



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Thursday 9 February 2023

Session 6



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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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CONSTITUTION, EUROPE, EXTERNAL AFFAIRS AND CULTURE COMMITTEE
5th 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:

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

Kirstin McPhee (Scottish Government)

Will Tyler-Greig (Scottish Government)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

James Johnston

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Thursday 9 February 2023

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:00]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Clare Adamson): [*Inaudible.*]—agenda items 3 and 4 in private.

Members *indicated agreement.*

Crisis in Ukraine

09:00

The Convener: Our second agenda item is evidence as part of our on-going consideration of Scotland's humanitarian response to the crisis in Ukraine. We are joined by Neil Gray MSP, the Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development and Minister with special responsibility for Refugees from Ukraine. The minister is joined by Kirstin McPhee, who is head of ministerial support and correspondence in the Scottish Government's Ukraine resettlement directorate, and Will Tyler-Greig, who is interim deputy director of the policy engagement and finance division of the Ukraine resettlement directorate. I invite the minister to make an opening statement.

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development and Minister with special responsibility for Refugees from Ukraine (Neil Gray): Good morning, colleagues, and thank you very much for the opportunity to update you on our work to welcome and support those who are fleeing the illegal war in Ukraine.

More than 8 million people have been displaced from Ukraine. This mass movement of people remains the largest in Europe since world war two. The Scottish Government condemns Russia's invasion and the crisis that it has created, and we stand in solidarity with the people of Ukraine. Sadly, as is evidenced by the numbers of people who are applying, the Scottish Government's supersponsor scheme has provided a desperately needed route to safety and sanctuary. Going well beyond our commitment to welcome at least 3,000 people, Scotland has sponsored more than 23,200 arrivals, the majority of which have been through the supersponsor scheme, which is more per head of population than any other part of the United Kingdom.

The scale and pace of this national response is unprecedented and awe inspiring. I would therefore like to recognise the enormous kindness and unwavering support of the Scottish people who have welcomed our friends from Ukraine into their homes and communities, and to thank them for that. Furthermore, I would like to acknowledge the work of our partners—the local authorities and third sector and community groups—that continue to provide that warm Scots welcome.

Responding to a challenge of this scale has required significant resource. This year, the Scottish Government will spend around £200 million on short-term accommodation, support for councils and funding to the third sector. Next year, we will invest a further £70 million to ensure that

communities continue to receive help to rebuild their lives. We do not want anyone to spend any longer than is necessary in temporary accommodation. A settled home is clearly the best outcome. I recently launched a new campaign for volunteer hosts, and we continue to work closely with local authorities and registered social landlords to bring forward longer-term housing options. Settled accommodation is just one part of our approach. We continually take steps to improve support to displaced people and to help integration in our communities through access to education, employment support, healthcare and any other services that they may need.

Although I hope that those who wish to return can do so safely in time, the Scottish Government's message to all those seeking sanctuary remains clear: Scotland is your home for as long as you need it to be.

The Convener: Thank you, minister. I will open by asking about the length of time that this is taking. At the very start, the expectation was that this would be about temporary and short-term support for Ukrainian people, as it was considered that the war would not last for very long. That has significantly changed and people are moving from what was considered to be a very short-term option to, realistically, looking to be in Scotland for perhaps a considerable time. Of course, we want it to be as short a time as possible.

People are moving from hotels and the ships into more permanent accommodation, and we are now hitting the six-month time where initial hosting arrangements may not continue for whatever reason. We therefore have a bit of a pinch point for the services, and we are still receiving more Ukrainians—of course, we do not know what the scale of that might be. I also understand from the Ukrainian consul that there are people who have received visas to come here who have yet to come.

I wondered whether your plans have changed and the policies have developed over time, and whether you are now looking at a different model.

Neil Gray: You are absolutely right that, sadly, everybody expected at the beginning that the war was going to be short. We have to pay tribute to the resilience and the bravery of the people of Ukraine for the fact that they have defended their country so incredibly well against the illegal Russian invasion—of course, it is the latest invasion, because Russia annexed the Crimea in 2014. I think that everybody's expectation was that it was going to be a short and temporary situation. We are now in a very different situation. We are approaching a year from the start of the war, which will be a poignant moment. I am happy to talk about some aspects of what we are planning

to mark that particularly tricky anniversary for Ukrainians who are in Scotland.

As a result, there has obviously had to be a change in approach, and you have seen that in the way that the supersponsor scheme has been organised. We had a review of the supersponsor scheme when I had to pause it due to the unprecedented demand that was placed on it during the summer months, when it was the only viable route through which to come into the United Kingdom. There were 16 interventions proposed as part of the review, which was led by Professor Linda Bauld. In the very short time since that review was published, we have made significant progress on the majority of those areas, including the £50 million fund to bring forward longer-term accommodation, support for people through the private rented sector and modular accommodation. We are doing a number of things to make the scheme sustainable and durable for the long term.

