



OFFICIAL REPORT  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Thursday 2 February 2023

Session 6



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**Thursday 2 February 2023**

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**CONSTITUTION, EUROPE, EXTERNAL AFFAIRS AND CULTURE COMMITTEE**  
**4<sup>th</sup> Meeting 2023, Session 6**

**CONVENER**

\*Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

**DEPUTY CONVENER**

\*Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

**COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

\*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:**

Hazel Chisholm (Highland Council)

Lorraine Cook (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

Gavin Sharp (City of Edinburgh Council)

Pat Togher (Glasgow City Health and Social Care Partnership)

**CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE**

James Johnston

**LOCATION**

The Adam Smith Room (CR1)



## Scottish Parliament

### Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Thursday 2 February 2023

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:02]

#### Decision on Taking Business in Private

**The Convener (Clare Adamson):** Good morning, and a warm welcome to the fourth meeting in 2023 of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee. Our first agenda item is a decision on taking agenda item 3 in private. Are members content to take that item in private?

**Members indicated agreement.**

## Crisis in Ukraine

09:02

**The Convener:** Our second agenda item is to take evidence on Scotland's humanitarian response to the war in Ukraine. We are joined by Lorraine Cook, policy manager at the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities; Gavin Sharp, lead officer for the Ukraine refugee response at the City of Edinburgh Council; Pat Togher, assistant chief officer for public protection and complex needs at the Glasgow city health and social care partnership; and Hazel Chisholm, housing policy officer in Highland Council's resettlement team, who is attending virtually.

I am sure that you have all seen the evidence that we received last week from the Ukrainian consul, who said that there has been a very mixed bag of experience. However, what was said resonated with me in relation to the experiences that not only Ukrainian people but many others bring to my surgeries at the moment.

Fundamental gaps seem to exist in signposting for Ukrainians who are here to be resettled. What information is given in the packs? How do we ensure that there is cultural understanding of the role of elected representatives in supporting people when it comes to signposting Ukrainian people in relation to issues with the Department for Work and Pensions and access to health and dental treatment?

**Pat Togher (Glasgow City Health and Social Care Partnership):** First, the entire operation has been an impressive endeavour in its own right, given everybody who is involved. Just over 2,000 Ukrainian displaced persons are now in Glasgow, and we take a fairly consistent approach with regard to the offer of support and accommodation. The asylum health bridging team and the asylum refugee team have a presence on MS Ambition, which has approximately 1,100 folk on it, and in the hotels in which Ukrainians are residing, and our asylum refugee team is also reaching out to all the families that are with host families.

Everybody who has arrived through the scheme has full entitlement to public funds, healthcare and social care support, in precisely the same way as anybody else who lives in Scotland. The arrangements that are in place also extend to education, which is being provided to 300 school-age children on the ship. It is quite an operation every single day. DWP staff are also on the ship and in the hotels to make sure that people have access to everything that they are entitled to and that that happens as quickly as possible.

All the arrangements were put in place early doors when the scheme commenced. Glasgow

stood it all up really early on, and we also have the support of third sector partners, who have a presence, through all the various schemes, in the hotels, on the ships and with the host families.

There is also health visiting provision for nought to five-year-olds. Very early on, when we envisaged that there would be increasing demand coming to Glasgow, including the ship, we were quite quick off the mark to make sure that we had enhanced resources and skill sets to address all the needs of everybody arriving under the scheme.

**Lorraine Cook (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities):** I cannot speak for every individual local authority, but I know that all local authorities that have welcome accommodation, including hotels, in their areas have a presence in those hotels. They provide information and a lot of wraparound services. All this is relatively new to a lot of councils, but some are experienced and knowledgeable. Some of that goes back a decade to the work that they did on the Syrian refugee programme. In the hotels, there are experienced reassessment teams that know about wraparound services and how to engage with wider services and the third sector.

The picture is different across Scotland because we do things in different ways depending on how services are accessed in different areas. However, in the local authorities that have welcome accommodation, there is a wraparound service.

**The Convener:** I will bring in Mr Sharp and Ms Chisholm in a moment. Are you aware of a one-stop shop web page or a single point where people can go to get a comprehensive list of the information that they might need, or is each local authority doing its own thing?

**Lorraine Cook:** I can come back to you on that. We can do a scoping exercise to find out what is provided by the relevant local authorities. That is not a problem. We can come back to you with further information, but I know that some have websites and access to translators who bring their services to the hotel, and that they direct people to services and provide translated welcome packs. The ways in which wraparound services are facilitated are quite varied across Scotland.

I would be happy to do that exercise. We have regular contact with all our resettlement leads, so we could do that pretty quickly.

**Gavin Sharp (City of Edinburgh Council):** I want to back up what Pat Togher and Lorraine Cook have said. In Edinburgh, the welcome hub at Gogarburn has seen approximately 10,500 individuals through the triage process. Each and every one is given access to a digital welcome pack, as well as a hard copy. That contains the Scottish Government's wider welcome pack and

other information. Those who stay in Edinburgh receive an Edinburgh-specific pack, which is available on the [edinburgh.gov](http://edinburgh.gov) website and gives information on accessing education, health and social care services, DWP services and Capital City Partnership, on the jobs front. There is in-depth information in that pack.

Similar to what Pat Togher said, we have wraparound support in place. The third sector plays a key role in Edinburgh, and the Association of Ukrainians in Great Britain runs drop-in sessions almost daily, and job fairs. There has been quite good take-up, but we are still in the early stages and we still need to work through things.

**Hazel Chisholm (Highland Council):** Highland Council has a similar approach, with a wraparound service provided in the hotels. The resettlement team meets arrivals initially and links them to education services and our welfare team. Our website has a list of contacts for our welfare team and education services, in relation to how to register a child for school and so on.

We provide links in the welcome packs that we send to everybody, in print form and digitally, and we provide Chromebooks, iPads or mobile phones when necessary so that people can link up and get access to information if there are any gaps. We also signpost people to the Scottish Refugee Council and to JustRight Scotland if there are particular pieces of information that they need—for example, someone might need legal advice that we are not able to provide.

We endeavour at all times to provide that wraparound service for everybody. It is a bit more challenging up here in the Highlands, given the geographical area that we cover—we have quite a rural community—but most of our hotels are spread across two main areas, which allows us to visit on alternate days.

It has been quite a challenge, but I think that we learned as we went along. It was a learning exercise for us all. Even though we have become quite well versed in supporting the resettlement of Syrians and Afghans since 2016, the approach was not as planned as we would usually like it to be, so that was a challenge in itself. However, we have been working closely with COSLA and other local authorities in order to pick up good practice as we go along and ensure that we deliver the best service that we can for the Ukrainians in our area.

**The Convener:** That is good to know.

My office has been involved in a number of inquiries relating to people using the DWP service as a benefit entitlement; very often, we are talking about professional people who just want to get into jobs. The involvement of Skills Development

Scotland and our colleges in that process has been vital, as Ukrainian adults are entitled to attend our colleges and take courses, so it is good to hear that work is going on in that area. We want to identify whether there are any gaps and ensure that we, as elected representatives, also provide a service for people who are here from Ukraine.

