deal with that without adequate support. It is not unlikely that people will go through that, given what is happening in Ukraine, so there needs to be on-going support. We are confident that we are seeing that in Scotland and Wales, and hopefully it will come round that way in England. I have spoken to local authorities in England this week, and they are concerned because they do not know exactly what is happening or who is being moved into their areas through the homes for Ukraine scheme.

The worst-case scenario is the risk of destitution or exploitation. As Andy Sirel eloquently said, that is a real risk. People who are minded to exploit will target the scheme because they see no checks, so we need to think about that. The supersponsor concept is the way forward in practice, and I hope that that becomes the norm across the UK.

Andy Sirel: I want add a couple of points that draw on our learning from the Syrian and Afghan schemes, the Dubs amendment and the national transfer scheme, which were schemes specifically for unaccompanied minors being placed in different local authorities across Scotland. A key point is that, as has been pointed out, local authorities that historically have not had high numbers in terms of a refugee community will need to respond. We need to think very carefully about that. The homes for Ukraine scheme more broadly is an outsourcing of responsibility to the British public, which is why we welcome the Scottish Government’s supersponsor idea, because it takes back control to an extent.

There is always a role for a well-funded, thorough sponsor scheme, but the international obligations and the moral, ethical and legal obligations are on the state. There are some good

examples. Glasgow City Council operates a supported carers scheme for unaccompanied minors, which works very closely with the Scottish guardianship service. Unaccompanied minors live in family homes within the community through a great scheme that is operated by social work services.

There are some fairly robust safeguards there. When I talk about safeguards, I do not want to suggest that we are worried about predatory sponsors. We have spoken a little about that. More generally, as Graham O'Neill and Marie Hayes said, those safeguards help the community. Expecting the community to house, look after and support traumatised individuals, where there are language barriers, is a lot to ask. The state must be clear that it is there to provide support. The young people and families whom I work with are supported under the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. There are safeguarding protocols that help if there is a relationship breakdown, and local authorities must be ready to provide support to communities.

As Graham O'Neill said, we do not know how local authorities are meant to know how many people are coming to their areas. We might be able to determine the numbers coming through the supersponsor scheme, but if people are applying under the homes for Ukraine scheme, which is outside the supersponsor scheme, it is difficult to measure the need and therefore difficult to plan. Argyle and Bute might get 50 people coming through the supersponsor scheme and then 50 more that the council did not know about might come through the broader scheme. The council does not know, and that should be discussed with the next panel of witnesses.

Our experience from the national transfer scheme for children, the Dubs amendment and the Syrian scheme is that it is wonderful when individuals are brought into communities. There are so many success stories from those schemes.

The provision of support services such as language, education and housing services is vital. Without that support, I see my clients facing isolation, which exacerbates mental health problems and trauma. People can receive the best care in the world in a local authority, but it is really challenging if all their community, and all the language and health services, are in another part of the country.

That is not a criticism of local authorities. If historically an authority has had low numbers of refugees, there will not have been the need or the resource to build services in that area. However, if we are going down this road—which I welcome—we must ensure that we do it properly, or it can end in a really difficult situation for individuals and their sponsors.

I have a final comment about housing. I welcome the fact that the Scottish Government has committed to providing temporary housing before moving people into communities. I understand that the current temporary solution is to be hotel accommodation. I realise that that is an emergency response, but the learning from the Afghan scheme and the from the wider asylum process is that hotel accommodation should be used for the shortest possible time, because it exacerbates trauma. The consequences, even in the medium term, can be devastating. We should prioritise that, for all the reasons of integrity and dignity that Graham O'Neill and Marie Hayes referred to. I want to be very clear about that. Our learning from NTS, Dubs and the Syrian scheme tells us all that.

You do not have to listen to me. Listen to the individuals who have been through those processes. Graham's comment about lived experience is critical. Those people can tell you at first hand what this is all about.

The Convener: As I am conscious of time, it would be really helpful if we could have succinct answers. I appreciate, though, that there is a lot that all the witnesses have to advise us on.

10:00

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Good morning, panel. I was struck by Andy Sirel's comments about language; indeed, I feel that it is important to highlight such language issues. I also welcome what Marie Hayes has said about the other challenges that exist around, for instance, accommodation and healthcare.

How confident are the witnesses that local authorities are prepared for the influx of refugees? I appreciate that the witnesses are all in different areas, but perhaps they could answer from a national perspective. For instance, I was struck by what was said about the difference between rural and urban areas. What is the state of preparedness?

Graham O'Neill: That is a really pertinent question. From the Scottish Refugee Council's perspective, the situation is dynamic. I would caveat this by saying that I know that this is not ideal, but we cannot let the best be the enemy of the good.

One of the reasons why we like the supersponsor scheme as an intervention within the wider homes for Ukraine scheme is that it tries to build some order into the process. I do not want to get too much into the detail, but if I apply through the UK Government's homes for Ukraine portal, the basic information that I put in, such as my name and the postcode of the property, will be passed over to the Scottish Government. If I mark

the Scottish Government as the sponsor, it makes things even simpler.

That information, which comes through the UK portal, gives the Scottish Government and local authorities the chance to have a conversation about the number of offers that they have in particular local authority areas, and it enables them to start planning on the basis of the potential supply of accommodation in a Scottish local authority area and to see how that sits. If I was in a local authority, I would be asking—I would have to ask—questions about, for example, capacity in health and education.

That basic information sharing is crucial. That is why I said that the local authorities in England are a bit concerned; they are just not in the same place in that respect. The fact that the scheme can happen outside of all this is one of the practical policy reasons for wanting that information to go to local authorities across the UK through the homes for Ukraine portal. It would enable us to plan for the supply of accommodation and the likelihood of people coming and to start to route people into accommodation in different local authority areas in a way that fits with the local authority's services and demands.