Sadly, Ukrainians will have to be in Scotland, for their safety, for longer than was anticipated. We will continue to ensure that we are doing everything possible, reflecting on some of the areas that the head of the consul office in Edinburgh, Mr Kuslii, has suggested, and reflecting on work that we are doing with our local authority partners and the third sector.

The Convener: Since you mentioned that one-year anniversary that is approaching, will you say what the Government is doing to engage with the Ukrainian community in Scotland to mark that?

Neil Gray: A number of events, including church services, are planned for that week by the Government, the City of Edinburgh Council and the Association of Ukrainians in Great Britain. There will be an event in Parliament that will be co-sponsored by me and the Presiding Officer on the Tuesday night. On the Thursday, which is the day before the anniversary, the Scottish Government will lead a debate on the issue. There will be wreath laying and processions, not just here in Edinburgh but across Scotland. There will be a number of events that will, I hope, allow the people who are here from Ukraine to see the solidarity of feeling that exists in Scotland.

I also hope that the events will remind people across Scotland that the war continues. As you say, convener, there are more than 13,000 people who still hold a visa to travel who are yet to travel. We still have people arriving from Ukraine every day, although the scheme has been paused. It is important to ensure that the issue is high in the public's consciousness and that people are aware that it requires significant intervention and support. Not least, the events are for our friends from Ukraine who are here and who have suffered great trauma. They will still be worried about family

members or will have lost family members and they will want to make sure that they mark that event appropriately.

The Convener: Thank you. We will move to questions from the committee.

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Welcome to the committee, minister, and thank you for coming. A few weeks ago, we heard evidence from the consul that Ukrainians in Scotland are still finding it hard to register with general practitioners and dentists. In fact, he warned that some had been forced to leave Scotland and go to Poland to get dental treatment. Additionally, JustRight Scotland warned in a briefing to the committee that some Ukrainians in Scotland are importing their own medications, as they do not know how to obtain prescriptions from the national health service in Scotland. Given the time that has elapsed, it might be thought that such bureaucratic barriers should have been sorted by now.

I suppose that I am asking for your reaction to that, with a plea to give the issue your urgent attention and ensure that the barriers to medical services are lifted.

Neil Gray: I have now had the opportunity to meet Mr Kuslii to welcome him to Scotland and to set out the number of areas of intervention by the Scottish Government, local authority partners and others working to support Ukrainians. I hope to be able to visit the MS Ambition in Glasgow with him next week to talk about some of the move-on operations on the ship and to discuss some of the areas that he has raised.

I cannot remember which local authority representative was asked about the issue at the committee last week, but there is confirmation from local authority partners—I can give it again today—that there are support services on board the ships or in hotels, and that advice is readily available to hosts on how people should or can register with doctors and dentists. If there has been a breakdown for some individuals, that is unfortunate. I am looking to ensure that the head of consular services, Mr Kuslii, is aware of the support services that are in place.

You are absolutely right that it would be unacceptable if there was not a clear pathway for people to register with a doctor and so on, but those support services are in place. People are entitled to register with doctors and dentists in the same way as any other Scottish resident, and I am confident that support services are in place to ensure that those pathways are clear.

Donald Cameron: The consul also raised the topic of accessing private rental accommodation, and he requested that local authorities act as rent guarantors. Last week, we heard from the

Highland Council that it operates a rental guarantee scheme, and I think that the witnesses from Edinburgh and Glasgow also said that they are part of a national working group that is looking at the issue. Can you advise when that working group might report? What action can the Scottish Government take to assist any local authority in introducing a rental guarantee scheme?

Neil Gray: Obviously, we hope that that working group can report as quickly as possible. Support for private rented accommodation is one of the 16 interventions that the review of the supersponsor scheme looked at. There are challenges and high levels of competition in the private rented sector in Scotland already, but it is one avenue of potential long-term accommodation that we are looking at supporting Ukrainians to move into.

Of the 32 local authorities, 18 currently offer some form of support through guarantee schemes for the private rented sector, and we are looking at what more we might be able to do to extend that. As I said, it is part of the review of the supersponsor scheme that Linda Bauld led. We will continue to do that work in concert with my colleague Shona Robison and her housing officials.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I want to ask about access to private rented sector accommodation and whether creative solutions are starting to come through on that. I am aware that, in Spain in 2015, Spanish cities were calling on the banks to make available for refugees empty vacant properties that were in their asset portfolios at that time.

I wonder what the options are in Scotland. You mentioned modular accommodation. In rural Scotland, we have empty properties or empty homes—in the community where I live, there is an empty bed and breakfast. It is frustrating to see homes and houses in our communities that are unavailable for general private rented sector accommodation, particularly for displaced Ukrainian people, who often want to stay in communities and continue to thrive and be a part of those communities. I am interested in what creative ideas are being developed to meet their needs right now.