I want to ask about those who, instead of arriving through the welcome hubs and the Scottish Government scheme, have been matched through the United Kingdom Government scheme. I know that you do not get informed about them, so is that leading to gaps in people's knowledge of how to access wraparound services? Are you concerned that some people lack such support?

**Pat Togher:** It is probably fair to say that we are fairly far down the line with this now. We are talking about a population that has a number of social media platforms on which to communicate. The Ukrainian community is coming together, and people are becoming much more familiar with what they are entitled to, what support is available and where they can access that support.

I will touch on the earlier question. Glasgow city health and social care partnership has a comprehensive website that includes a list of frequently asked questions. We routinely consult on those questions to ensure that the information remains contemporary and up to speed, given the shifting sands around all this. People's questions have shifted; they now tend to focus more on longer-term properties that will allow them to settle.

I can confidently say that information about the service is well and truly out there, and that people who have arrived under the scheme—or in another way, as you have described—have fairly easy access to all the support, in the same way that anybody else has.

09:15

**Lorraine Cook:** We only match under the Scottish supersponsor scheme. Under the homes for Ukraine scheme, people go directly to their host—they have their name on their visa—and local authorities do property checks and disclosure checks of the host. That is where resettlement, as we would view it under our normal humanitarian protection schemes, happens. The resettlement teams know that those people are there and can get on, because they are settled, even if they are still with temporary hosts. We struggle a little, because having hosts is a very new situation for us. With any of the other humanitarian protection programmes, people go directly into long-term accommodation, so it is quite a different situation. However, resettlement officers are aware of that, and that is where the resettlement work is done,

because those people are relatively settled and are not in hotels or on ships.

**Gavin Sharp:** Similar to what Pat Togher and Lorraine Cook have said, in Edinburgh, we know of about 3,000 Ukrainian displaced persons in temporary accommodation, host properties and private lettings. There will be people who have slipped through the net, although not necessarily under the homes for Ukraine scheme because, as Lorraine Cook said, we get a list, we do home checks and we do safeguarding work. However, there will be private matches that we are not aware of. About 17,000 people have arrived under the supersponsor scheme, but we have seen only between 10,000 and 10,500 people through the hub. There are people arriving in Glasgow and Aberdeen directly, but there could still be a cohort of people who have come through private matches and come in via England or Ireland.

Again, similar to what other witnesses have said, the website has all that information. We signpost as much as we can, and word of mouth is crucial, too. We pull together information from the education team, the DWP and Capital City Partnership to see whether anyone has slipped through the net, so that we can contact and speak to them and offer any support that we can provide. We know that there will be some such people—although not a huge number of them—and we need to do everything that we can to support them and get information out there.

**Hazel Chisholm:** I echo what has been said. The resettlement team works closely with our environmental health officers, who carry out property checks in the first instance, and the business support team, which carries out disclosure checks on homes for Ukraine applicants for hosting arrangements.

We try to keep up communication with hosts right from the start. Sometimes, people match privately, and we find out only when they contact us after the event. There might be a small number of people in the Highlands who have done that.

The fact that most hosts under the homes for Ukraine scheme want to access the £350 thank-you payment to support them with costs encourages contact, even for private matches. People's guests arrive and then they contact us to say, "My guests arrived last week." When I look at examples of contact with hosts, I find that, in general, that happens early on and involves a communication from hosts to say, "My guests are due to arrive. I've made contact and their flight is arriving. How can the council assist?"

We have a website, as well as a resettlement team mailbox that anybody can contact with a general query. That is usually where contact starts.

I cannot say that there are no instances of us not connecting with people under the homes for Ukraine scheme, but, in the majority of cases, contact is made early. We look to support people in all our rural communities—there are a lot of rural homes for Ukraine hosting arrangements up here in the Highlands.

**The Convener:** I move to questions from committee members. I know that Alasdair Allan has an interest in an area that we have already covered.

**Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP):** Thank you, convener—it has mostly been covered, but I have one question for the witnesses.

You mentioned the background and home checks that local authorities are doing. How varied is the situation in different local authority areas across the country? Anecdotally, we have heard that some local authorities, possibly for good reasons, have taken some time to do that work. I appreciate that they are not doing it on their own, as they have to co-operate with other agencies.

**The Convener:** Ms Cook, if you want to go first, that is fine.

**Lorraine Cook:** To be honest, with EOIs—is that right?

**Gavin Sharp:** Yes, it is expressions of interest.

**Lorraine Cook:** We saw significant numbers of EOIs. I cannot remember exactly, so I do not want to give a specific number but, thinking back to the original list, it was in the thousands. To be honest, a lot of them were quickly taken off the list, but there was huge pressure on environmental health officers and on Disclosure Scotland to get the checks done, and there was a lag.

Nobody was matched until the Scottish supersponsor scheme came in. We do not receive any hosts until they have gone through those two checks, so there was a lag, but we have caught up with the majority. Some potential hosts were very rural and remote, and councils were looking at prioritisation. As I can go on to say, it has been quite difficult to match people with hosts in more rural and remote areas. The environmental health officers may take two days—or three days, in some cases—to do the checks, so there is an element of priority in whom we deal with first. We have a discussion group that meets monthly with environmental health officers, so I can go back to them, but I am pretty confident that the majority of cases have been dealt with.

We also have the offers of accommodation campaign, but the numbers coming in are smaller. They are not the overwhelming numbers that we saw initially, which we slowly worked through.

**Alasdair Allan:** Thank you. As you said, convener, others have covered that area, so I will come in on other subjects later on.

**The Convener:** Does anyone else want to comment on Dr Allan's question at this stage?

I should say that the witnesses do not need to answer every question. If you have a particular interest in answering, you can indicate to me and I will bring you in. I should have explained that at the top of the meeting.

I will bring in Jenni Minto next. We touched on rural issues there, so she might want to follow up on that.

**Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP):** I thank the witnesses for joining us today. Like Dr Allan, I represent a rural constituency. Last week, we heard comments from the consul about the difficulties that Ukrainian families may experience in more remote areas, so I am interested in hearing about that. Ms Chisholm, perhaps you can comment on that and explain what Highland Council, as a more rural local authority, is doing to support Ukrainian families who have been placed outwith our cities.

**Hazel Chisholm:** Living in a rural community up here in Highland Council has been quite challenging for those families who have been resettled outwith the main cities.

What has been quite helpful is that where we know that there are three or four families in an area, even if they are not very close to each other, we look to support them and try to link them up. We have found that a lot of the main hosts have established a small community in their area and set up now very well-established Facebook groups for people to share information. We have been allowed to join those groups so that we can pick up any queries on which we may need to provide assistance. Those hosts have also been holding regular events so that Ukrainians in the area can attend and socialise, and we have been quite good at supporting that to enable people to be aware of such events.

