

Domesticating Responsibility: Refugee Hosting and the Homes for Ukraine Scheme

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Abstract: In March 2022, in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the UK government launched its “Homes for Ukraine” private hosting scheme. The British public were urged to support Ukraine by signing up to host people fleeing the war in their own homes. There are many critiques of the scheme, especially the racialised connotations of welcoming Ukrainians while shunning others seeking sanctuary. However, the particular themes of responsibility and responsabilisation stand out. This scheme is the first programme of this scale in the UK, signalling a different approach to accommodating and supporting refugees, away from the realm of government. Is this a retreating state, and who exactly is responsible for supporting Ukrainians as they settle? What does this responsibility entail? Drawing on 58 interviews with hosts, guests, charities, and central and local government representatives, this article forges new contributions to understanding what is at stake in refugee hosting schemes.

Анотація: В березні 2022 року у відповідь на вторгнення росії в Україну уряд Великої Британії запровадив спонсорську схему «Дім для українців». Жителів Британії закликали підтримати Україну і зареєструватися спонсорами для тих, хто тікає від війни вдома. Схему неодноразово критикували, особливо з расових міркувань, зважаючи на гостинність до українців і одночасне уникавання інших шукачів притулку. Втім виокремлюються певні теми відповідальності і перекладання обов'язків держави на громадян. Ця схема є першою програмою такого обсягу в Британії, і висвітлює інший підхід до підтримки біженців, відокремлений від урядової діяльності. Чи вважати це заходом обмеження урядом своїх повноважень, і хто саме зобов'язаний допомагати українцям освоїтися? В чому полягає цей обов'язок? Ця стаття ґрунтується на 58 інтерв'ю зі спонсорами, гостями, благодійними організаціями, а також представниками органів центральної та місцевої влади, і поглиблене розуміння впливів та наслідків спонсорських схем.

Keywords: hosting, refugees, responsibility, care, home, Homes for Ukraine

Introduction: The UK's Homes for Ukraine Scheme

In March 2022, in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the UK government launched its “Homes for Ukraine” scheme through the Department for Levelling up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC). The British public were urged to support Ukraine, and those fleeing the war, by signing up to host displaced Ukrainians in their own homes. This plea was largely successful, and 131,000 Ukrainian adults and children have since arrived in the UK through this programme (National Audit Office 2023:4). On the surface, the scheme offers a

generous package for Ukrainian arrivals. Local authorities, charged with the administration of the programme, initially received £10,500 from central government per person (dropping to £5,900 after December 2022) to resource this support. Ukrainian guests have been issued visas, been receiving £200 on arrival, have full access to public services and benefits, are allowed to seek work and are in Band B priority for social housing. Hosts have been given “thank you” payments of £350 each month, going up to £500 for hostings which last beyond a year, to offset the costs of opening up their homes (National Audit Office 2023:5).

The participation of private individuals in refugee resettlement programmes is not new. Private hosting, or “homestay”, has been used across Europe much more since the so-called “refugee crisis” of the mid-2010s (Bassoli and Luccioni 2023; Monforte et al. 2021), partly building on the long-established Canadian model of private refugee sponsorship (Hyndman 2022). The international humanitarian response to the invasion of Ukraine has signalled a further expansion of this approach, not least in Poland where there has been a huge commitment from the public to support and privately host displaced Ukrainians (Cullen Dunn and Kaliszewska 2023). In the UK, where private hosting has not previously been widely used (Gunaratnam 2021), Homes for Ukraine presents a change in approach to formal refugee settlement, placing much more emphasis and responsibility on private individuals to host and support those in need of refuge (Burrell 2022). At face value, Homes for Ukraine, and other private hosting efforts, effectively relocate refugee settlement, and all its complexities, away from the state and into these intimate domestic spaces. At the very least, they reduce, or displace, government costs associated with accommodating refugees (National Audit Office 2023:10). As hosting becomes more prevalent, and fiscally attractive, in governmental responses to growing population displacement, there are pressing questions to ask about the levels of responsibility and labour involved in hosting and what this means for hosts’ and guests’ experiences of refugee resettlement. As this article will demonstrate, refugee hosting presents significant opportunities, but also risks, in the care offered to those seeking sanctuary.