09:15

Neil Gray: That question strikes at the heart of the work that we are doing to try to ensure that people have suitable long-term accommodation to move into from temporary accommodation, whether that is hosted, hotels or on the two ships.

The £50 million fund that the First Minister launched last year has had good take-up so far. Through the projects that have been agreed, close to 750 properties will be brought back into use that

could be allocated to Ukrainians. In some cases, they will be dedicated to Ukrainians, but others will also provide legacy accommodation options for domestic homelessness as well. We have a number of applications to that fund in the pipeline from authorities across Scotland.

I would always say that more could be done. I encourage local authorities or owners of buildings that could be repurposed to consider whether something creative, as Mr Ruskell described it, could be done to repurpose those buildings to offer accommodation to respond directly to the situation for Ukrainians and, additionally, to provide legacy accommodation for domestic homelessness.

As Mr Ruskell points out, we are also looking at modular accommodation, and we are not unique in that. The Irish Government already has modular accommodation in use, and the Welsh Government is in the advanced stages of introducing modular accommodation.

We need to look at any and all factors to try to ensure that we are providing appropriate and sustainable accommodation for people arriving from Ukraine. Again, I encourage local authorities, registered social landlords and others to look at empty homes and empty buildings that could be repurposed, and to speak to my colleagues in Government and my officials to see whether a bid can be made for that capital funding to ensure that those properties are brought back into use.

Mark Ruskell: The committee has heard that there have been delays to in-country applications for the Ukrainian visa scheme from Ukrainians who were without leave to remain when the war began. Are you aware of that, and have there been discussions with the UK Government about how we can ensure that there are no delays? Initially, the committee had concerns that seasonal workers who had maybe left seasonal employment and were without leave to remain would be trapped and unable to go through other routes. It was a surprise to see evidence that suggests that that is still an issue.

Neil Gray: Mr Ruskell is right that it is still an issue. The UK Government has responsibility for all aspects of the processing and organisation of visas, whether for Ukrainians or others who are looking to come to Scotland. We make regular representations to the UK Government on the processing of visas for Ukrainians and others to ensure that it happens as timeously as possible. The Ukraine extension scheme was intended to bridge the gap that Mr Ruskell has pointed out but, if he has direct evidence of areas where that continues to be an issue, I would be happy to raise that with Home Office contacts whom we meet regularly.

Mark Ruskell: Thanks—I appreciate that.

Another issue is about a potential path to permanent settlement in the UK. The vast majority of Ukrainian people whom we meet wish to return home, but some of them may wish to stay. Understanding what that path to permanent settlement might be is important for them in weighing up options. Is there clarity on that? If not, what can you do to try to get clarity for those who have the power to decide?

Neil Gray: Again, Mr Ruskell asks a very pertinent and timeous question. I raised that issue directly with Felicity Buchan, the new minister with responsibility for the Ukraine scheme in the UK Government. I am concerned that we are approaching a year since the start of the latest invasion by Russia; therefore, we are approaching a year since some people will have received visas. That means that they are a third of the way through their time here in the UK, because it is a three-year visa. Mr Ruskell is right that some will want to return to Ukraine as soon as it is safe for them to do so. They have property or family there, or they have jobs to return to. There is an emotional tie there, understandably, and they want to return to help to rebuild.

I know from speaking to Ukrainians that others want to rebuild their life here in Scotland. They have enjoyed their stay thus far and they want to stay for the longer term. I raised that question with Felicity Buchan. I am not confident that that thinking has progressed yet in the UK Government, but I will continue to raise the issue because we want to ensure that people who are here right now have the certainty of knowing what their status is. Again, I encourage colleagues, if they have evidence of where concerns have been raised, to ensure that I am aware of that, so that I can continue to raise them with UK colleagues.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): One issue that has been raised by the Scottish Refugee Council is arrivals and welcoming people effectively in a way that provides some of the information that we are talking about. I realise that some of this involves the co-operation of the UK Border Force, but the Scottish Refugee Council mentioned the lack of predictability of arrivals being one of the main challenges: it no longer receives any information from the UK Border Force and, therefore, has no access to pre-arrival information. I realise that that is for the UK Border Force to organise, but where does the Scottish Government come into the greeting and arrival process, and are you trying to overcome some of those co-ordination challenges?

Neil Gray: I thank Dr Allan for that question, because it has been an issue for us for coming up to a year in responding to the crisis in Ukraine and the movement of people. The Scottish Refugee

Council, which we fund to support us in the arrival support mechanisms—our welcome hubs—is absolutely right. I think that you also received evidence last week from local authorities about the unpredictability of arrivals being one of the greatest challenges, particularly in relation to the peak arrivals period last summer, when we had high numbers of people arriving. There is a complete contrast with the resettlement programmes for those arriving from Afghanistan and Syria.