We have ensured that the local council offices in the areas, not just the resettlement team, are aware of Ukrainians in their areas. That is key so that, when the community has any queries or needs support, that support is there for them.

It has been challenging. Sometimes, there are a few families but some areas have one family on its own. However, I have found that the local community support has been excellent and local communities are good at inviting Ukrainian families to attend events or become involved in their local churches.

Working closely with the community and the third sector has been key to providing the holistic



support that is needed for families to try to integrate into the communities. We can help them with their welfare support, and we can ensure that they have access to the local schools and to transport.

Transport in rural communities has been challenging. All Ukrainians in the Highlands now have access to free bus passes until the end of the year, which has been really helpful. It will not make buses run more regularly or improve services to more local communities but, again, the community has come in and been good at offering transport to people where required.

We had to engage our third sector to ensure that we connected with people in hosting arrangements in rural communities. That has been the key to success in our communities for providing support to date.

**Jenni Minto:** I recognise some of what you described with regard to bus services. The consul raised that with us.

I will move on to a couple of other things that the consul said to us. He mentioned on a couple of occasions working with the Association of Ukrainians in Great Britain, which I believe has branches in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Dundee. I would be interested to know what work the witnesses have been able to do with AUGB.

How do we ensure that the children of the Ukrainian families who are here do not lose contact with their Ukrainian roots? The consul described children as being like sponges and quickly taking on English as their first language. I am interested to know what the different areas are doing on that.

**Gavin Sharp:** I was brought in by the City of Edinburgh Council on 10 March last year to lead on the matter. The following Friday, we held our first meeting of the oversight group in Edinburgh. That group is multi-agency and includes the third sector. AUGB has played a key role in it from the start. The relationships are really close.

We have assisted AUGB with getting a co-ordinator specifically for supporting refugees along with Edinburgh Voluntary Organisations Council and Volunteer Edinburgh. We meet weekly—we used to meet daily—and work in conjunction with AUGB on various events in its premises, at hotels and on MS Victoria, as well as other civic receptions.

To me, that link-up is the most important partnership of the situation. Over the past few months, AUGB Edinburgh has helped to set up the AUGB in Glasgow, which Pat Togher will touch on. We are really supportive of AUGB and it is a fantastic support to us. We also had close links with the previous consul general. We are still to

meet the new consul general, but we forged good working relationships from the start.

We have appointed an education co-ordinator specifically for Ukrainians, who is part of our team at the City of Edinburgh Council and has been in post for a couple of months. She is doing a lot of work one to one with families and across all educational establishments. She has a meeting with the independent sector today, because we know that that sector in Edinburgh also has Ukrainian pupils. That appointment has been a great support to the council.

We also have good links with further and higher education establishments. Edinburgh College has the Dnipro children at the moment, and we are doing a lot of work with the other establishments as well. We think that between 400 and 500 Ukrainians are enrolled in further and higher education.

It is important to work with those people, ensure that their roots are maintained and give all the support that we can. English lessons are key, but so is everything else. There is still a mixture of online and face-to-face learning in schools. We have more than 650 pupils enrolled in schools in Edinburgh, so a lot of work is being done at the moment.

09:30

**Pat Togher:** It is a very similar picture with the meeting structures that we have set up in Glasgow, going back to February of last year. That has now developed and evolved and the relationship and interface with AUGB are firmly in place.

Glasgow has representations from a number of organisations and they meet every Monday morning. We have key partners around the table, including from the third sector, education, health and social work. There is an interface arrangement whereby we feed in and feed back to AUGB.

A critical point is that that is an additional version of the service user's voice. We are routinely issued with questions from people who are involved in the Ukrainian programme who perhaps feel more comfortable doing that than fielding questions elsewhere. We are there to pick that up. It is, in effect, an additional point of safeguarding for us. Similar to the situation in Edinburgh, there is a very well connected arrangement in Glasgow.

**Hazel Chisholm:** We recently recruited somebody to our Highland Third Sector Interface to work closely with the Scottish Refugee Council and a representative from AUGB, and to invite those who are supporting groups in the

community. They meet every fortnight, and it is a great platform to share what is going on in those rural communities and identify gaps that we can provide support for.

In order to ensure that Ukrainian children could link back and keep their contacts up, it was key—especially for children in hotels—that they had the devices to do that and have face-to-face contact. That group was key in setting that up and ensuring that everybody had that access.

It was also about ensuring that the community groups supporting those in temporary accommodation, as well as in anything else, were getting support on weekends so that children could take a break from their devices. The children were finding that being in school all day and then joining Ukrainian lessons in the evening was a lot, but they placed education so highly that they were very keen to keep both going. We were therefore working with the third sector to arrange events at weekends to give the children a break and get them away from their devices and the temporary accommodation and out into the lovely Highlands and nature so that they could make use of that rural community around them.

Those key meetings with the Scottish Refugee Council and the HTSI have been really important to make sure that we are sharing all the information.

**Lorraine Cook:** To go back to the original question about services in rural areas, although there are definitely different situations compared to in the cities, I would not like the services that are there to be overlooked. For example, in Argyll and Bute, there is ESOL—English for speakers of other languages—for everyone, and there are career pathways, which I believe have already got people into teaching. A doctor is also going through career pathways. It is about recognising and making the most of people's skills in rural areas that need those people. There are a lot of good services in rural areas, as well as challenges that we may not face in cities, where we have different challenges.

**Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green):** Staying with the rural aspect, I wonder whether Hazel Chisholm or Lorraine Cook have encountered particular challenges in enabling people to make the transition from temporary to more permanent accommodation in rural areas.

You might have seen some of the early concerns around the Killin hotel. Ukrainian people had moved into the hotel and become quite settled there—they had got jobs locally and were sending their kids to the local school. The early concerns were then around their having to move out of the hotel into more permanent accommodation and what that might mean with regard to moving jobs

and schools. How is that transition being managed in Highlands? I have had a lot of conversations with Stirling Council about how it is dealing with that in relation to Killin, but how are rural local authorities trying to manage that in general?

Last week, we heard from the consul that there are travel issues, including with regard to re-registering cars for use in the UK, so there is quite a complex set of issues. It would be good if you could provide any brief insights on that.

**Lorraine Cook:** Perhaps we need to look at matching. A reassessment of the accommodation strategy is needed, because there is a centralised model for matching so the majority of people are coming into Edinburgh or Glasgow and, once people are settled, it is very difficult if they have to move.

I do not know the figure off the top of my head, but we are finding that, when people are quickly moved from hotels to different parts of Scotland—Aberdeenshire, which is a pretty rural area, is a good example—the percentage of successful matches is high. It is pretty phenomenal how quickly people are being matched and supported into their host accommodation or longer-term accommodation, so there is something to be said about the need for a different accommodation strategy.

On matching, I agree that it can be difficult to ask people to go to a more rural area when they have spent time in cities and got settled. There is also the issue of the unknown. People have fled the war and they become settled and link with their community, and then we ask them to move again, so there is something to be said for moving people quickly.