There are other salient critiques of the Homes for Ukraine scheme that are important to highlight here. In the context of a longstanding, and arguably intensifying, “hostile environment” for migrants in the UK (Tyler 2018), Homes for Ukraine seems uncharacteristically benevolent (Machin 2023:300). Indeed, across Europe and North America, the warm welcome to a white European, Christian population, consisting predominantly of women (53%) and children (32%) (DLUHC 2023), contrasts starkly with entrenched racialised Fortress Europe bordering practices and “stop the boats” kinds of discourses (Hyndman 2023; Moise et al. 2024). Even Ukrainian pets are being accommodated within usually draconian and Kafkaesque European bio-bordering and visa regimes (Sandvik 2023). This adds a new iteration to the real and discursive filtering of “foreigners” employed through domopolitics (Gunaratnam 2021; Walters 2004). In the UK, while Ukrainians, exercising a special pre-approved status bestowed by the scheme, are invited in and offered “homes”, new “spontaneous” asylum seekers are threatened with high profile “offshoring” on dangerous giant barges (Syal

and Taylor 2023) and ultimately deportation. Of course, Syrian and Afghan refugees have also been supported in the UK, as elsewhere, through recent government schemes (Karyotis et al. 2021), but these programmes have been smaller and attracted much less public interest and involvement.

Further concerns can be raised about the specific temporalities of the programme. In keeping with the wider temporary protection directive established by the EU after the invasion, Ukrainians are being issued with Biometric Residence Permits (BRPs) which last just three years, with no information, 18 months on, about what might follow (National Audit Office 2023). Similarly, at the time of writing, local authority funding for the scheme, and with it host support payments, is due to be halted in March 2024. This offers a different kind of temporal uncertainty to those facing the bureaucratic violence of prolonged decision making on asylum applications (Näre 2020). The initial decisions and visas may have been made and issued (relatively) quickly, but the insecurity of status, and support, is nevertheless re-asserted, manifested here as distant and unacknowledged cliff edges, rather than ongoing limbo. From this perspective, Homes for Ukraine looks more like emergency temporary provision than a sustainable resettlement model, with all the temporal violences and uncertainties this inscribes.

This article extends these critiques by focusing directly on this shifting of responsibility for the welfare of these newcomers away from government and onto hosts in their homes. While local government has been funded to administer, monitor, and support this scheme locally, ultimately it is the hosts who are providing intimate and everyday support for their Ukrainian guests. Drawing on extensive interviews with those involved in Homes for Ukraine in a variety of ways, this article makes two immediate contributions to understandings of this programme. First, it pinpoints where responsibility is located within the structures of the scheme, extending this analysis to probe what this responsibility looks, and feels, like “on the ground” and in people’s homes, and what kind of timelines are associated with it. Second, it offers vital guest insights into hosting which are otherwise scarce in academic analyses (Bassoli and Luccioni 2023:16). While these discussions are directly related to Homes for Ukraine, they resonate with wider debates about the limits of state responsibility and the politics and realities of supporting displaced people, in the UK and beyond, as well as the specific difficulties in centring domestic space in these policies. This piece thus uses this case study as a prism to interrogate what is at stake in these kinds of refugee resettlement programmes. What actually happens when responsibility is diffused in this way? And what impact does this shifting of focus have on those offering support, and for those receiving it?

What follows now is a discussion of theoretically adjacent literatures relating to responsibilisation and the governance of refugee welfare, as well as the power dynamics of care, welcome, hospitality, and hosting, all of which set the analysis of Homes for Ukraine in its scholarly context. The article will then explain how this sensitive research was undertaken and set out the main empirical material, interrogating how responsibility has been offloaded, bestowed, and taken up in practice within the scheme, and the uncertain temporalities of responsibility it has set up.