There is no doubt that there is a challenge, and we have been looking to respond as best we can. For instance, we have had to ensure that we have sufficient temporary accommodation to match the trend of arrivals, which meant that, at some points last year, we had overprovision of temporary accommodation. Sometimes we have been stretched in relation to temporary accommodation, but not having that certainty and correspondence has made it far more difficult for us to plan.

It is difficult and a challenge, but I need to pay tribute to my colleagues in Government, local authority teams and the Scottish Refugee Council, who have been responding admirably to ensure that people are given the appropriate welcome when they arrive. In particular, they have ensured that, as part of that welcome operation, there are people at the welcome desks at the transit points at Edinburgh and Glasgow airports and at train stations to greet folk arriving from Ukraine, with messages and information translated into Ukrainian and a very clear pathway showing where they are heading. As I said in my introduction, we could not have done that without partnership support for the welcome hubs involving local authorities and the SRC. Of course, I am happy to speak to the Scottish Refugee Council or, indeed, Border Force again about how that could be operated in a better way in the future.

Alasdair Allan: A completely different issue that was raised by the consul was the question of people who are looking for employment in Scotland and who feel, with some justification, that they are underemployed, perhaps because their qualifications have not been recognised so that they can work here. Again, I realise that some of this touches on reserved matters, but I am interested to know what progress there has been in that conversation about ensuring mutual recognition of qualifications, where possible, to allow employment.

Neil Gray: Dr Allan is absolutely right. People who are qualified to very high levels and who are very well skilled have been arriving. We are looking to ensure that while they are here they are able to utilise those skills, given that we have labour market challenges here. There have been

discussions with the UK Government about mutual recognition of qualifications to try to make sure that when people such as medics arrive, they are able to quickly go through the necessary transition to be able to practise in Scotland. We will continue to have those discussions as areas that are raised with us are pointed out. I would like to bring in Kirstin McPhee at this stage to supplement that.

Kirstin McPhee (Scottish Government): We have had an update from the Law Society of Scotland, which is doing a lot of work with Ukrainian solicitors to support them to practise here under their home title or to requalify in Scots law if they so wish. That includes waiving examination and exemption fees and providing free access to English language courses. To support that, it is also running shadowing and mentoring schemes, for example. We are linked into that and we are doing what we can to support it.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I would be very interested in the committee getting an update on the 16 recommendations from the review of the supersponsor scheme, which I think was put out in November last year, and an update on the £50 million scheme that was launched in September.

You mentioned repurposing and accessing homes. There are 43,000 empty homes in Scotland—there are more than 9,000 in Edinburgh. I think that there is huge interest in a cost-effective way of getting access to homes. I am thinking in particular about those who have been hosts, given that it has been almost one year since we began to recognise the devastation. Many houses and communities have been bombed and destroyed, so this is not now about the short term, as you have correctly acknowledged; it is about giving people that medium-term support.

Could we have an update on the £50 million scheme and the extent to which we can use it to repurpose existing empty homes, which would be cost effective? Could you also say something about continuing support for hosts? Many are over their six months. Are you bringing new hosts into play? Can you talk about what is happening now?

Neil Gray: I thank Ms Boyack for that question. In the interests of time, although I would be happy to go through each of the 16 recommendations and the progress that has been made on them, I would also be happy to write to the committee detailing the follow-up work that has been progressed in the three months since the recommendations were published—if that would be satisfactory to the committee, convener.

Ms Boyack raised two issues: the £50 million fund and support for hosts. On the £50 million fund, as I outlined previously, nearly 750 units

have been brought back into use and £10 million of the fund has been granted to local authority partners. We have a large number of applications that are being progressed and there are registrations of interest, including from Edinburgh City Council, about potential opportunities for bids to repurpose or bring properties back into use. The empty homes issue has been around for some time. If properties are in the social rented sector, the £50 million fund should address them, but privately owned homes are a challenge. There are opportunities to buy those back, but that requires quite a lot of discussion and negotiation, as well as gathering information about who owns them and whether they are willing or in a position to sell them or bring them back into use.

On support for hosts, I have to first express my utmost gratitude to the thousands of people across Scotland who put their names forward and are hosting people. I have friends who are doing that and I have been able to see for myself the incredible generosity as well as the appreciation among Ukrainians for people having opened their homes.

There has been an updated appeal for new hosts to come forward, which has been well taken up thus far. We would always look to encourage anyone who thinks that they might be in a position to offer a place of sanctuary to a Ukrainian who has been displaced to come forward, and we will do what we can to provide the necessary support.