To be honest, I would say that preparedness is evolving. As I have said, we cannot let the best be the enemy of the good, but we need to have the state—and its weight—involved in the matter. That is why we like what the Scottish Government is doing. However, local government is an integral part of government throughout the UK and it needs to be involved.

Our sense is that local authorities are becoming involved in the process. They will be critical to the bulk of people's lives once those people move out of what we hope will be supertemporary accommodation at ports into local authority areas and, ideally, their own accommodation in which they can build their own lives, perhaps after an initial period with somebody who has kindly given them a room or self-contained accommodation somewhere. The process needs to be gradual. I do not know whether that answers your question about the level of preparedness; as I have said, it is evolving.

There is something important in a practical sense about the supersponsor arrangement, because it enables a conversation to happen between local government and, in this case, the Scottish Government. We really need that orderly process so that local authorities, along with charities, can plan and support people. If we do not have that, we might end up with a lot of people going to different areas, and local authorities would then need to respond. At the end of the day, what matters is that the experience is good both

for the sponsor in that local area and, in particular, for the family or the individual who is coming in.

Andy Sirel: In the interests of time, I will defer to Graham O'Neill and Marie Hayes on this matter, because the British Red Cross and the Scottish Refugee Council are best placed to answer the question. In any case, I do not have much to add to what Graham said.

Marie Hayes: I will try to be really brief.

The fact is that everybody is trying to act quickly. We have the national groups, and the Scottish Government has also set out to include the third and community sectors in what can be learned and how these things can be shaped.

People's control over the numbers, the knowledge and the planning will, as Graham O'Neill has said, evolve. One challenge relates to the current pressures on mental health services, education and, indeed, access to English for speakers of other languages courses. We will have to look at how those will be funded. There is no easy solution here; we cannot suddenly escalate these things, even when we know that there is a need to do so, because we are already creaking in most of the areas where people need support and help. A lot of refugees are currently stuck in the system, unable to access some of that support. The funding package for local authorities will need to support areas outwith the central belt, where specialist mental health services and support might already exist. The need to spread that support out will be quite critical.

We have to try to build capacity modelling but, as I have said, there is no easy answer. We will have to look at a funding commitment beyond year 1, because this is not something that is going to shift quickly or easily.

Donald Cameron: Thank you for those answers.

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): I am quite interested in what we can do in Scotland to support refugees. Clearly, as the Scottish Parliament it is our role to scrutinise and assist the Scottish Government. Donald Cameron touched on funding and physical support, but what support is available in the emotional space and how can the third sector help to facilitate that?

Marie Hayes: The British Red Cross and the Scottish Refugee Council have experience of offering psychosocial support and trauma support. There are also some specialist agencies doing that. There is a need to expand and to fund expansion of that support. Somebody mentioned possibly preparing toolkits for people, including in schools, on knowing what to look out for and knowing how to approach and broach issues. That is something that we can look at.

Trauma is apparent now; it is apparent as people come through the border countries. Other issues might emerge quite quickly after people have been received and welcomed, particularly in relation to their having lost their homes and their families, in relation to separation and in relation to anxieties about the future. There is a definite need. We must recognise the genuine challenge in terms of our existing waiting lists for mental health provision. It will be important to invest in that, to train people and to develop that support, using some of our current specialist providers to shape it. We also need to make sure, if we are going to place people around the country, that support is accessible outwith the cities.

Andy Sirel: Our experience of working with clients and navigating through their emotional needs and mental health issues tells us that our support must be seen to work hand in glove with the other services that are around.

We provide an intensive legal service that is trauma informed, is child centred and uses gendered analysis. I often need to stop engaging with a client for a period so that they can access trauma therapy; when they feel better, they can re-engage. Good legal service is not represented just by a straight line of constant engagement; the process has peaks and troughs according to individuals' needs. That applies to engagement not just with lawyers but with other services.

To be honest, trauma specialist mental health care in Scotland is pretty limited. We have amazing initiatives in the third sector, such as those from the Scottish guardianship service, the Scottish Refugee Council and the British Red Cross. Organisations such as Govan Community Project and Maryhill Integration Network also provide community-based approaches.

Grass-roots organisations provide support on the ground as best they can within their resources. However, the committee probably knows well the issues with waiting lists for child and adolescent mental health services at the national level. The Glasgow psychological trauma service, which is based in the national health service, does amazing work, but there is a long waiting list for it, and the service is only for the Glasgow region. My clients whom I work with more broadly across Scotland struggle to access such services.

A few months ago, I had a conversation with a social worker when I had to stop engaging with a client because he said to his guardian, his social worker and me, "I can't do this right now—I need help." In his area and in all the surrounding local authority areas, there is no provision at all of psychological trauma support. That is because demand has not necessarily existed historically, as I said. However, there is demand now, to which we need to react innovatively. Provision needs to

be well resourced, so perhaps local authorities can work together to provide regional hubs. There are lots of ideas on the table; local authorities should be encouraged to think about them.

It is hard for workers such as social workers to be asked for help that they cannot provide because none is available. As we expand resettlement schemes across the country, that issue needs to be prioritised.

Graham O'Neill: I agree with what Marie Hayes and Andy Sirel have said. The Scottish Government needs to apply its national psychological trauma framework; it exists precisely for populations such as the people who will come from Ukraine, who will predominantly be women and children. This is about building capacity in the trauma-informed or trauma-skilled services that we will need. We know about the waiting lists for CAMHS, which Andy Sirel mentioned, and about the waiting lists for specialist interventions. When people reach the point of needing such services, that means that prevention has failed.