Responsibility and Refugee Governance

First it is important to think about what responsibility, and responsibilisation, means in the context of governing displaced people. Governmentality literatures have been pivotal in pinpointing how risk and responsibility have been falling increasingly on individuals and away from the state in (neo)liberal polities (Dean 2010; Miller and Rose 2008), impacting especially on social and health policies (Juhila and Raitakari 2016:26). In the UK, the 2010 Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government’s launch of the “Big Society” agenda, designed to encourage “communities” to take more active roles in being responsible for their local areas, seemed to perfectly encapsulate the twin ideologies of responsibilisation and austerity. Writing at the time, Kisby (2010:490) disparaged this as potentially “dangerous, a genuine belief that charities and volunteers, rather than the state, can and should provide numerous, core public services”. Importantly, scholars note how this shift has partly been forced through severe, and uneven, funding cuts to local government, leaving staff struggling to “absorb the shock” of austerity (Hastings and Gannon 2022).

Responsibilisation can be read and experienced in different ways. For Trnka and Trundle (2014:137), it is not enough to simply critique the rolling back of state (moral and fiscal) responsibility and then stop there—this process also needs to be analysed through a “prism of care”. It is important to think in more nuanced terms about what responsibility looks like once it has been imparted, and who is taking it. The grassroots nature of the manifestation of responsibilisation agendas also creates new and messy, unpredictable local (and micro) spaces of responsibility, care, agency, and resistance (Juhila and Raitakari 2016:27), further complicating the realities and lived experiences of delegated responsibility, of who does what, where, and why, and the consequences these actions may have.

These broader discussions resonate strongly with trends within the specific realm of refugee governance approaches and ideologies, where, as noted, the immediate UK political context for any recent responsibilisation of refugee support is the wider “hostile” or “compliant environment” agenda (Tyler 2018). Strikingly, just as responsibility for border control has been more explicitly delegated to a wider range of actors (landlords, healthcare and education providers, etc.), support services for refugees and migrants have also increasingly moved away from the state. One aspect of this has been the governmental outsourcing of vital functions to for-profit third-party bodies and companies, creating very real dangers for those dependent on this support. Darling’s (2022) work on dispersal and the subcontracting of housing for asylum seekers powerfully underlines the enormous risks of these kinds of approaches for people who have already been displaced and are further destabilised by insecure and unsafe housing over which they have no control. Humphris (2019) sees an obvious link between the audit cultures of outsourcing, austerity, and the hostile environment, and the ultimate manifestation of a state which simultaneously manages to retreat *and* steer (Juhila and Raitakari 2016:26), divesting the onerous task of support while still shaping the parameters of it.

A withdrawal of state support also creates gaps in responsibility and care that are not officially acknowledged and are ultimately plugged by volunteer and

other informal efforts. Mayblin and James (2019) document a notable increase in the scale of third sector provision in asylum and refugee support in recent years, arguing there is a direct correlation between an official tightening of rights and restrictions and the absolute need for more informal kinds of support—a proliferation of spaces of care for refugees that Frazer (2022) also notes. These spaces synthesise and incubate wider discourses of welcome and exclusion in different ways, often shaped, and policed, by the worldviews of the volunteers themselves (Darling 2011; Humphris 2019). It is easy to see how in some contexts this can morph into new efforts to responsibilise refugees directly for their own welfare. Writing about United Nations approaches to the governance of refugee camps, Ilcan and Rygiel (2015:337) warn of a wider trend “to create self-governing and entrepreneurial refugee subjects who will be responsible for their futures”.