09:30

This also gives me the opportunity to reflect on the fact that the UK Government has partially acceded to the calls from the Scottish and Welsh Governments to increase support for hosts. I am very well aware of the challenges that people are facing with energy costs and the costs crisis. We recommended that the UK Government should immediately double, or certainly increase, the £350 “thank you” payment to reflect the fact that inflation is running incredibly high. It partly acquiesced to that, increasing the payment to £500 after someone has been hosting for 12 months. That does not meet the needs that we believe are involved in maintaining hosting arrangements or in encouraging new people to come forward. We would have wanted to see that go much further.

Our arrivals data shows that the majority of people who arrived in Scotland—whether they are being hosted or otherwise—arrived around the summer. People will therefore not meet that 12-month hosting requirement until the summertime, and we know that the pressure is being felt now. I referenced the meeting that I had with Felicity Buchan—I think that it was last week or the week before—during which I and Jane Hutt, my

counterpart in Wales, impressed upon her the importance of the Treasury releasing further finance to support hosts, and we will continue to make those calls. Other calls were made around support for local authorities—I am sure that we will turn to that later in the discussion.

Sarah Boyack: It is very good that you will give us that update on the recommendations—we do not have time to let you run through them in their entirety.

Neil Gray: I could if you want, but I suspect that I had best not, in the interests of time .

Sarah Boyack: I come back to housing—and I direct members to my entry in the register of members’ interests in terms of my former employment.

I think that support to get empty homes back in use is very much seen as a win-win, because we have a housing crisis within a housing crisis. It will not be straightforward, but the £50 million fund could be really significant.

I am glad that you have put on the record your comments about the issues facing hosts, because constituents have told me of their worries about the money running out after six months. It may not be enough, but it is important to let people know that support is there.

You also mentioned modular housing in your introductory remarks. I think that most of us were assuming that that had now been ruled out, given the focus of the £50 million. There are a lot of concerns about that. Do you want to say anything more about it on the record?

Neil Gray: We have not ruled it out. We are still looking at the possibility of a pilot to assess the appropriateness of modular housing. There are concerns that we want to make sure that we can overcome, if we are looking at modular housing, around homelessness standards and utilising appropriate accommodation. We are looking very closely at the work that has been done in Ireland and are looking to liaise further with our colleagues in Wales, who are also in advanced discussions around utilising modular accommodation.

There is a wide range of potential options, ranging from very temporary solutions to longer-term options that can be purchased and have a lifespan of decades. Those can be utilised and we are very interested in exploring them further. Once we have taken a decision, I would be happy to make sure that the committee is updated on any progress that is made on that front.

Sarah Boyack: That would be very helpful, because there is a huge amount of concern about the issue. You mentioned issues such as local authority capacity, schools and people being able

to get health support, aside from the welfare of people living in modular accommodation. We would be very keen to see any updates on that because there are real worries. That is why the focus on bringing existing homes back into use—homes that are safe and integrated in communities—is, as I said, potentially a win-win. In Edinburgh, we have people from Syria and Afghanistan who are still in temporary accommodation, so it has to be seen as an urgent issue that requires investment.

Neil Gray: Ms Boyack is absolutely right. We are considering the issues that she raises around ensuring access to appropriate services and appropriate living accommodation. If we are to proceed, the key considerations for us are deciding where sites might be located as well as ensuring the appropriateness of the accommodation. As I have done with regard to the ships, to give colleagues confidence, when we take a decision on or progress any of those matters, I am happy to ensure that the committee is furnished with the details and the opportunity to visit any potential sites that we look at.

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): In your evidence, you have touched on co-operation and co-ordination with other Governments across the UK and with Ireland. Will you expand a wee bit more on that?

I am also interested in delving a bit more into the change in council funding and the decrease from £10,500 to £5,900, as mandated by the UK Government. I would be interested in getting your thoughts on how that will impact on local authorities here.

Neil Gray: On international and intergovernmental co-operation, any international visit that I have been on of late—whether that has been to Brussels, Dublin, Poland or Germany—has involved discussion about the country's particular response to the situation in Ukraine. As I set out in my introductory remarks, it has been evident to me that the movement of people is the largest on the European continent since the second world war. People could not have prepared for the crisis, and they are responding to it as well as possible. We all face a Europe-wide challenge, and we are all looking to examples of best practice elsewhere to see where other countries, including our own, are trying to ensure that they are responding in the best possible way for those who have fled war.

There is very strong co-operation and discussion with Welsh Government colleagues, for instance. We are, on responding, very much on the same page as they are on. Obviously, there is a difference in the scale of people's arrival and, from the discussions that we have had with the Irish Government, we know that there is a

difference in the scale of arrival in the upward direction in Ireland. Ireland is one of the European nations that waived visa requirements, so a very large number of Ukrainians have arrived there, compared with the number in Scotland or elsewhere in the UK.