Pat Togher, I know that local authorities are coming on to the ship and bringing displaced people to promote the areas where they are living. Matching people is a complex issue.

**Hazel Chisholm:** Yes, it is complex and it has been challenging. Mark Ruskell is right that people move into certain areas and find jobs and their children go to local schools, so there is reluctance to accept an offer of accommodation outwith that area. The majority of our temporary accommodation is in areas that have high demand for housing and very little availability of longer-term housing.

My team has been working closely with COSLA and locally to match people to accommodation outwith the hotels, and we have had successful matches but not nearly as many as we need. There are a lot of people in hotels who we could possibly find some short-term accommodation for but it might not be in the areas that they wish to live in, and that is where the issue lies.

We have offers of accommodation in rural communities and we have had hosts contact us to ask why they have not been matched with a Ukrainian guest. They are offering nice facilities with local schools and shops, but a lot of people just do not want to go to those rural communities. They do not know enough about them, as much as we try to explain it to them, and they have become quite settled in the area that they are in. Communities have developed in hotels, people feel comfortable in their surroundings and they have really come to like the areas that they live in, so it is quite challenging to sell them another area and tell them to leave that community that they have established.

Highland Council is assessing the purchase and refurbishment of houses in multiple occupation and care home properties, but that will take time. It will take time to get the funding that the Scottish Government has offered to make those properties available. It might be six to nine months before that accommodation becomes available, but it does not answer the need that we have now, which is that we have a high number of people in temporary accommodation that we do not have longer-term solutions for. That is one of the biggest challenges that is in front of us as a council. Coming up with solutions for the situation will be one of our biggest challenges. There is no two ways about it.

**Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** Good morning to the panel and thank you for everything that you are doing for Ukrainians in Scotland.

In many areas, we are witnessing a transition from temporary to long-term accommodation. As that move happens for Ukrainian individuals, families and households, it is vital that they are able to continue established education and employment opportunities wherever they are. Are you able to reassure the committee that the measures are in place to enable that to happen? We will start with Lorraine Cook.

**Lorraine Cook:** I think—sorry.

**Donald Cameron:** Take your time. Do you want to let someone else in?

**Lorraine Cook:** Yes.

**Donald Cameron:** Pat, will you start?

**Pat Togher:** I am happy to answer that and can speak from a Glasgow City Council point of view. Although we will endeavour as much as possible—particularly for people with on-going treatment, healthcare needs or complex needs—to ensure that the connection with education and employment is retained in the local authority of the person's choice, Glasgow will not have the capacity to provide accommodation to everyone

who wants it in the city centre. There are in excess of 2,000 Ukrainians and it is important to highlight that housing them should be seen in the context of much wider homelessness pressures. For example, when the Ukrainian persons started arriving in Glasgow, we were in the process of Covid recovery, which put a sharp focus on the requirement for housing association properties in the city.

Maintaining the connections will be an enormous challenge. It would be remiss of me not to highlight that. It would be disingenuous to give any kind of commitment that we can do it for everybody. We can prioritise and mitigate risk wherever possible, but it will not be possible for everybody given the scale of what we are describing and the context of the housing pressures that exist in Glasgow and existed well in advance of the supersponsor scheme.

**Gavin Sharp:** I fully endorse what Pat Togher says for Edinburgh as well. People are well aware of the housing crisis in the city. Similarly to Glasgow City Council, we work on a city region basis, so we are looking with our neighbours at availability across the piece.

The definitions of and terminology about what is long term are key. There is mixed messaging that hosting arrangements could be seen as long term in certain areas, but they are not. That is key as we move forward. To touch on Mark Ruskell's point about what happens when we move people, I note that some people see hosting as an intermediate point as well. They see it as another move and then they will have to move again. That is very difficult territory when we have conversations with people.

There is not enough accommodation across the country. It is almost a housing crisis within a housing crisis. That is the key point at the moment and it must be recognised. We are doing everything that we can on Pat's side of things with the disembarkation from the Ambition. The Victoria contract that we have ends in the summer, so we are working closely and along with COSLA on that.

Lorraine Cook can comment a little more on the matching and give numbers. However, there must be recognition not only of the issue with definitions and terminology but of the fact that there is not enough accommodation across the country at the moment.

09:45

**The Convener:** Mr Sharp, will you elaborate on the mixed messaging that you mentioned? Where is that coming from?

**Gavin Sharp:** It is difficult to say, because it is not just from the Scottish Government. It is UK-wide. When you look at Home Office information, what is on the Scottish Government website and the discussions that we are having in different meetings, there is no agreed definition of long-term accommodation.

**The Convener:** Is that agreed at local authority level?

**Gavin Sharp:** I can speak for Edinburgh and Glasgow and possibly Highland in saying that we would not see hosting arrangements as long-term accommodation.

**The Convener:** But some local authorities do see them as that. That is fine. Thank you for clarifying that.

**Donald Cameron:** Before I turn to Lorraine Cook and Hazel Chisholm, I fully acknowledge the housing pressures. I am entirely cognisant of them. In the event that you move someone from temporary to long-term accommodation within a local authority area and it necessitates a child moving school or someone changing their job, how is that managed? How do you deal with that?

**Gavin Sharp:** In Edinburgh, at the moment, if they are staying within the city boundary, the child will not be asked to move school. They have their place at the school and we will support them where we can. We will also bring in the education co-ordinator, who is key to that, to manage that expectation across the city.

Discussions will take place between the family and the new school to say that this is their local school, and we will do introductions, but if they wish their child to stay at the previous school, we will support that. We have free bus passes for children within the city. It would depend on where they moved to in the city, but we will support that where we can. The involvement of the education co-ordinator is key.

On the jobs front, we are working closely with Capital City Partnership. Again, there will be discussions with the individual and the company to look at what is possible, but they will also have the support of our downstream team as they transition.

**Lorraine Cook:** I wanted my colleagues from Glasgow and Edinburgh to set the context before I came into the discussion. The centralisation model of accommodation is exacerbating the challenges and the sheer scale of what is involved in asking the cities to accommodate people. With the best will in the world, we would all want children not to have to move out of schools and people not to have to move from their work, but the cities are facing a huge challenge and it is exacerbated by the accommodation model.

There are so many people in the cities, so perhaps we need to look at that. This would not be a complete fix because the situation is the same across Scotland, but there will be other resources. If people went straight to Aberdeenshire or wherever, there would be more chance of them being able to stay in that area, whereas it is just a huge challenge in the cities.

**Hazel Chisholm:** I echo what everybody else has said.

In a rural community, it is a more of a challenge to move somebody from a hotel to a longer-term or even a shorter-term hosting arrangement because, unless the new place is very local to them, they will have to change schools and they might have to change jobs. That is why we are getting a lot of refusals of the offers that we are making, because people are reluctant to do that. We have very few offers close to our temporary accommodation and we have exhausted those that we do have. That will mean people moving out of the area, and that is where we are finding the challenge.