While much of this third sector activity is piecemeal and responsive, as indicated, there are more concerted public–private partnership models being used to support refugees which can be seen as antecedents and inspiration for the Homes for Ukraine scheme. In Canada (Hyndman 2022), and more recently Europe and the US (Libal et al. 2022; Tan 2021), the sharing of private and state responsibility for refugee settlement has been much more explicit, operationalised through community and private sponsorship schemes. These rest on a much firmer assumption that refugee support *should*, according to a 2016 UNHCR summit declaration, “involve a multi-stakeholder approach” (Libal et al. 2022:264). In the UK this move could be seen in the 2017 Community Sponsorship scheme which urged local communities to come forward to sponsor and support refugees. For Dajani (2021:71) this scheme represented a troubling “outsourcing of care” which has “enabled an official disavowal of responsibility, leaving it to overworked and overstretched individuals in increasingly precarious conditions to provide that labour out of solidarity”. D’Avino (2022:328), moreover, sees the community sponsorship push as another “tool of migration management”, reinforcing familiar binary constructions of the un/deservingness of refugees where those deemed safe enough to enfold into community spaces are offered more generous support (Karyotis et al. 2021). From this view, community sponsorship looks like a state imposed austere domopolitics (Walters 2004), simultaneously moving support away from the state *and* sorting those who can receive it. Again, these are all arguments which can inform analysis of Homes for Ukraine as the UK transfers more responsibility for (some) displaced people onto private citizens, performing domopolitics through a series of individualised bureaucratic and intimate interactions and practices.

Responsibility, Care, and Hospitality

Many discussions of responsibility and third sector refugee support also focus on care and power, emphasising the inequity between refugees and those who “help” them. While Humphris (2019) reveals the moral codes volunteers use to shape, and conditionalise, the care they offer, Darling (2011:414–415) warns of a tendency to valorise volunteer efforts while simultaneously framing refugees as passive and as “victims to be accommodated, cared for and pitied”. Stock (2019),

researching a refugee buddy scheme in Germany, found that even when volunteers are not obviously power wielders (older women who don't work, for example) they still inevitably possess more contingent cultural capital than the people they are supporting, cementing a distinct hierarchy within the refugee/volunteer relationship.

While damaging and minimising power relations can be entrenched within the provision of care, the refugee/volunteer relationship does not always adhere to binaries of active/passive, helper and helped, and can change over time (Bowlby 2012). More literature now focuses on the relational and affective dimensions of responsibility and care between refugees and volunteers/hosts/supporters (Monforte et al. 2021), highlighting the emotional labour of volunteering and sponsoring (Elcioglu 2023; Phillimore et al. 2022), as well as the “emotionally and morally charged relationships” which emerge (Stock 2019:129). Ultimately, many scholars see hopeful potential in the kinds of encounters that refugees and volunteers engage in and the spaces which these interactions create (Askins 2015; Boccagni and Guidici 2022; Frazer 2022). For Blank (2021:1641) it is important to remember that volunteers can also help to contribute to localised processes and cultures of *debordering* through the spaces they help to make.

If third sector spaces are made and transformed through refugee/volunteer interactions, taking these responsibilities into the home concentrates many of these complexities further (Burrell 2022). On the one hand, a widespread understanding of the domestic as a space which is wholly private, set apart from the state or anything else, has been systematically debunked (Blunt and Dowling 2022; Brickell 2012). Homespaces are also not untethered from wider discursive framings of deserving and underserving refugees (Farahani 2021). Interestingly, some analyses of hosting as a practice position it as something public and collective, a wider feat of solidarity rather than simply a private act (Bassoli and Luccioni 2023:5). Boccagni and Guidici (2022) underline the multi-scalar aspect of domestic hosting, symbiotically linked into local support services and networks, as well as national level discourse. As Macklin (2021:33) observes, “despite its label, private refugee sponsorship depends significantly on cooperation with the state. It is really more akin to a public–private partnership”.

What happens within those domestic boundaries, however, is far less visible, and more difficult to regulate and safeguard, than what happens in a day centre or scheduled visit—just like Power et al.'s (2022) risky and fallible “shadow infrastructures of care”. Day-to-day temporalities (Bowlby 2012) are far more intense too, characterised by ongoing, rather than more regularised, interaction. Monforte et al. (2021:677) reveal how their host participants “construct their narratives of responsibility through emotion”; hosting homes inevitably become highly charged emotional environments, infused with the traumas of war as well as the responsibility of care. The responsibilities of hosting can weigh very heavily, especially for women, who seem to find themselves offering more of this domestic caring responsibility (Farahani 2021; Rosello 2001:126; Stock 2019).