My practical recommendation for the short term is that there should be funding for and utilisation of capacity building by specialist organisations to front-line workers, including in charities, so that we can take a trauma-informed approach. For the longer term, we should start to build capacity in specialist services, which will be needed not only by people who have come from Ukraine and other refugee populations, but by people who are already in Scotland, because they, too, are on waiting lists for such services. That is a wider point.

I hope that the Ukraine refugee situation is one of those moments that concentrates the Government's mind and makes it realise that it needs to improve the psychological trauma framework so that it can build capacity, spread trauma-informed knowledge and build in greater specialist capacity, because that will be needed. That will be a good thing for everybody because, at the moment, the waiting lists are a symptom of the fact that, among other things, prevention has failed. We need that situation not to go on for too long.

10:15

The Convener: Before I invite Paul Sweeney to ask his question, I will just give everyone a wee nudge by saying that we are up against our time limit.

Paul Sweeney: I was particularly struck by the description of the plight of people on the seasonal workers scheme and the implications of the current situation for them, given that the vast majority of them are Ukrainian. Mr Sirel, it is great that the Ukraine advice Scotland service has been

set up, but how easy has it been to reach people on the farms and other locations in which they are physically restricted? Has that been relatively straightforward? Has the Home Office been co-operative with regard to providing relevant information about where people are located?

Andy Sirel: I can tell you about our experience of setting up Ukraine advice Scotland and say something about the work that we intend to do on reaching seasonal workers.

At the moment, Ukraine advice Scotland is an email advice inbox with a helpline that runs twice a week. In the short term we, alongside the funders, are monitoring it to ensure that further resource can be allocated to it as demand increases over the period. Right now, many of the queries are about sponsorship schemes and people coming into the country; once people are here, the queries will become more complex.

We are working through our anti-trafficking and exploitation specialist team and we are working with organisations including Focus on Labour Exploitation—FLEX—on reaching out to engage with seasonal workers. The four sponsor organisations in the UK are key gateways for us to engage with, so work is under way to try to reach people through them.

The people who have accessed Ukraine advice Scotland and its predecessor—a UK-wide scheme that involved volunteer pro bono lawyers—are those who have had a problem and have been lucky enough to find us. I worry about the people who have not been lucky. Further outreach is needed on that front, and we need the co-operation of employers.

The Home Office has not been particularly forthcoming, in my experience; Graham O'Neill can give you more specific information on that. The statistics tell us what countries refugees come from and various other information, but not where they are. Work on that definitely needs to be prioritised, so we are working on it.

Graham O'Neill: The Home Office has not been co-operative, which is why we need to go to the four sponsor employment agencies, which we hope will be able to facilitate the outreach work. The Scottish Refugee Council has a 24/7 advice line relating to the Ukrainian situation—I will send the committee details of it, later. We also run community-based information sessions. We are doing them remotely at the moment, but we hope that they will be in person, at some point.

On seasonal workers, I said earlier that what is happening is a hidden scandal—it is genuinely a scandal, and it needs to be prioritised. If the committee could write an urgent letter to the two secretaries of state whom I mentioned, that would be valuable. Rather than the state putting the onus

on the people who are affected, we need it to lift the weight off them and to put those people in a place where they have a set of rights. We have suggested that the Ukraine families scheme would be the appropriate place for them. If that does not happen, people will not be reached even with the best outreach and advocacy. People have been left in an intolerable situation.

Paul Sweeney: One of the key issues around the seasonal workers scheme is that of people having no recourse to public funds—that is a major menace in many immigration and asylum cases. Are there mechanisms and opportunities for the Scottish Government to enhance provisions to support people who have no recourse to public funds? There are potential ways around the restrictions; do you have particular or specific proposals?

Marie Hayes: The Red Cross is funded by the Scottish Government to deliver a crisis fund for people who have no recourse to public funds. That scheme—which is time-limited and due to be reviewed—was started midway through last year, and was set up because people who had no recourse to public funds could not apply to things such as the Scottish welfare fund. One of the important issues to look at is the criteria for access to existing funds, but there is also the potential to advertise and increase the scheme that I have mentioned.

The Convener: It would be worth asking the minister that question, too, Mr Sweeney.

Graham O'Neill and Andy Sirel, if you want to respond, please be very succinct.

Graham O'Neill: My point is that we have a national anti-destitution strategy: the population whom we are dealing with—Ukrainians with temporary visas, including seasonal workers—are at acute risk of destitution. The Scottish Government and COSLA need to apply the anti-destitution strategy to that risk. To be fair, that is happening to an extent through funding of the Ukraine advice Scotland programme and the Scottish Refugee Council for integration advice.

The strategy is designed to address the risk of people becoming destitute, so I look to the Scottish Government to apply it to Ukrainian holders of temporary visas who are in that position, especially seasonal workers. We know that those people are in the agriculture sector in particular, so perhaps you could ask the minister about the work that the Scottish Government is doing in relation to that sector.

You are right to say that the situation of people who have no recourse to public funds is a “menace”—that is an important point. That is one of the reasons why we need to get workers out of

that scheme and into a place where they have a full set of rights.

Andy Sirel: My point will be short and sweet. It is crucial to remember that a fund that is not on the list in the immigration rules is not a public fund for the purposes of NRPF. Plenty of funds are not on that list. A key issue that we see in practice is misunderstanding of that point. People believe that any provision of services by the state represents use of a public fund in that regard, but that is not the case.

We have existing tools that we can use to provide individuals—not only women and children, but destitute seasonal workers, too—with accommodation and financial support in emergency situations, and we should ensure that we use them.

The Convener: Thank you all for your attendance this morning. We must move swiftly on.