Some people will accept the move if it involves a social tenancy that will provide them with a longer-term option, but if we do not have that for them and we have only a hosting arrangement, which is a shorter-term option—even the private rented sector is a shorter-term option—people are quite reluctant to take that. We are therefore finding it quite a challenge to find a solution for matching people into accommodation, because the options that we have may not be in locations that will match their needs.

We are trying to find that longer-term accommodation with the pressures that have been identified given current stock and demand and the pressure related to homelessness in all areas across all local authorities.

**Donald Cameron:** My final question is about private rented accommodation, which Hazel Chisholm has just mentioned. Last week, the consul said that Ukrainian households are having difficulty accessing private rented accommodation because landlords are asking for guarantees and credit checks, which Ukrainians are simply unable to provide, for fairly obvious reasons. The consul suggested that local authorities could act as guarantors. Is that feasible or realistic?

**Hazel Chisholm:** We can offer that. We offer a rental guarantee scheme and we are looking to put it on our website and make it available if Ukrainians need it. However, up here in Highland, we do not have a very buoyant private rental market, so there is huge competition for any accommodation that becomes available. We have had Ukrainians move into private rented accommodation, so it is doable, but there is so

much competition for the few available places. We can support them with a rent guarantee scheme—that is no problem at all—but that is not the whole solution to the challenge in that area.

**Pat Togher:** A number of governance structures are in place to consider all those options. On all of them, consideration needs to be given to consistent application across all local authorities, and parity with what we offer our domestic homeless population is just as important. That is key to the issue and it is part of the discussion as we move forward.

A number of options are being considered. In Glasgow, the private rented sector is contracting, and we have looked at that area of the market as part of our recovery from Covid.

**Donald Cameron:** That is a fair point on parity.

**Gavin Sharp:** I echo what Pat Togher said. We have a working group that is looking at the issue nationally. We will be meeting colleagues up at St Andrew's house after this meeting to discuss it.

In Edinburgh, similar to Glasgow, we are considering all options. We are looking to invite the private rented sector in and we have had discussions with several letting agents, but we are having limited success. I agree with Pat Togher's point on parity across the piece, which we are working hard on. It is a work in progress nationally and for local authorities but, as Pat said, the key is parity.

**The Convener:** Alasdair Allan has a supplementary question. I will then bring in Ms Boyack.

**Alasdair Allan:** My question is also about housing. Mr Sharp mentioned the housing crisis, and there are certainly pressures there. I realise that planning decisions do not immediately deal with the here and now, but I am keen to hear from any of you how addressing housing problems for displaced people fits into your planning policy or approach.

You will be aware that swathes of suburban Scotland have large private developers building houses that are beyond the reach of anyone who lives within 50 miles of them or has not sold a house in a large city somewhere else. What is being done to factor the needs of displaced people into planning decisions that are made around such issues?

**Gavin Sharp:** That ties into the long-term accommodation working group that Pat Togher and I have talked about. On planning, there are developments in Edinburgh that could be for intermediate rent or social rent; those discussions need to be had. Across the country, that has to be led by the working group. Individually, as local authorities, we can have those discussions with

developers, but we are looking for a steer nationally. As we—Pat, Lorraine, Hazel and I—have all said, this is a national response.

I go back to the point about parity. When decisions are being made, especially around planning, we need to have parity across all local authorities. That has been worked on for a number of months, so it would be great if we could increase the pressure on that working group. We need to start getting answers and getting those policies in place. We are coming up to the first anniversary, so we need to start implementing that.

**The Convener:** We are straying into the concerns of the Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee and the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee, so I do not want to pursue that further, if that is okay, Dr Allan.

That was a timely reminder that, a year ago, we all thought that things would be better for the Ukrainian people by this time. All the policies have had to adapt to the length of the on-going situation.

**Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab):** I go back to the issues of homelessness and housing. I direct members to my entry in the register of members' interests. I take the point that it is a long-term issue, but we have been raising the issue of a long-term solution for about six months now.

I want to go back to the evidence that we have just heard from Gavin Sharp, Pat Togher and Lorraine Cook from COSLA and focus on access to housing. Given that we have a housing crisis, what opportunity is there to accelerate bringing homes into use? Homes can be empty for multiple reasons. There are 43,000 empty homes in Scotland, including 9,000 in Edinburgh and nearly 2,500 in Glasgow.

I know that there is a £50 million fund, some of which is being used to repurpose housing, and that our cities tend not to have lots of available housing lying empty and waiting, but is there an opportunity to get homes back into use as well as accelerating new homes, particularly to address the crisis that we have around supporting Ukrainians, but also to address the longer-term housing shortage? I know people and families from Afghanistan who have been in temporary accommodation for years after they arrived in Edinburgh.

Can something be done to sharpen that and get things moving that we as a committee should be looking at? I invite Pat Togher to answer that first and I will then bring in Gavin Sharp, as we have talked about the issue before.

**Pat Togher:** The offer of the £50 million investment has been extremely well received and it is very welcome. Glasgow is a non stock-holding local authority, so we are absolutely reliant on the relationship with all our registered social landlords. We have sound relationships and partnerships with RSLs, but it is fair to say that they are under considerable pressure. We know that we have a substantial shortfall in available lets for our domestic homelessness population.

It is encouraging that the £50 million investment has translated into four principal bids in Glasgow, one of which looks as if it will be on stream by the disembarkation of MS Ambition. That will come in at around 250 properties for 250 households. The committee can see the scale of that. As we described earlier, it is helpful, but it will not be the entire solution. For the disembarkation of MS Ambition, we are very reliant on the contribution of all capital funding bids across all 32 local authorities. That will be our continued focus.

My answer to Sarah Boyack's question is yes: there needs to be a programme of works in the longer term. I repeat that, as I said earlier, there has to be a read-across with our domestic homelessness population and an acknowledgment that the work has brought that into sharp focus.

**Gavin Sharp:** As we have said in previous discussions, this is on-going work. As Pat Togher says, the £50 million fund is very welcome, but it is not the solution to all the issues. There are other pockets. As well as the capital fund, we have to look at long-term leasing and other areas.

As I said, we are working in the city region to identify the void properties across the city and we are looking at parity around that. We are also looking at repurposing properties across the city and beyond in East Lothian, West Lothian, Midlothian, Borders, Fife, Clackmannanshire and Falkirk, as the city region.

10:00

Another interesting avenue that we have been exploring and on which we continue to have discussions is the future use of decommissioned Ministry of Defence sites in Edinburgh in particular. The site up at Redford has been highlighted recently, but there is also Craigiehall to the north of the city. We are working on that as a potential site, and we hope to meet the MOD again later this week or next week to look at it. The site has family homes, although infrastructure would be needed around it. We are certainly very keen to progress that avenue, which would help on the family home side of things.

Go back to the issue of parity, I note that that would—as Pat Togher said—have to encompass the homelessness side of things as well as the

Ukrainian population. However, we are actively working on that, and we will have discussions over the coming days and weeks about what is being done and what can be done within Edinburgh and the city region.