Drawing on the many writings on hospitality aids further understandings of the dynamics of refugee hosting. For Farahani (2021), hospitality involves the giving of time and space, and this is manifested very literally in the hosting home.

Gunaratnam (2021:714) writes about the “resourceful middle-class hospitable household”, and it is this *ability* to provide which crystallises the power asymmetry uncomfortably embedded in hosting. In Derrida’s (2000:4) words, it is the host who “defines the conditions of hospitality or welcome”. When the host gives space, the guest receives it, creating an age-old imbalance of reciprocity and obligation richly recognised in anthropological gift theory (Mauss 1954).

Of course, reciprocity is possible within the guest/host relationship (Komter and Leer 2012), and many studies explore the resultant kinning bonds which emerge as new threads of care within these affective hosting homes (Sirriyeh 2013; Stock 2019), highlighting new opportunities for reciprocity, dignity, and engagement that could not flourish to this degree in different kinds of spaces. However, the enhanced risks associated with hosting for both hosts and guests (Rosello 2001:12), as an intense and difficult to regulate practice, remain readily apparent. Writing about hosting schemes in the Netherlands in the 1990s, Komter and Leer (2012) stress how important it is to have strong vetting procedures, reliable ongoing support, and clear timelines and end points to mitigate these risks. As this research attests, these are not qualities which have characterised the Homes for Ukraine scheme.

With these discussions in mind, the significance of the Homes for Ukraine scheme for wider analyses of refugee governance and settlement becomes clear. On the one hand, the programme feels contradictory; a high-profile government scheme welcoming refugees in ways rarely witnessed in the UK does not immediately suggest a shrinking away from these kinds of responsibilities. But, embedded in this scheme is a government desire to step further away from the complexities, and costs, of refugee support, while actively dispersing this responsibility to new people and places. In keeping with the broader private sponsorship drive, Homes for Ukraine relies “on the goodwill of people in the community” (Machin 2023:303). Not surprisingly, this development does open up new spaces of care and encounter, but, as this article will reveal, it does so at the same time as entrenching the vulnerabilities of being displaced in new and unsettling ways.

Research and Methods

This project was largely an emotional response to the invasion, cemented by my sister’s decision to open her own home to a young Ukrainian woman. Between June 2022 and September 2023, I carried out 58 semi-structured hour-long (on average) interviews with people connected with Homes for Ukraine in different ways, documenting early responses to the scheme and then following developments as the programme matured.

My first focus, after securing ethical approval, was interviewing hosts, sharing my project advert through my sister’s social media hosting networks. These networks had quickly become the backbone of hosts’ support systems so were extremely useful for recruiting people, with hosts sharing my advert on their own sites and groups. I spoke to 30 hosts in total, 20 in England and ten in Wales, drawn from across the whole of each country. Interviewed hosts tended to be financially comfortable (Monforte et al. 2021), often living in salubrious

neighbourhoods with large enough homes to be able to offer spare accommodation, although there were exceptions to this. Ages ranged from 30s to 70s (and one-third were retired) and current/former occupations were varied but skewed slightly to public sector roles. More women than men came forward to be interviewed, and some interviews were carried out with couples. Given the wide geographical spread of participants, all these host interviews were undertaken online, taking care that people could not be overheard within their home when they spoke (Engward et al. 2022). Hosts were very keen to share their experiences and I had to turn down many more offers to be interviewed from people interested in the project. There were many positive accounts overall, but some of these interviews were sensitive and emotionally demanding (people who had been having a hard time and were feeling guilty or exhausted, or simply alienated in their own home), something that the online medium perhaps mitigated slightly, through the decreased physical immediacy of the interaction (Żadkowska et al. 2022).