I suspend the meeting for, at most, five minutes.

10:23

Meeting suspended.

10:26

On resuming—

The Convener: Welcome back. I welcome to the committee, for the first time in his new role, Neil Gray, Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development and Minister with special responsibility for Refugees from Ukraine. He is joined online by Alison Byrne, director for equality, inclusion and human rights, and John Primrose, the deputy director of the international division, both of the Scottish Government.

I look forward to working with you on this issue, minister. I believe that you have a short opening statement for us.

Neil Gray (Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development and Minister with special responsibility for Refugees from Ukraine): Thank you, convener, and good morning, colleagues. When I was appointed as minister two months ago, I could not ever have predicted that my first committee appearance would be to discuss the matters that we are discussing today.

Four weeks ago, Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine unleashed death, destruction and the displacement of up to 10 million people within the country and abroad. Scotland stands in resolute solidarity with the Ukrainian people, and the Scottish Government is committed to playing its full part in the global humanitarian effort, and to

offering a warm welcome, safety and sanctuary to the displaced people who desperately need it.

In the short time since we learned that the UK Government was to introduce a visa scheme to allow those displaced people to find refuge within the UK, we have worked rapidly and constantly with a range of partners to set up our warm Scots welcome programme and supersponsor scheme, linking into the UK Government's visa and homes for Ukraine scheme. We have chosen to act as a supersponsor to short circuit the matching process and enable significant numbers of displaced Ukrainians to come to Scotland without unnecessary delay. To prepare for that, we have established welcome hubs to support displaced Ukrainians who arrive into Edinburgh, Glasgow and Cairnryan, where all those who need it will find safe, comfortable accommodation and a hot meal, and where local partnerships are already in place to assess the need for additional services.

We have also published supporting information, translated into Ukrainian and Russian, on the Scottish Government website, to let people know what to expect and how to get here.

The complex needs and human rights of those who are fleeing the atrocities in Ukraine are our number 1 priority. We have developed a multi-agency approach to assess and meet those needs, with wraparound support being provided through the welcome hub. Welcome packs in Ukrainian will provide information on accessing a range of support. Translators will be on hand to help, and trauma experts will be on call.

We are working flat out to secure temporary and longer-term accommodation for those who need it, in addition to the generous offers of thousands of Scots who have opened their hearts and their homes.

Partnership is and must be at the heart of our approach. We are working closely with key partners, including local government, the Scottish Refugee Council, and Police Scotland, as well as the Ukrainian and Polish consuls in Scotland to co-ordinate plans and address challenges. I thank all those partners for their tireless work and close co-operation. I also thank my Scottish Government officials in particular. Across Government, they have been working day and night to get the supersponsor route in place and to scale up our response.

10:30

We are also working in close partnership with the UK Government, particularly the Home Office and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. Urgent work is under way to enable the sharing of data from UK Government systems—including visa application systems—so

that we can understand as early as possible who is coming.

We have committed to £4 million in humanitarian aid for Ukraine, of which UNICEF will receive £1 million. In addition, we have provided a substantial amount of medical supplies and equipment from NHS Scotland. We are also providing more than £13 million of funding to support local authorities, provide accommodation, and meet longer-term needs. In addition, we have provided £1.4 million to the Scottish Refugee Council for the expansion of its refugee integration service. That funding is in addition to the £10,500 of funding per resettled Ukrainian that the UK Government will provide to local authorities to support sufficient provision of services, although we do not yet know how or when that will be delivered.

Scotland has a wealth of experience in offering sanctuary and, through work that we have done with our partners around the strategy for new Scots, we have a tried and tested approach to integrating displaced people into our communities. However, we know that the scale of this task is new, and that we will face many challenges ahead. We are committed to continuing to work with our partners to ensure that Ukrainians will be welcomed and supported, and have access to the care and services that they need. As the First Minister said at the weekend, we will treat people with compassion, dignity and respect, and Scotland will be their home for as long as they need it to be.

The Convener: I will ask a question on that note of compassion, dignity and respect for the refugees coming here, and as someone who has experience of the resettlement scheme in North Lanarkshire. As a representative of that area, I am sure that the minister is also very familiar with that scheme and how successful it was, particularly for Syrian refugees.

I have a concern about the level of media interest in some cases, such as the Dnipro Kids children. We have talked about how the Scottish people have stepped up to welcome people and about how there is a long-standing relationship between Hibernian Football Club and Dnipro Kids, which they have been able to build on. However, how do we ensure that those coming have their privacy and dignity respected, and that they are given the space and time to deal with resettling?

Neil Gray: First, I commend Dnipro Kids for the work that it has done. That should go without saying. However, we should remind ourselves of the phenomenal work that has been involved in getting the children here—and I am very pleased that they are here.

In more general terms, we need to ensure that we respect the privacy of everybody arriving in Scotland, including ensuring that it is respected and maintained in relation to the locations that they will be at and the routes by which they will arrive. I concur with the concerns that the convener raised in her question, as well as during the committee's earlier deliberations with the previous panel.

We need to understand the fact that these people—particularly children—will have fled particularly traumatic experiences, and be mindful of ensuring that, when they arrive here, they are treated with dignity and respect and are allowed the time and space to enable them to recover well.

Jenni Minto: In your opening statement, you touched on the experience that Scotland has gained from other crises. Like Clare Adamson's constituency, my constituency of Argyll and Bute welcomed Syrian families. What have we learned from that, and how might that shape the way that we welcome Ukrainian families?

Neil Gray: We can learn a number of lessons. First, we are incredibly proud that all 32 local authorities were involved in the resettlement of refugees from Syria. Second, partnership working was a key part of ensuring that success. Across the UK Government, Scottish Government, local authorities and the third sector, a very clear approach of partnership working ensured that people were provided with the security and sanctuary that they needed, as well as long-term support.