There are shared challenges in ensuring that our response is appropriate in respect of access to housing and services and other similar issues. The challenges that we face in Scotland are not unique.

The financial situation that Ms Minto has described is a huge worry to me. I know that it is a major worry to local authorities in Scotland and that that came through in evidence last week. It is also a huge worry to Welsh Government colleagues and, I believe, to the Local Government Association in England.

Ms Minto is right: local authority tariff support reduced from £10,500 per person to £5,900 per person as of January. Thereafter, there is no year 2 tariff support for local authorities, unlike in the Syria and Afghan schemes. The support has been replaced by a one-off fund of £150 million across the UK. We still have to understand what the allocation will be, but our assumption is that the funding will be a tenth of the value of the year 1 tariff funding per person.

The £10,500 already represented a stretch for our local authority partners, which we are asking to provide a significant amount of education, housing, social work and trauma support—you name it. In the conversation that I mentioned with my counterpart in the UK Government, Felicity Buchan, she suggested that local government should or could be doing even more. That was met with some frustration from me because, while we are asking our local authorities to do more, people are still arriving, and we are seeing funding from the UK Government to support that dropping to as low as a tenth for the year coming.

I hope that it is not too late and that we can impress on Treasury colleagues the fact that, although they have done a huge amount in respect of the military support grant—I take my hat off to the UK Government for the world-leading military support that it has provided to Ukraine; credit where credit is due for that. We must ensure that we are appropriately supporting the humanitarian response. I have grave concerns that the cut in funding will mean that the expectation of meeting the humanitarian concerns will not be met.

I am happy to bring in my colleague Will Tyler-Greig at this stage.

Will Tyler-Greig (Scottish Government): I will build on the minister's comments.

We understand that the education tariff is another element that will be ceased and that there is no current plan for a replacement. We have asked for clarity on whether the Scottish Government will receive any uplift in Barnett consequentials, but we have yet to receive a firm answer on that. Obviously, that is concerning.

The uplift and “thank you” payments are another added element. In an Office for National Statistics survey, the majority of hosts—95 per cent—reported struggling to meet the costs of utilities and basics, such as bedding and toiletries. The approach will therefore hit communities, hosts and children in school. Having children in school is, of course, among the foremost ways of helping to integrate a family. Obviously, the approach is concerning.

Jenni Minto: I thank both of you for those comprehensive answers.

Things really hit home when we realise the magnitude of what is going on across our local authorities and our third sector groups to support Ukrainian families that are here. My thanks go out for all the hard work that is happening to ensure that people are welcomed.

Two weeks ago, I spoke to the Ukrainian consul, Andrii Kuslii, about the heritage and culture of Ukrainians who are now living in Scotland. It is important for all of us to mark the anniversary of the start of the illegal conflict, but we also have to recognise the importance of the culture that families are bringing to us. One of the consul’s suggestions was to look at Ukrainian holidays and how we could support local authorities to recognise those. Given that “Culture” is also in your job title, I would like to hear your thoughts on how we could support the Ukrainians in that respect. In addition, given the length of the conflict and the damage that has happened, how can Scotland continue to support the country to rebuild once the dreadful conflict has ended?

Neil Gray: I want to touch on a number of aspects.

First, I reiterate the thanks for, and the appreciation of, the work that is going on in local authorities throughout Scotland to respond. They have had some experience on a smaller scale with the Syrian resettlement work, and resettlement officers throughout Scotland have done an exemplary job in supporting hosts and Ukrainians and ensuring that everything possible is done to facilitate schooling, housing and so on. We have had very close co-operation with individual local authorities directly, as members would expect, and through the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, which we have regular meetings with at the ministerial and senior official levels.

Ms Minto is right about recognising and celebrating the fact that Ukrainians who arrive here bring cultural diversity with them. That is something that we celebrate in Scotland, and we should not take it for granted. We need to ensure that that continues to be appreciated.

09:45

Work is done by existing and growing Ukrainian community groups. I mentioned the Edinburgh branch of the Association of Ukrainians in Great Britain. There is now a Glasgow branch as well. Hannah Beaton-Hawryluk has been recognised with awards, as has the Ukrainian club in Edinburgh. That is deserved, because they are doing fantastic work to support our work to support Ukrainians who have arrived here to continue to celebrate Ukrainian culture.

I would be more than happy to consider any suggestions from Mr Kuslii or others about what more we can do to support that work and ensure that we are providing the support and the warm welcome that people absolutely deserve.

Jenni Minto: How can Scotland’s cultural side support the rebuilding in the future?