I also recruited people who were formally and informally supporting the scheme, but not hosting directly, to gather different perspectives of the programme. I found two volunteer matchmakers through host links, but my main recruitment tool was “cold call” emailing, using publicly available email addresses for charities, different local authorities (LAs), and DLUHC itself. I was able to speak with Opora (the main charity offering support to Ukrainians in the UK) and the refugee hosting charity Refugees at Home, along with other (anonymised) local charities and a Ukrainian priest supporting local “guests”. It was much more difficult to secure local authority interviews. Having emailed the Homes for Ukraine scheme contact email addresses for over 30 councils, I ended up with just three LA respondents. One was the director for the scheme for a large southern local authority, overseeing the logistics of the programme’s roll out across the whole county. Another was supporting the scheme within a Welsh council, undertaking home visits as part of their role. The third was an immigration lead in a large northern metropolitan council, who had been given oversight of the scheme. I also talked to somebody evaluating the programme from within DLUHC, again set up in response to my email enquiry. These interviews were very candid and have been crucial in balancing my understanding of the scheme. I have been careful to get participants to check their transcripts represent their words fairly and have deliberately kept role and location details vague, to safeguard the anonymity of the respondents.

Once I felt I had a good enough understanding of the scheme and its issues I submitted a second ethics application and recruited 15 Ukrainian “guests”, managing this largely through snowballing, drawing on contacts I had acquired during the earlier stages of the research. Many of the women were fluent in English, and others had only been learning since they arrived, but were still keen to talk to me. I was also able to draw on Ukrainian and Russian interpreter support, through contacts I had built up, for three of the Ukrainian interviews. These interviews had a different dynamic, as I felt less directly engaged with the conversations, but they did enable me to reach people I would not have been able to speak to otherwise. Nine of the interviews were conducted online, and six were carried out in person, in my office and in local coffee shops specifically requested by the women, having

identified them as places they felt safe to speak. These guest interviews were inevitably the most poignant. While we found common ground through gendered and parental identities especially (over half of the women had travelled to the UK with children), I was hit hard by my inadequacy as a researcher to really understand what they were going through (Butcher 2022). I may have only managed 15 of these interviews, and they were restricted to women in their 20s, 30s, and 40s, so do not reflect the experiences of older (or male) refugees, but they are a powerful record of displacement, and “guesting” in particular, which is more usually occluded in academic research (Bassoli and Luccioni 2023:16).

Some charities have been named, at the request of the participants, but otherwise all names used here are pseudonyms. All interviews have been fully transcribed and because the resultant dataset is very large, for this article, data analysis has prioritised narratives of responsibility, risk, hospitality, and home, manually coding each interview around these themes to preserve the nuance of the testimonies.

Responsibility in Practice

Responsibility for the scheme, and for supporting everybody within it, was a key theme throughout all the interviews. The DLUHC conversation was especially important in exploring this, noting that private hosting had become a more sustainable option due to the high expense of temporary refugee accommodation, particularly hotels. In this light, the decision to deploy hosting looks like a financial calculation (Darling 2022:49; Lenard 2016:306). Responsibility for providing and maintaining the physical infrastructure of refugee accommodation, along with all its associated material costs, is devolved to private hosts and homes, albeit with “thank you” payments to mitigate any financial impact. In this interview more generally, a picture emerged of a government noticeably keen to pass the immediate responsibility and care for the new arrivals on to hosts, creating uncertainty and gaps in support:

From government’s point of view, they’re like, whoa, we don’t want to enter that space ... the tension between government not wanting to be entering the home, metaphorically, to hosts wanting the trust of government entering the home, and then having that handoff, so that third-party agencies are meeting that unmet need of support.

This purported governmental enthusiasm to harness the space of the home, and simultaneous reluctance to enter it, has arguably determined the everyday experience of the scheme for hosts and guests. According to the Welsh council representative, “they haven’t had that sense of, you know, where the government is”. Using private space for refugee hosting is only politically expedient if the tricky realities of everyday domestic hosting are governed at a distance (Juhila and Raitakari 2016), and critical understandings which question the implicit conflation of “domestic home” with “safe haven” (Blunt and Dowling 2022) suppressed.

Three aspects of this passing on of responsibility, and sharing of risk, stand out in particular: the initial securing of accommodation for new refugees through the

matching of guests with sponsors; the responsibilities taken up by hosts to provide safe and welcoming shelter in their own homes; and the temporalities and practicalities of “moving on” after hostings end.