Reflecting on North Lanarkshire—my local area, as well as the convener's—I believe that there was a particularly strong model for the Syrian scheme in relation to its volunteer befriending networks. We have learned from all of that, and that is why we are keen to ensure that we are doing everything possible in the scheme to provide everything that people who are arriving from Ukraine will need and that we are following a similar approach.

Partnership working is already established. As I outlined in my opening statement, there are regular meetings at the official and ministerial levels with our colleagues in local government, the public services and the third sector. We will continue that approach, because the success of the scheme will come from all of us working together and ensuring that we are providing the best for people who are arriving from Ukraine—and, for that matter, anywhere else.

Jenni Minto: One of the witnesses on the previous panel talked about co-ordination of the different schemes and how things were being co-ordinated if there was a concern about Ukrainians

coming in on one scheme and perhaps in another, as well.

Neil Gray: We are in constant dialogue with our colleagues in the UK Government. Yesterday, I had a meeting with Lord Harrington on ensuring that appropriate data is shared so that we have an awareness as early as possible of people who are arriving from Ukraine and we are able to have contact details for them so that we can make early contact with them and ensure that they know what to expect, when to expect it, and how that will work for them.

Ensuring that there is a partnership approach and that we get a proper flow of information will be absolutely critical for success. The First Minister, the Deputy First Minister, Shona Robison, Angus Robertson, other ministers in other areas of Government with responsibility for delivering public services and I are all engaged in ensuring that we get information where it is needed and that we are working in partnership with the UK Government to get that through as quickly as possible.

Donald Cameron: Welcome to your first appearance in front of the committee, minister. Can you give me a sense of how many people have arrived? Have a significant number of refugees arrived in Scotland? I appreciate that it is the early stages, but it would be appreciated if you could give a sense of that.

Neil Gray: The honest answer to that is that we do not know yet. Part of the conversation that we needed to have with Lord Harrington and part of the conversation that others have been having with other UK Government ministers is around the fact that the data flows have not started in the way that we would want them to start, and we do not have the information in place as yet. I do not believe that that is because the UK Government is holding it back from us; rather, I believe that it is because of the speed at which the system has been created. From the First Minister's conception on one Friday to the launch on the following Friday, getting the system up and running has taken time. However, we are pressing hard to ensure that we get that data as quickly as possible so that we are able to provide a bespoke service that allows people who are arriving here from Ukraine the comfort of knowing that we are making early contact with them to ensure that they know what to expect and to ensure that we have services in place to be able to respond as well as possible.

Donald Cameron: On a similar note, are you worried that people might slip through the net for whatever reason and will not go into the welcome hubs that you mentioned? Do you think that you will catch everyone?

Neil Gray: Yes. I would be happy if Alison Byrne explained this in more detail, but we have put in place very clear systems at all the major hubs that we expect people to come through—Edinburgh and Glasgow airports, and Cairnryan, as members would expect—to ensure that a management process is in place so that we identify people who are arriving from Ukraine and they are pointed in the right direction. The welcome hubs are in place and ready.

The majority of the people who have been arriving so far have arrived with onward addresses; they have not been arriving through the supersponsor route, as far as we are aware. However, as I have said, the data needs to flow.

Alison Byrne might have something to add to what I have outlined.

Alison Byrne (Scottish Government): The minister is absolutely right. There is a multi-agency approach on the ground. We have made sure that welcome hub arrangements are in place at all major points of entry into Scotland—Glasgow and Edinburgh airports, the main train stations, and Cairnryan. We are working with the police, Transport Scotland and our local authority partners. People who are coming in who require assistance will be identified and moved into the welcome hub arrangements. Transport is available 24 hours a day to move people on to the welcome hubs, and there is accommodation if people need it, as well as immediate support around triage in relation to their needs, age, food and clothing, for example.

Donald Cameron: In the previous session, there was discussion about people who come in via the supersponsor scheme and people who come in through people signing up for the UK-wide homes for Ukraine scheme. How are you managing that issue?

Neil Gray: Again, we are keen to get the data on the supersponsor scheme as quickly as possible. I note that the previous witnesses were very complimentary about the fact that we have established the supersponsor scheme and that they understood it to be, as we intended, a humane and swifter approach to ensure that we get people here as quickly as possible. For the scheme to work, we are still reliant on the UK immigration system working as quickly as possible to approve initial visa applications so that people can get here. That is why, initially, we wanted visas to be waived; that was our preferred approach.

We are pleased that we have managed to put in place the supersponsor route, and we are now gearing up to ensure that we have a co-ordinated response. Having a clear and live data flow is crucial to that. That will ensure that we are aware

of how people are applying and when applications are approved, so that we can tailor our response accordingly.

Maurice Golden: You mentioned the funding that has been allocated to the Scottish Refugee Council and others. Are they in receipt of that funding? What are the timescales for the funding being processed?

Neil Gray: I am happy to bring in Alison Byrne to confirm, but my understanding is that local government funding is still to be allocated through a system that is to be agreed with COSLA but that other funding streams have been allocated. Alison Byrne might have further information, particularly on the Scottish Refugee Council.

Alison Byrne: Money is being made available for this financial year. As the minister said, we are working with COSLA to agree the local authority settlement. The grant offer has been made to the Scottish Refugee Council to help to build its capacity.

Maurice Golden: Refugees will require physical support, such as accommodation, but it is likely that on-going emotional and mental health support will also be required, and such services are already stretched. What conversations have you had to ensure that refugees can access such care?