**Sarah Boyack:** Lorraine, do you want to comment from a COSLA perspective on ensuring that that money is spent and that it delivers as soon as possible?

**Lorraine Cook:** It has been very much welcomed and we are now seeing families move into accommodation in North Lanarkshire, South Lanarkshire and North Ayrshire. The process is moving as quickly as it possibly can. I know that there are issues around refurbishment, getting people and skills in place and how long the process can take, but we are seeing things happen and they are moving pretty quickly.

On domestic homelessness and the need for parity, we need to look at the issues in a holistic way that includes other humanitarian protection schemes and the dispersal of asylum seekers. We need to look at the situation with Afghan refugees and the widening of the dispersal of asylum seekers. We need to take a more holistic look at demand for accommodation rather than looking at the Ukraine issue as a silo, because the issues are wider.

**Sarah Boyack:** In a way, that is why I was keen to raise the issue. I take on board the convener's comments about not straying into other committees' remits. Nonetheless, thinking about people who might move to Scotland for whatever reason, we might potentially have Hong Kongers coming here in the future. It is both an issue for now and something that has been there for quite a while, so we need to keep that on the agenda.

The COSLA submission refers to potential cuts in support for people in local authorities; I think that you said that there is a cut of nearly 50 per cent from the UK Government. Will you say a bit more about how that will have an impact? I know that £10,000 sounds like a lot, but, even considering only the education and housing aspects, it is nothing in comparison with the crisis that you face.

**Lorraine Cook:** I think that there will be a huge impact. The tariff funding for those coming in from 1 January will, I believe—finance is not my area—be cut to £5,900. That is a significant cut, and there is no year 2 funding.

In comparison with other funding mechanisms and humanitarian protection schemes, that is quite a significant cut. The £10,500 was very important for resettlement work at the very beginning, as we have talked about, to ensure that the wraparound services and resettlement teams were there to support people as they moved into

accommodation, whether it was host accommodation or long-term accommodation. We have significant concerns about that. With regard to funding as a whole, negotiations are still happening with the Scottish Government, but we are concerned about that aspect.

**Gavin Sharp:** To follow up on that, I note that there is an indication that there is no education tariff funding for year 2, and there has never been a health tariff fund associated with this area. We have been pushing for that, and I know that the Scottish Government is pushing the UK Government as well, but we need to continue with that, because—as Lorraine Cook said—the negative impacts of the cut will be felt across all local authorities. We need to look at that.

**Sarah Boyack:** That is useful feedback. The Ukrainians whom I have met are so grateful to be here, and they do not like to raise difficult issues when they arrive—those issues only arise months afterwards.

A particular issue that people have mentioned is post-traumatic stress disorder, not just for adults but for children, because of what they have gone through. That gets parked because it is a fresh start, but there are families back home. It is useful to have that flagged for mental health and national health service support.

Is there anything more that could be done to link with general practitioners? We know that they are under pressure.

**Pat Togher:** As we touched on, Glasgow is a dispersal city and has in excess of 20 years of resettlement experience. We continue to support not only Ukrainian arrivals but, at the same time, the arrival of Syrians and Afghans. We have done that successfully, and we are particularly proud of it in Glasgow. We have an awful lot of experience in that area of work.

We recognise that the priority for families that arrive, particularly those from war-torn countries, is to feel safe and secure in their accommodation with the correct support around them. The other issues that are associated with trauma can then be supported. That is our experience through our asylum bridging health team and the enhancement of mental health support and provision in that service, which we have continued to reflect on over more recent years.

We are particularly experienced in and au fait with that area. We will continue to support people with it. As I touched on earlier, there is provision for GP registration for everybody who requires it. We proactively support that, and the frequently asked questions website that we have for Glasgow health and social care partnership makes it clear how to access that. We are focused on the area.

**Gavin Sharp:** People from NHS Lothian's resilience and operational sides sit on the oversight group in Edinburgh. We have regular health meetings every two weeks, and someone has been appointed who will co-ordinate the response.

We have been fortunate with Boroughloch practice coming in for the people on the ship. A lot of work was done previously on that. However, yesterday, we were in discussions with NHS Lothian about how on-going support for general practices will materialise as people transition across the city away from the Victoria or hotels. Health funding has been brought up on numerous occasions in the health group, and we are actively pursuing it for the future.

**Sarah Boyack:** That is really useful feedback, because the message that we get from NHS Lothian and GPs is that they are at capacity, so even marginal increases can be challenging. The point about needing additional funding is well made.

**Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con):** To follow on from access to healthcare, I note that, last week, the consul highlighted access to dental care as a particular issue. Do witnesses have any reflections on that? Pat Togher looks keen.

**Pat Togher:** Yes. As I described earlier, the experience that we have in that area carries us a long way. Healthcare needs are always at the top of the priority list, and dentistry is no exception to that. There is a requirement to support children and adults to access dentistry where it is required. We continue to be focused on the provision of and investment in the childsmile programme and everything else that people are familiar with, even from pre-five.

I am not aware of any issues being flagged up in which dentistry has been a point of pressure or a gap. Given where we have come from in the past 12 months, we are all close to operational delivery, but dentistry has not been flagged up as a particular gap in Glasgow, as far as I am aware.

**Gavin Sharp:** Dentistry has not been flagged up per se in Edinburgh. Coming at the end of Covid, we know that there are issues in the city with getting an appointment with a GP and for dentistry. It is difficult. Therefore, we will follow it up with the consul general to gather a little bit more information. We know that there are pressures in the city, but we will take the matter and follow it up, so we can come back to you on it.

**Maurice Golden:** Thank you. I have another question for the panel. We have already touched on parts of this issue. In your experience, how important has the third sector been in supporting displaced Ukrainians in Scotland, and does it have the resources that it needs to fulfil that vital role?

**Gavin Sharp:** As I said, the third sector is a key partner. From day 1 of our response, it has played a key role in the Edinburgh oversight group's response. Volunteer Edinburgh has welcomed people through the transport hubs. Each of the three transport hubs in Edinburgh that we have worked with closely have appointed a co-ordinator, but they need continued funding. At times, funding has been a struggle, but, over the past month and a half, there has been movement, which is positive, and applications are going in.

The third sector is key for Edinburgh's response; we have one Edinburgh response, and the third sector plays a key role in it. The third sector has had frustrations nationally and locally about the allocation of funding, but, as I say, that is progressing. We are keen to push the issue on behalf of the third sector in Edinburgh, so that it can continue its work.

As the convener has said, we are coming up to the first anniversary, and the third sector will play an even bigger role in the future. AUGB was a small organisation a year ago, but it has grown and requires more support. We are doing everything that we can along with Scottish Government and local authority colleagues, but financial support for the third sector must continue.

**Pat Togher:** The third sector is critical in this space and always has been. It has supported asylum refugees coming to Glasgow, which is no different from the support that it provides Ukrainian arrivals. It augments all the service provision and support that we have in place, and it is a key partner in that.