Finding Hosts and Homes: Matching and Vetting

Taking the matching of sponsors and guests first, it is important to reiterate that however flawed, arbitrary, and cruel refugee dispersal schemes can be (Darling 2022), refugee settlement programmes have at their centre a system for finding physical shelter for people. There has been no such systematic approach to accommodating Ukrainian guests; it has been largely left to would-be hosts, volunteers, and charities to organise specific housing for newcomers. This was readily acknowledged by the DLUHC employee: “this is this tension between, you know, when it started the matching, the government didn’t want to be involved in matching, because they didn’t want the onus to be on them”. I interviewed volunteer “matchmaker” Eliza, a former international aid worker, who had been shocked to discover that nothing was being done to follow up with potential hosts who had rushed to register with the government scheme as it was launched. She set about using her working experience to match-make directly, vetting potential sponsors herself and putting them in touch with Ukrainians seeking hosts, conscientiously aligning needs and interests between the two—just one of hundreds of volunteers matching hosts with guests, independently and in their own time, across England and Wales. Interviews with charities highlighted this problem especially. A representative from Opora damningly described the scheme as having:

...not much other information, no framework, no structure, no guidance, nothing, really. And on the official government website, you know, how do I find someone to sponsor, you know, they said, go on Facebook, social media, that kind of stuff, which is obviously silly.

Rob, who had been working for another charity supporting Ukrainians, was angry about the risks guests and hosts were taking by relying on sharing Facebook posts about themselves to find a match: “there is a Polish activist ... he labelled the UK scheme Tinder for Refugees which is an apt quote”.

The conversations with the Ukrainian women themselves revealed deep unease at having to post photos on Facebook to secure a UK sponsor, uncomfortable with the proximity of this practice to online dating and the sexualised risks this entailed. Maryska had been fending off interest in her posts from single men and wanted to share the relief she felt when someone from the charity Sunflower Sisters reached out to her:

I received some messages back from just the single men about could I be your sponsor please, come everything, I will meet you in the airport, I will give you a room, everything will be fine, but I said, excuse me, sorry, but I’m just afraid ... I met some group, some woman from voluntary groups and Sunflower Sisters. And she chatted to me first ... Can I help you? I volunteer and we have this programme in UK, we can look for some sponsors for you.

Most of the people I spoke with ended up relying on match-making volunteers, or mobilising distant contacts and networks, to help find hosts, fashioning themselves, in the midst of war, as entrepreneurial refugees (Ilcan and Rygiel 2015).

Housing refugees safely surely demands organisation and oversight (Komter and Leer 2012). For the Homes for Ukraine scheme, the responsibility to find these homes for Ukrainians has been almost entirely—barring some local authority efforts—left to third sector parties. The risks, furthermore, have been borne by both guests and hosts, who have had to rely on sporadic and patchy video calls, and Facebook exchanges, before deciding whether to commit to each other. While sponsors will have undergone security and house checks through the local authority before being able to host, these matching and vetting processes have, by necessity, fallen short of the processes that established refugee hosting charities usually adhere to. An interview with one of the co-founders and trustees of the charity Refugees at Homes confirmed the importance of these preliminary phases, where hosts are interviewed at length about their motivations and expectations and matches are carefully arranged.

During the course of the interviews I did hear stories of serendipitous matchings, of people connecting successfully through friends of friends, and would-be hosts and guests bonding virtually ahead of meeting in-person. But I also heard horror stories of matches which did not live up to these online presentations—accommodation not as suggested, inappropriate behaviours from male hosts. Either way, there was an overarching trepidation across host and guest accounts of those early stages, of not really knowing who they were going to be living with for the next few months. In the words of host Elizabeth:

It's a big gamble for them as well as for us. Because we've discussed this on both sides. It's been a big gamble. They're coming to a stranger's house and where we've got strangers living in our house with all our belongings and that.