Neil Gray: Mr Golden should be confident that we have had those conversations from a very early stage. We have been working with our partners in all public services on accommodation needs—there will clearly be pressures in that area, too—on practical healthcare and mental health support and on the trauma response that Mr Golden alluded to. We have been in dialogue with our partners in local government, the health service and the third sector to ensure that we respond effectively and as quickly as possible. That response starts from arrival. Our first discussion, from a triage perspective, will relate to immediate needs, and we will then have a more in-depth discussion on longer-term needs. We are alive to those issues and are keen to ensure that we provide appropriate support as quickly as possible.

Mark Ruskell: I am sure that you will have caught some of the evidence that we heard earlier. We heard particularly moving evidence on the plight of Ukrainian seasonal workers in Scotland. We heard specific examples of people being trapped in employment contracts and not being able to bring their families here. Even if they were able to do so, they would be tied to forms of accommodation that would be completely unsuitable. I take it that you acknowledge that. What can be changed? What pressure can you put on the UK Government? For example, do you

support seasonal workers being able to move instantly from their temporary visas to the Ukraine family scheme? Alongside that, could other forms of support for those workers and their families be provided?

10:45

Neil Gray: I am very alive to that situation. Discussions have been going on with the UK Government about the seasonal workers who are here from Ukraine. I am very conscious of the fact that their status here is precarious. As Mr Ruskell said, it is linked to employment that is seasonal by its nature and is therefore temporary. Those people's ability to bring family members here is also limited. The supersponsor scheme may well be helpful in relation to their being able to bring people here, but their immediate accommodation situation may not be suitable or make that possible.

We continue to urge the UK Government to ensure that there is parity between people from Ukraine who are already here under the seasonal scheme and those who are arriving via the current resettlement programmes, so that the seasonal workers have the security and certainty of the three-year position that others are arriving with. We will also be looking to make sure that we continue to work with our partners to provide whatever support we can to those who are already here, alongside those who are arriving or are soon to arrive, such as family members.

Mr Ruskell is absolutely right. This is a very serious situation for the seasonal workers. However, we are alive to it and we are continuing our discussions and engagement with the UK Government, which we hope will be able to step up and provide parity of security for those people in Scotland.

Mark Ruskell: That is very welcome. Has there also been a conversation with the farming sector?

Neil Gray: Yes.

Mark Ruskell: It is obviously in a difficult position. If an employer has large numbers of seasonal workers, that is part of their business, but at the moment there is also a massive humanitarian need to support the families. What can be done in that regard to help the farming sector, but also to help those families?

Neil Gray: Mr Ruskell is absolutely right. Conversations are on-going with the farmers. We are aware of offers of support from some farmers in the form of accommodation, linked and otherwise, for seasonal agricultural workers who are already here.

In all aspects of Scottish society, I have been overwhelmed by the offers of support, the feeling

of solidarity and the willingness to go above and beyond to ensure that we provide the safety, security and sanctuary that people from Ukraine absolutely deserve, and farming is part of that. The farming sector has been incredible.

I expect that conversation to continue in order to ensure that we provide the support that is needed to support people arriving from Ukraine.

Mark Ruskell: Finally, I want to ask about free public transport. Mr Sweeney has been vocal on that issue and I am sure that he will have questions on it, too. However, I have a specific question on the introduction of free public transport for those who are seeking asylum and those with refugee status. It is important that that free transport is not restricted to Ukrainian people but is available to people from around the world. A confirmation that you are considering eligibility for free travel would be useful.

I hope that this is unjustified, but there is also a concern that the Home Office might attempt to claw back money from people who get such universal free benefits. Can you confirm whether that concern is justified? I hope that it is not.

Neil Gray: The answer to the first part of Mr Ruskell's question is yes, that is under consideration. I pay tribute to colleagues round the table who have been working on it.

On the second part of Mr Ruskell's question, we are in constant dialogue on the matter, and colleagues in the committee will be aware of the statutory instruments that were laid this week in order to ensure that people arriving from Ukraine have access to public funds in Scotland, including social security. We have moved at pace on that work and, to be fair, the UK Government has done likewise. I am hopeful that, from a financial perspective, people will have access to the support that they are going to need. On the public transport side, we are considering all the options.

The Convener: Minister, you mentioned seasonal workers. One of the concerns that witnesses on the previous panel expressed was that they do not know who the seasonal workers are. We are in a situation where the third sector is having to step in and support people who are in financial need or who have not been able to maintain their employment and accommodation status. Have you discussed access to that data on seasonal workers with the UK Government? If the Scottish Government gets the data and you know the numbers, can you share some of it with the third sector organisations that we fund to support people?

Neil Gray: Absolutely, convener. Conversations are on-going on all those aspects.

The Convener: Thank you.

Paul Sweeney: I really appreciate the tone, particularly in relation to the bus pass; there is a real spirit of collaboration. Certainly, conversations that colleagues have had with ministers have been very positive. The modelling that has been produced shows that the policy could be very cost effective and has been shared with the Minister for Transport as well as the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government.

I note that you say that you are hopeful of progress. Could greater pace be projected into that work with leadership from you and others in a cross-party group to pull it together and drive it forward? There are time constraints around people's welfare.

There was an interesting intervention from Mr Sirel on the previous panel, who mentioned NRPF restrictions and benefits that are not specified in the schedule. The schedule itemises 26 benefits, but access to other funds that are not specified is not restricted. The key theme that came out of the discussion with the previous panel was that there are ways to circumvent the NRPF restrictions. We can be creative with that, which is potentially a route for getting money into people's pockets who are way below even the minimum level at which the social security system would provide support to British citizens. Is there an opportunity for us to work together on a cross-party basis to drive that forward?