Neil Gray: A conference was held at the Scottish Parliament with heritage and cultural organisations from Ukraine in which we heard—you and the convener heard these, as well—harrowing accounts of cultural vandalism and destruction of monuments and other sites of cultural significance in Ukraine. There is clear targeting of those sites by Russian forces to try to wipe Ukraine and everything that Ukraine stands for from the face of the earth. I suggest that investigating that should be in the category of investigating for a war crime. We will continue to work directly with colleagues from Ukraine on the culture side on what we can do to support that.

On rebuilding, when I was in Brussels at the end of last year, I had a meeting with the European Committee of the Regions about what we can do in partnership on the rebuilding work. That committee has taken a leading role to co-ordinate the recovery support. We have not yet had advanced discussions because we are still in the war situation, but we will be looking to do what we can, depending on what the demand is, to offer special practical support or otherwise, to ensure that Ukraine can rebuild when the war is over and it has maintained its borders and boundaries.

The Convener: I have a supplementary question about the “thank you” payments as they stand, minister. From what you said, my understanding is that there will be two levels and that hosts will qualify after 12 months. I know that some hosts will already be on a second or possibly third hosting arrangement. By its nature,

there is a break in that process, so I am curious to know how that has been managed, if there is a 12-month limit. That seems strange, because people are incurring expenses in the here and now. That disparity could discourage people from stepping up.

Neil Gray: You are absolutely right. It was recognised that more needed to be done to support our hosts and, to give credit where it is due, the UK Government has acknowledged that. The disappointing element is that when that support starts has been kicked down the road. For many people, that will not be until long into the summer, and there is confusion as to when the qualification will come in. I will bring in my colleague Will Tyler-Greig to provide some clarification on that.

We continue to impress on UK colleagues, as does the Welsh Government—it is not just the Scottish Government that is doing this—the need for such an intervention. The previous UK Government minister with responsibility for Ukraine, Richard Harrington, said publicly that he wanted support payments to be made more quickly. We will continue to do what we can.

Will Tyler-Greig: The UK Government has confirmed that time spent in short-term accommodation will contribute towards a 12-month eventual uplift. In other words, any placement in country, whether it is in temporary accommodation with a first host, a second host or a third host, will eventually add up to 12 months. At that point, the host at 12 months will receive the uplifted payment. My worry is how councils will navigate that.

The Convener: Someone could have a person in their house for 10 months, but the money follows the person—

Will Tyler-Greig: It does.

The Convener: —so the payment goes to the host at 12 months.

Will Tyler-Greig: It does. The scheme is certainly not intuitive. My concern and the minister's concern—the Welsh Government has made this clear, too—is that progress through the different hosting arrangements will be difficult for councils to track, which will make implementation difficult. It would be far simpler to uplift universally, as the minister said. It does not matter when someone starts volunteering; they are making the same good contribution to welcoming Ukrainians.

The Convener: It seems a strange system.

Neil Gray: It will be really challenging because, as we have heard—we know that this will potentially happen with the disembarkation from MS Ambition—people could potentially move to different local authority areas. That will be the

case in relation to hosted accommodation, temporary accommodation and long-term accommodation.

The issue could be resolved in relatively simple ways. To be fair, I do not think that the block here lies with my ministerial counterparts with responsibility for Ukraine. I think that the Treasury needs to be encouraged to get this issue and the issue of tariff payments to local authorities resolved, so we will continue to do what we can to impress on it the need for that.

The Convener: As you rightly said, our thanks go to the people who have stepped up to host. The last thing that we want to do is create a disparity or a level of unfairness for them. Thank you for your work in that area, and thank you for your commitment to provide us with further information.

Neil Gray: I am happy to provide it to the committee, rather than to Ms Boyack alone.

The Convener: Mr Cameron has a question.

Donald Cameron: You touched on this in your last answer, minister, but an issue that I raised last week with local authority witnesses was that of transition from quite short-term accommodation to longer-term accommodation, wherever that is, and the importance of continuity, particularly in education settings for children and in employment settings for adults, and the challenges that might be posed if a Ukrainian individual or a family moves from one local authority area to another or to a different part of a large local authority area. What is the Scottish Government doing to help out?

Neil Gray: That is undoubtedly a challenge, and it was among the foremost issues in the discussion that I had with Mr Kuslii when I met him. We want to ensure that there is minimal disruption to people as they move—especially from the ships, but also from hotel accommodation. As I said, he has given a commitment to come with me to MS Ambition—next week, I hope—in order to help to communicate what is available, the support that is in place and to give some reassurance around some of that work.

First, I am very heartened by the fact that Ukrainians who have arrived in Scotland, albeit that they are in temporary accommodation, have been able to put down roots and to establish themselves in schools, employment and other community settings. That is obviously what we want to see. Because, by its nature, temporary accommodation is temporary, there will be an element of disruption when people move on from that, which poses a challenge.