I second the comments that were made about long-term plans and funding arrangements for all this. The third sector has been provided with some investment, so there has been some enhancement to its service provision, but, given where we are and where we are likely heading with longer-term support, that will have to be recognised.

**Lorraine Cook:** Pat Togher mentioned the revised governance structures, and the Scottish Refugee Council has been an important voice in that. During the revision of the governance structures, we asked for more local government representation, particularly from the resettlement side, which has the knowledge and expertise that is required to influence next steps on the issue.

**Hazel Chisholm:** I agree with Lorraine Cook that the SRC has been a key organisation in third sector delivery. In a rural community, there are not as many face-to-face volunteers on the ground, so the SRC has been key from the beginning of the Ukrainian resettlement scheme in keeping communication going and in ensuring that we fill any gaps and that the resettlement team takes a holistic approach.

Third sector organisations such as the British Red Cross and Barnardo's Scotland have been essential in our delivery, particularly for people in temporary accommodation, and in ensuring that we deliver holistic support for people. We would not be able to deliver our full service without the third sector.

**Maurice Golden:** That is very helpful.

**Mark Ruskell:** You have already touched on some of your experiences of working with the other resettlement programmes, and Pat Togher talked about the experience of dealing with PTSD among people who have come here through the Afghan and Syrian schemes, as well as among the wider asylum-seeking population in Glasgow. Are there any lessons learned from, in particular, the Syrian and Afghan schemes that have fed into the way you approach Ukrainian displaced people? I recognise that there is a difference in people's circumstances, but is there anything that would be useful to share with the committee about the way in which the schemes have been running, how they are being resourced and how you are configuring teams to welcome and support people?

10:15

**Lorraine Cook:** I can cover that quickly and then hand over. There is a huge body of knowledge and expertise in the resettlement leads in councils who have worked on other programmes. As I said, we wanted that knowledge to be embedded into governance and next steps, and that is starting to happen now. There is a lot of learning, but there are also a lot of new situations, because we have never experienced anything like it on this scale. We have never experienced so many people being in hotels and on ships and we have never had to deal with hosts, which makes it a very different situation. In other humanitarian schemes, people were immediately put into social housing, so resettlement could start from the very first day, because people were in long-term accommodation, were settled in their schools and had their work. This is a very different environment, but I believe that the resettlement teams come with a lot of knowledge and expertise that should be recognised. When they say that certain things might not work, they should be listened to. As I said, there are a lot of skills there, but we are also dealing with a very different situation.

**Hazel Chisholm:** Highland Council had already supported Syrian and Afghan families to resettle in Highland, so the framework was already there for what was needed, from employment to education, and we were working closely with all our partners. However, as Lorraine Cook touched on, the Ukraine resettlement has been very different



because of the involvement of hosting arrangements and because the resettlement team was not driving the model right from the start. We had to use all the experience that we had from previous resettlement schemes and adapt it to fit the hugely different situation that came with the arrival of Ukrainians, including Homes for Ukraine and supersponsorship.

It is about building on what we know, adapting, picking up good practice across all 32 local authorities and listening to what others are doing, so that we can learn from one another, because the situation is so different. However, I think that we have done great work so far and the new working groups are developing new guidelines and policies that, we hope, will shape the way we do resettlement. It is a challenge, but we are getting there.

**Mark Ruskell:** Thank you for that insight.

**Gavin Sharp:** To follow up, it is the scale and the unknowns about this situation that have been different from the start. Everything is unknown, including the arrival numbers and the visa applications. On any given day, we still do not know how many people are arriving. With the previous schemes, that was known in advance, so housing or hotel arrangements were made in advance but, in this situation, the first thing that we know is when someone comes off a plane, train, car or other vehicle at Gogarburn, in the case of Edinburgh. We need to gather their information and have the initial triage and safeguarding conversation with them, so that we understand each individual's circumstances and requirements. The situation varies hour by hour and day by day and continues to do so, and that probably needs to be recognised. Although the numbers are not as high as they were in the summertime, people are still arriving, and there are a lot of unknowns about how the numbers will be impacted over the coming months. For us, the biggest shift is the sheer scale of the response that is required. However, as Hazel Chisholm said, all the local authorities are coming together and using the skills and expertise that are at their disposal and working coherently as one.

It has been very difficult. It is different in Edinburgh and Glasgow from how it is in Highland and Aberdeenshire, so it is about bringing together the different pockets of expertise from local authorities across the country. We also need to look at the picture not just in Scotland but nationally in the UK, and at the possible impact from England, Wales and, in particular, Ireland and the knock-on effect that anything happening in Ireland might have on Scotland because of EU travel. There are a lot of complexities in this.

**Pat Togher:** It is also important to highlight the fact that the arrangements in the scheme are very

different from what we are familiar with in the other resettlement schemes, in the sense that they gave advance warning. We can manage that and co-ordinate the required support and the accommodation. Unfortunately, this scheme does not allow for that, for a number of obvious and practical reasons.

In Glasgow, there are probably two or three key points from our learning from 20 years as a dispersal city. The first is not to carry too many assumptions about what people require when they arrive. It is correct and proper to acknowledge their sense of trauma, but people tell us that their first priority is that they want to feel settled and secure.

Secondly, we have learned that we need to keep an eye on the complexity of need and make sure that support is proportionate to that.

Thirdly, we need to ensure that there is an infrastructure that we can use to support people to integrate into communities. We also need to acknowledge the skill sets that people bring and capitalise on those.

**Mark Ruskell:** My final question is about the criteria for reopening the supersponsor scheme. Are those close to being met? Is there a sense that they could be met at some point? I guess that we all hope that there will not be a need to reopen that scheme, but there is so much uncertainty in this situation. What is COSLA's view on that?

**Lorraine Cook:** I would be surprised if the supersponsor scheme reopened, especially when we look at the number of people who have come to Scotland. We are talking about accommodation and about people being willing to host, and that will end. People will not open their homes for an infinite time. We are also looking at rematching, so the process is on-going.

We still have a lot of visas for people who have not arrived, so there is potential for a lot of people still to come. Homes for Ukraine is also still receiving people under that visa scheme. People are still coming and we are certainly not in a comfortable situation, as we have been saying. I would be surprised if the supersponsor scheme was to reopen any time soon.

**The Convener:** Are there any further questions from committee members?

**Sarah Boyack:** I have a brief question to follow up on that. I seek clarity on the comment about host accommodation and how people will not open their homes for a infinite time. I have heard from quite a few people who volunteered but were not picked at the time. Are there still people who volunteered to be hosts whose accommodation is not being used, and is that a potential route, given

the other huge challenges that you face with providing temporary accommodation?

**Lorraine Cook:** For us, national matching is about suitable accommodation and the expectations of hosts. It is such a complex area. I would say that we have experience of resettling and not necessarily of matching. At the beginning, as Pat Togher said, it was very controlled. We knew who was coming and had decided where the accommodation was and what the support was. This is a very different situation. We are dealing with two human elements. The first is the people who arrive and their expectations; they are settling in places for longer than everyone assumed they would be here, and there is an expectation that they will stay where they are and put down roots. However, there are also the expectations of hosts.