Neil Gray: I very much appreciate Mr Sweeney's anxiety to move at pace on all those matters. He can rest assured that the pace has been relentless over the past few weeks since I have had additional responsibility for refugees arriving from Ukraine: we have been getting the supersponsor scheme in place and then ensuring that we have the support services in place around that.

I will bring in John Primrose to talk about the public transport elements on which he can illuminate the committee further. I am conscious from my previous experience as convener of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee that the Government is very much alive to finding creative ways to provide support for people where it can. The system is different for the Ukrainians, by the way, because they have recourse to public funds, but that is a separate situation.

John Primrose (Scottish Government): I will add the information—many committee members may already be aware of this—that free rail travel that connects to UK routes is available to Ukrainians who are looking to come to Scotland. We are actively monitoring the availability of that free transport. Free transport is also being provided from the hubs to the accommodation that is being provided for those Ukrainians. We are constantly monitoring the availability of transport

options for those who are looking to come to Scotland or participating in the route.

Neil Gray: I hope that that helps, Mr Sweeney.

Paul Sweeney: I think that it does. However, as I said, the key ask was about using the Scottish statutory instruments that recently extended the concessionary travel scheme for bus travel to young people to extend free bus travel to all people who are subject to immigration control under NRPF.

One of the key issues that pertains to Ukrainians, which was raised by the previous panel, was that those who are here on the seasonal workers visa scheme are subject to NRPF restrictions. That is quite a significant population, although we do not know specifically how many of them are in Scotland. I believe that there are up to 6,000 across the UK. The other problem that was identified was that we do not know where in Scotland they are located, so that is a bit of work that needs to be done.

Perhaps there could be a quick-fire mechanism to extend the current well-established concessionary travel scheme to include that relatively small cohort. It would have a relatively low cost but a high impact by giving people that extra ability to move around their communities once they are located in their final place of residence.

Neil Gray: I am aware of meetings and correspondence between Mr Sweeney and my colleagues Jenny Gilruth and Shona Robison on those matters. I know that the proposal is under active consideration and I hope that we might be able to move forward on it. Consideration is on-going and, understanding Mr Sweeney's anxiety, I hope that we can put something in place as soon as possible.

Mark Ruskell: I assume that there has been discussion with the Welsh Government about its free public transport pilot in this area.

Neil Gray: That has not come across my desk as yet, but we constantly look to ensure that we are aware of good practice that is happening elsewhere, and we reflect on the good work that the Scottish Government has already done in these areas. Obviously, the Scottish Government has of late been investing substantially in expanding free public transport availability in Scotland. We will look at what is being done elsewhere to see whether it can be replicated, although I am conscious that a significant amount of work is already on-going in Scotland on that front.

Donald Cameron: On a different topic, I am interested in where in Scotland you see refugees being located once they have come through the

welcome hubs. Do you envisage an even spread across local authorities or might we expect more people to be located in certain parts of Scotland because of existing links?

Neil Gray: The success of the Syrian scheme was very much that all 32 local authorities were involved in it. I am grateful that local government has agreed that all 32 local authorities expect and are ready to be involved in the Ukraine scheme. We will not pick an arbitrary number in our approach to how that will be split; it will be about where there is availability and where we know that we can provide support.

Mr Cameron rightly alluded to the fact that a larger Ukrainian community is based in Edinburgh. We are aware of that, and it might well point to more people arriving in Edinburgh through the family route and perhaps not so many through the supersponsor route. Those issues will all be considered, and there will be a clear triage, allocation and matching process, in which we will involve local government, to ensure that we get people in longer-term accommodation as quickly as possible. We will also ensure that we have wraparound support in other areas as soon as possible so that people can find a way to get a more normal life and recover from the trauma that they have experienced as quickly as possible.

Jenni Minto: Will you explain a bit more about what happens at the welcome hubs and what the families or individuals who arrive can expect?

Neil Gray: I had a meeting yesterday with those who are organising the Edinburgh welcome hub. As I briefly alluded to earlier, there will be a soft approach. After people's immediate arrival at the airport, there will be transport to take them to the welcome hub and the accommodation there, and there will be a discussion about their immediate needs. We understand that the people who arrive will be tired, traumatised, upset and emotional, so the discussion will focus on their immediate needs and allowing them to settle into their accommodation.

There will then be an on-going process with our partners to ensure that people's longer-term needs are assessed. We understand that the majority who arrive will be women and children, and we are very alive to the need to ensure that we have capacity at the welcome hubs to facilitate children's ability to enjoy their experience there. We will then work with local authority partners to ensure that we get people into longer-term accommodation as quickly as possible.

Jenni Minto: That is great. In our previous evidence session, Marie Hayes from the Red Cross talked about the importance of allowing children to become children again and to give them space.

When we had the consul general of Ukraine at the committee a couple of weeks ago, he talked about Ukraine's education system and the fact that so much education can be provided online. Is that being brought in? We want the children to be welcomed into our schools, but their culture and education should be considered. Have you had discussions about that?

11:00

Neil Gray: Yes, we have; I have had a number of meetings with Yevhen Mankovskyi. He is involved in the partnership approach that we are looking to take and is helping us to ensure that we are tailoring our response appropriately, understanding the linguistic and cultural differences that there may be and ensuring that we are mindful of those and sympathetic to them. Our local authority partners have experience of delivering education for people who have arrived from other countries such as Syria. I mentioned the success of that scheme and I know that our local authority partners are already working on replicating that model to ensure that we are providing appropriate support for children in our schools. We are also working very closely with the Ukrainian consul to ensure that we are mindful of those issues, that we approach the experience for children as sympathetically as possible and that we understand their needs as well as possible.