We are looking to do what we can to offer accommodation, where we can, as close as possible to where people have been based. That will not always be possible, which is why we have had staff from a number of local authorities from across Scotland go on to MS Ambition in the past few weeks. I think that 50 families are likely to move to Aberdeenshire in the coming period. We also want to impress on people the opportunities that exist for employment, schooling and housing across Scotland, not just in the central belt. When I appeared before the committee in June, I mentioned the opportunities that exist for people to move around Scotland and to be able to rebuild their lives from there.

We will work closely with Mr Kuslii and with our local authority partners. We will not work only with those that have direct involvement in the hosting of the temporary accommodation—Glasgow City Council, in the case of the accommodation on MS Ambition—but neighbouring authorities as well, to see what we can do to offer accommodation that would allow people to still be able to commute easily or to be able to go to school where they have already settled. However, I must stress that, because of the nature of temporary accommodation, there will be an element of disruption.

Finally, the national matching service has become very successful. I think that approaching 4,000 people have been matched from temporary accommodation into longer-term accommodation, whether that is hosted accommodation or longer-term accommodation in private housing or social housing. Conversations continue between people in the national matching service and those on the ships and in hotels in an effort to ensure that people can move on to areas of their choosing that will suit their needs from the point of view of education and employment.

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): We have heard about the pressures on accommodation. There is a large caveat here, given how the war in Ukraine could progress. We hear warnings coming out of the country of a new Russian offensive. In that context, are there emergency contingency plans in place if there is a large, fresh influx of Ukrainians wishing to come to Scotland?

Neil Gray: Yes. We continue to monitor the war situation, because that is the best way of predicting what movement might be like. Obviously, the scheme itself is paused and only those who are in receipt of a supersponsor visa—more than 13,500 of whom are still to travel—or those who have managed to find a private host through what is available UK-wide would be able to travel.

We keep a constant eye on the situation as regards the war, and we would look to procure the necessary temporary accommodation to keep up the provision or to go beyond that, given the contingency that, as Mr Golden points out, would be required, which we see elsewhere in Europe, where there has been a larger movement of people, which would be more typical refugee accommodation. We have been seeking to avoid that up until now, to ensure that people who arrive here are given the best possible start, but all those considerations are kept under review to ensure that we are able to offer appropriate accommodation as best we can.

Maurice Golden: Thank you. I am also keen to hear your views on how important Scotland's third sector has been in supporting displaced Ukrainians. Do third sector organisations have the resources that they require in order to do that?

Neil Gray: Again, as I did in my opening remarks, I pay tribute to the third sector, as I have done to our local authority partners. The Scottish Refugee Council is a key partner for us with regard to implementation, the welcome arrangements and delivery of our response; it enables us to ensure that everything that we do is sense checked. In individual communities and across Scotland, third sector organisations—as they do for people who are already resident in Scotland—do a phenomenal job to help and support people who have arrived from Ukraine.

I have seen wonderful work in my constituency of Airdrie and Shotts and in wider North Lanarkshire, as well as across Scotland, when I have been out on visits to places such as Aberfeldy. The community there has done an incredible job of providing help and support for people from Ukraine.

As regards whether third sector organisations are getting the necessary support, I would say that they can always come and speak to us if they need more support. We provide funding to third sector interfaces across Scotland to make sure that money and support can be distributed. Will, do you have the exact figures?

Will Tyler-Greig: I do. I will also mention the third sector reference group that the minister will chair. As part of the review, we took forward a decision to better integrate the understanding that the third sector has on the ground and to understand and co-ordinate that. More than £77,000 has been provided to the Edinburgh Third Sector Interface, and more than £1.3 million has been provided to the Scottish Refugee Council.

There is also a package of support that goes beyond that, in terms of the Ukraine advice Scotland service and, of course, the British Red Cross. I think that the new minister-led third sector

group will be the key platform to make decisions on how best to support the third sector as we move into the next financial year.

10:00

The Convener: We come to what I hope will be the final question. You mentioned the suspension of the supersponsor scheme and the context of the other schemes that were open in the UK at that time. When is that likely to be reviewed? Can you update the committee on progress in that area?

Neil Gray: The situation is under constant review, as would be expected. In my most recent statement to Parliament, I confirmed that the supersponsor scheme would remain paused. Discussions will be had with the programme delivery board in the coming weeks and a decision on the current status will be required this month. I will make sure that the committee is furnished with the outcome of those.

The Convener: That exhausts our questions. I thank the minister and his colleagues for their attendance this morning. We look forward to having full participation in the events that you mentioned to mark a year since the start of the war, which we hope will be over as soon as possible.

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener: It appears that the microphone did not pick up what I said at the start of the meeting. Therefore, I must ask, for the sake of official parliamentary process, whether colleagues are content to take agenda items 3 and 4 in private. Is that agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: On that note, we move into private session.

10:01

Meeting continued in private until 10:50.

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Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

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