

Stability and Settlement for Disabled Ukrainian Refugees

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Research Context

- The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine led to wide-scale population displacement, with more than 250,000 visas issued by the Home Office under the Family and Sponsorship schemes.
- Approximately 15% of new arrivals reported significant physical or mental health conditions, with 32% receiving healthcare treatment before leaving Ukraine. (ONS Humanitarian Response Insights Survey, 2023)
- People with disabilities face major practical obstacles in their new location, as well as considerable mental health challenges as a result of war and displacement. (Kang et al, 2023)
- However, we know little about the particular challenges faced by Ukrainian war refugees with disabilities in the UK, and the ways these might be best addressed. We conducted the only UK study focused specifically on disabled Ukrainian refugees.

Our Work

- We worked in partnership with SCOPE, RNIB, Visibility Scotland, Guide Dogs, Coventry City Council, Warwickshire County Council, the British Red Cross, and the Association of Ukrainians in Great Britain.
- We focused on refugees with physical and sensory disabilities. Research questions included the journey to the UK, subsequent housing, work, education, welfare, healthcare, social relations, and mental health. Given the distinct challenges faced by this group, our work does not seek to generalise to the wider Ukrainian population in the UK.
- We interviewed 45 refugees online: 16 in interviews + 29 in focus groups (averaging ~ 4 members per group). 38 discussed issues associated with their own disabilities, 7 were parents of children with disabilities.
- 8 respondents were from Wales, 4 from Scotland, and 33 from England. Interviews/groups, each approximately 1.5 hours, were conducted in Ukrainian, Russian, or English, or a combination of languages.
- Four Parliamentary questions based on these findings have been asked so far on our behalf in the Commons and Lords

Our findings

- Uncertainty about the opportunity to remain long-term in the UK is an important impediment to the employment, housing, and well-being of all Ukrainian refugees in the UK, but these challenges are particularly severe for those with disabilities.

- UK rehabilitation, specialist care, mobility aids, and disability-inclusive services are unavailable or unsafe in Ukraine due to the war: “ ... when Russia came, we did not use state services at all... ” (Antonina, on behalf of a disabled child with cerebral palsy, wheelchair user)
- Despite a strong motivation to work, inappropriate JobCentre referrals and delays in receiving clinical assessments and rehabilitation led many unable to engage in employment: “I’m visually impaired... the job centre... sent me to be a bus driver. ” (Victoria)
- Depression, anxiety and social isolation were common in this group. This reduced work-readiness, especially for those in rural areas or without peer/community networks: “I still have depression... this is one of the reasons why I can't find a job now. I just pass out for a few days... ” (Mykola, connective tissue dysplasia)
- Some with disabilities require financial support. However, complex English-only forms and inconsistent professional advice led many eligible participants to abandon applications: “ ...it was difficult for me here to organise it at first with the language barrier... with the lack of support for special children with disabilities. ” (Valeriia, parent of a child with vision impairment)
- Moves between temporary accommodation and a lack of accessible housing reduced stability and interrupted care: “nothing even goes here except taxis... it’s a lot of money... if I need to go to the neurologist I need the bus... a healthy person can get there in 5-6 minutes, it takes me half an hour. ” (Olga, MS)

Recommendations from our research

i Settlement for disabled Ukrainian refugees

Under the current humanitarian Ukraine visa schemes, a small, clearly defined group of disabled Ukrainian refugees relies on UK-based rehabilitation, specialist care, mobility aids, and adapted housing, which are unavailable or unsafe in Ukraine.

This temporary status disrupts employment, healthcare, and housing. Longer grants of leave would make employers less reluctant to hire disabled refugees, reduce reliance on benefits, and improve continuity of care and housing.

i Employment

JobCentre Plus should recognise clinical limitations and healthcare and rehabilitation needs in order to provide appropriate job referrals.

Trauma-informed, culturally competent support would increase rates of employment for disabled Ukrainian refugees, especially in rural areas where isolation is more prevalent.

i Supporting employment through targeted benefits

Accessible benefits are necessary so disabled refugees can engage in work where possible, and remain in employment when other structural barriers limit this.

i Mobility and employment

Housing allocations should reflect functional and employment needs, with rural placements accompanied by access to affordable transport.