The Convener: I will ask a final question, minister. Obviously, we are facing a huge humanitarian crisis and we want to help the best that we can. Witnesses on the first panel said that they believe that the supersponsor route has been implemented with empathy at its heart. I want to ask about the relationship with the Westminster Government, given that much of that work will involve co-operation with Westminster. In the past, there have been significant differences in attitude to refugees; for example, the Scottish Parliament did not give legislative consent to the Nationality and Borders Bill. More recently, withdrawal from the 1951 refugee convention has also been mentioned.

How well and how willing is Westminster is able to co-operate? Having been convener of the Social Security Committee, I know that even data sharing can be a contentious issue. How is that relationship working and do you feel that Westminster is co-operating with the Scottish Government as fully as it can? If the Ukrainian situation was the only thing that we were facing that would be enough, but there are other humanitarian issues across the world that mean that people are seeking asylum and refugee status here. I appreciate that you are here as the minister with responsibility for Ukrainian refugees, but how can we ensure that the needs of other people who

come to our country are met in the same way and with the same dignity and respect?

Neil Gray: There are two very important issues there. First, Mr Cameron will remember well that I was the minister who moved the motion to withhold legislative consent from the Nationality and Borders Bill. It has been a very consensual meeting thus far, so I do not want to break that, but my comments on that are clearly on the record. Given the situation, we can see that the bill was short sighted—it has been shown to be so.

We maintain a very good and positive relationship with the UK Government at a ministerial and official level in relation to the response to the issue. From the conversations that I have had with the likes of Lord Harrington, I believe that the UK Government genuinely wants the approach to work; it is keen to respond to our questions and to provide the information that we need as quickly as possible. I am pleased that there is a commitment to doing that. That approach is replicated at an official level; I am pleased that there is a good working relationship there, which, as you say, has not always been the case.

It should go without saying that we will treat people with the same respect and dignity regardless of where they come from, however, I will repeat the point that Scotland has a long history of welcoming people who are seeking sanctuary, which goes back decades and generations. We will continue to welcome such people, regardless of where they come from.

I am aware that there have been difficulties in previous schemes in which there has not been the same partnership approach between the UK Government, the Scottish Government, local government and the third sector as there has been in the Syrian and Ukrainian schemes. I hope that having genuine partnership working will ensure the success of the Ukrainian scheme.

We continue to do what we can to provide support for Afghanis who are in Scotland but we acknowledge the fact that, because of the way that the scheme was set up, the responsibility for accommodation lies with the UK Government. Regardless of where people come from, we are determined to do all that we can to support them in their time of need and we will continue to do that.

Paul Sweeney: Has the issue of equality between people with refugee status and asylum seekers been taken into consideration? Will any provisions be introduced to support people coming from Ukraine? There is a wider humanitarian crisis in our midst given the current asylum system. In Glasgow, we had the Park Inn tragedy with hotel accommodation. There is a hierarchy of people in the asylum system who are subject to different

restrictions. What consideration has been given to ensuring that there is as much parity across the system as can be achieved under NRPF? Perhaps Alison Byrne can answer that.

Neil Gray: I am happy for Alison Byrne or John Primrose to respond. I do not know which of them feels best placed to do so.

The current situation has shown how ensuring that we provide a swift, humanitarian, human rights-based approach to allowing people to find sanctuary works well. It is for the UK Government to reflect on that in relation to how the asylum system works.

Alison, do you want to respond to Mr Sweeney's question?

Alison Byrne: Thank you, minister. Mr Sweeney reflects the position that the Scottish Government has taken on the matter, which is that asylum seekers and refugees should be broadly welcomed to Scotland and treated with parity.

The work that we do under the new Scots strategy is designed to ensure that all people are welcomed to Scotland, whether they are refugees or asylum seekers, and that support is available to help people to rebuild their lives, including those who face destitution as well as those who have refugee status. We work with people to provide support where they do not have access to public funds.

Through the new Scots strategy, we take a holistic approach to all people who arrive in Scotland. We continue to press the UK Government to properly fund and support the asylum system so that people can be treated with the dignity and respect that they deserve.

Paul Sweeney: Mr Sirel mentioned the Ukraine advice Scotland service that has been set up, which is great. However, he said that it is a passive system—an email inbox that is monitored and a telephone helpline—and that there were issues with access to data for locating people in Scotland who are have seasonal worker visas. The Scottish Refugee Council tried to access that information, not through the Home Office, which was being quite unco-operative, but through the four employment agencies that tend to deploy seasonal workers around Scotland.

Mr Ruskell asked about the farming community. Is there a way to advertise that advice line and promote it on social media through the farming community in Scotland? Could we ask people who have Ukrainian workers on their farms to introduce them to that advice service so that they can get extra access to support? That could be a mechanism to drive greater uptake of that service.

Neil Gray: Mr Sweeney is absolutely right. We are working to ensure that people are aware of the

support services that are in place, whether it is the advice provided by the Scottish Refugee Council or JustRight Scotland, which we are funding. Indeed, on the supersponsor route, we are working to ensure that people in Ukraine and surrounding countries are aware of the fact that that faster route to get into the UK and come to Scotland exists. We are working on marketing that support and trying to ensure that people are aware as quickly as possible of all the ways that they can seek advice.

We all have a role to play in helping to illuminate those routes and I encourage colleagues to share what the Scottish Government is providing—the advice that is available on the website and the funding for the Scottish Refugee Council, JustRight Scotland and the non-governmental organisations on the ground—to ensure that people are pointed in the right direction for the support that we have made available at pretty short notice.

The Convener: That concludes questions from the committee, minister. I know that this is an incredibly busy time for you and your officials and I thank you all for attending.

Meeting closed at 11:10.

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