There is also the question of what kind of accommodation is suitable. A lot of the accommodation on our list was very rural and remote, with no transport links. You can look at the lists of expressions of interest and offers of accommodation and say that there is still quite a lot available, but you have to look at how suitable places are and balance that with people's expectations, because they are refusing to go to other places. It is definitely quite a complex situation.

We were talking about something this morning. It may be unfair to use the expression "breakdown" because that is not what is happening. A lot of hosts have been very supportive. People have been very happy with each other. There has not been a breakdown, but people have been there for so long that it is time to move on.

To come back to the point about reopening the supersponsor scheme, that will not be our decision. I was just giving an opinion on the situation we are in.

Matching is phenomenally complicated. It comes down to things that you would not have expected. There have been huge issues with pets. It comes down to such nuances, because we are dealing with people who are living with each other.

**Sarah Boyack:** On one level, that is nuanced, but that is fundamental if someone has an allergy. Those things cannot be ignored.

**Lorraine Cook:** We have case files of the in-depth interviews that councils carried out with people. Those are very detailed, which shows again how difficult it is to match people. One of the questions is about pets.

**The Convener:** Our deputy convener, in opening, thanked you all for the work that you are doing. That is echoed by the whole committee.

The initial period for matching was six months, so a lot of those matches will be coming to an end. Although people have sustained those connections, they may not be willing to carry on. That is one pinchpoint that you will be expecting. The contract for the MS Ambition comes to an end in March and the contract for the ship in Leith comes to an end later this year, in June or July.

Bearing in mind all the issues that have already been raised, what flexibilities do your organisations have to help you deal with those pinchpoints as they arise?

**Pat Togher:** I will answer the question in relation to the MS Ambition, which is due to disembark on 31 March. That is our principal focus right now. As we have already discussed, this is a national scheme, so the responsibility to provide accommodation for everyone on that ship does not sit with Glasgow. We are engaging with all 32 local authorities and have had a very productive meeting.

The aim in the first instance is to match people from that ship with host families, whenever we possibly can, but there are limitations. There are particular limitations for people with pets if there are allergies in host families. There are also limitations for larger families, who are unlikely to be matched with a host family. We acknowledge those limitations and also the limited number of housing association properties. We want to take full advantage of all the offers across all local authorities.

10:30

As we near 31 March, we will know what our situation is going to look like, but suffice to say that a lot of people will transition from the ship to hotel accommodation—we hope as an interim arrangement until something more permanent can be found—and that will take place across Scotland. As we touched on earlier, we just do not have the housing provision available in Glasgow, given the homelessness pressures.

However, the arrangements for working through priority of need are well under way. We are prioritising some families to remain in Glasgow, for the reasons that were outlined earlier but principally in relation to, wherever possible, employment, education and complex health needs.

**Gavin Sharp:** We are working with the Glasgow team and across the other local authorities on the joint assurance review. Obviously, how the disembarkation of the MS Ambition goes will have a direct impact on the disembarkation of the MS Victoria. If you are looking at it purely in numbers, the number of properties available for those leaving the Victoria in the summertime will be

lower, as things stand. We hope that that will change as we move forward.

In that regard, there are multiple risks from different areas. There are continued arrivals and matching, there are matches ending for whatever reason, there are hotels having to end contracts and there is the disembarkation of the Ambition. Therefore, there is a lot to consider with partners around the country and with Scottish Government colleagues. As I said, we were at St Andrew's house today to discuss our joint assurance review, predominantly for the Victoria but also looking at Edinburgh as a whole.

There is a lot of work to be done and a lot is being done in the working groups, to touch on the accommodation issue again. We need further accommodation to accommodate everyone—that is absolutely clear—but we have a fantastic group working on that across local authorities and with COSLA that is doing everything within our powers to have good outcomes for that.

There is the unknown of the number of people still to arrive. As Lorraine Cook touched on, thousands of people have had visas approved who, for whatever reason, have not arrived in Scotland yet. They might arrive and the other visa schemes are still open as well. We will support everyone who comes through our door, but we need to work collaboratively with the Scottish and UK Governments in order for the accommodation situation to improve.

**The Convener:** Ms Chisholm, what is Highland Council doing in anticipation of those events, particularly the ships ending their contracts?

**Hazel Chisholm:** We have been attending meetings with Pat Togher to support the MS Ambition disembarkation, and we will provide support wherever possible. As a council, we are reaching a bit of a pinchpoint with hosting arrangements coming to an end. Practically every day, we have a communication from a host saying that they are nearing the end of their hosting period, that it has worked well but that they feel they need to return their home to them and their family or that the family that they have been hosting needs to become independent and move on. That is generally the vibe. We have had a few breakdowns but, generally, that is where people are. Some people have extended the arrangements and some say that they will keep the families with them for as long as they can, but there is an expectation from a lot of hosts that the council will therefore just provide a social tenancy. There is a big misconception at the moment that that would be the offer.

We have some matches for accommodation that we can move people into, but that is only a short-term answer to their accommodation needs. That

is where we start with people when they need to be moved on from hosting. We have put another call out asking for other offers of accommodation, and we are trying to identify any potential housing gaps. It is really challenging, because that six to nine month-period is just ending for a lot of people. We will continue to try to find solutions and to work with the properties that we have put a lot of time and effort into checking on behalf of hosts.

A lot of hosts are very keen, still, to consider inviting families into their homes and providing that support. If, in the short term, we can use those offers as best we can and, running parallel with that, identify some longer-term solutions, that is our way forward as a council.

**The Convener:** As the MSP for Motherwell and Wishaw, I have been out to visit the North Lanarkshire project, which goes wider than just my constituency. Ms Cook, to be blunt, it is a national project, but the cities have been most involved up to now. Are the other local authorities stepping up to the mark and doing as much as they can to deliver?

**Lorraine Cook:** Definitely. As Pat Togher said, the meeting that he chaired two weeks ago was incredibly positive, as were the offers by local authorities to come on to the ship to work with people in order to match them.

**Pat Togher:** I second that. The contribution from all the local authorities that have been involved in the last meeting and the meeting that is due to take place tomorrow has been exceptional.

Every local authority feels the pressures of the cost of living crisis and everything else that goes with that, and housing pressures are apparent in every local authority, so it is a big ask. A number of local authorities have been very proactive in coming on to the ship, and some have come on to the ship with Ukrainians who have managed to integrate into those local authority areas. That is looked on very favourably.

However, any available options for housing association properties, on the back of the capital funding arrangements, will only take us so far. It is mostly through the host family arrangements. I reiterate that, so far, in that space, the local authorities have been excellent, by assisting the disembarkation from MS Ambition.

**The Convener:** That is probably a useful and hopeful note on which to end today's session. I thank you all for your attendance.

We move into private session.

10:37

*Meeting continued in private until 11:30.*



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