This may be a rare “safe route” to refuge, but there are still dangerous informal mechanisms embedded in the scheme. As Rosello (2001:172, 175) notes, “risk ... is one of the keys to all hospitable encounters”; a stronger sense of responsibility for vetting from government, and more willingness to “enter that space”, would at least have mitigated some of this risk for hosts and guests.

Responsible Hosts, Dependent Guests

It is important to consider just how much responsibility has been devolved to hosts in this scheme. On the one hand, hosts are clearly not doing everything. The interviews with the different local authority representatives quantified the extent of the labour needed to deliver, urgently, this “admin heavy” scheme, working within a resource-starved environment to set up new record and payment systems, undertake safety checks on houses, and visit hosts and guests. These interviews illustrated that the state had in fact not gone missing but was instead diffused and manifested through considerable local authority administration and effort (Macklin 2021). However, while digital infrastructures and programme systems are crucial, they are still removed from more intimate day-to-day

concerns and realities of being a host or guest. If the LA employees have been working hard in their jobs, the sponsors have been turning their homes, and sometimes lives, around to accommodate their guests. Most hosts I spoke with took this responsibility very seriously. Veteran soldier Simon, for example, likened his hosting to a “tour of duty”.

First of all, hosts are responsible for making sure they are able to offer appropriate accommodation which would pass the council safety and suitability checks—as a minimum offering sufficient space, privacy, and facilities, and up-to-date gas, electric, and fire safety features. Interviews were full of examples of the physical changes which sponsors were making to their homes before the councils were even involved. As Rachel shared, “we got the fire brigade out to do the smoke detectors we, we took initiative on that”. Most hosts fitted new locks to bedroom and bathroom doors, to ensure privacy for their guests. Vanessa had been researching this: “I read up about it and basically the advice was that one of the most important things for refugees is to feel safe ... and so I got a lock for her bedroom door”. Hosts awaiting the arrival of a mother and young children had to childproof their homes, fitting stairgates, window restrictors, and locking away pills and vitamins in newly bought medicine boxes. People also embarked on serious decluttering drives to free up spare rooms, usually purchasing new furniture and bedding to dress these spaces, along with a whole new material culture of welcome packs full of toiletries, dressing gowns, and slippers.

This is where we see the first obvious slippage between responsibility and care. Most hosts were preparing not just the bare basics of accommodation expected of them, but thinking care-fully about what people fleeing war might need and want, creating, through this materialised homeliness drive, new personalised infrastructures of care (Frazer 2022; Power et al. 2022). While people were eager to make these changes and create welcoming spaces, it is also clear that organising private homes for hosting is an expensive, sometimes physically demanding, and definitely time consuming, process. Theresa and Mark did not have a spare bedroom to offer, but wanted to host so much they reconfigured their existing living arrangements to make it possible: “Our son vacated his bedroom and is sleeping in our front living room now”. If councils are responsible for the safety checks, it is undoubtedly hosts who are taking on the full labour of providing this refugee shelter.

It is also not just physical shelter that hosts are offering when they house refugees in their homes. Host Belinda shared that “if there’s one thing the government did make clear, that you’re providing accommodation, you’re not expected to provide anything else”, but the reality is quite different. Much interview time was spent recounting all the bureaucratic hurdles hosts found themselves navigating, especially for the first couple of months. Having already helped with visa applications pre-arrival, these first weeks were spent sorting out Universal Credit, Job Centre visits, school places and uniform, GP registration, Biometric Residence Permit applications, even pet quarantine. Host Jess shared that, several months in, she “would really like to stop ... going to Job Centres every week, you know, dragging my little one along, making appointments at the doctors, doing this, doing that, taking them in the car ... it’s a cumulative effect”. The Refugees at

Home co-founder and trustee was clear about the amount of work being expected of hosts, compared with other hosting set-ups: "I've spoken to a lot of people who've hosted Ukrainians recently. And it's hard work. There are different expectations". Some hosts were also offering modest levels of financial support to their guests, especially in the early days, paying for food and other items, as well as facing increased household and petrol bills, not always offset by the thank you payments being received.

According to the northern council representative, Homes for Ukraine is a "do it yourself resettlement programme ... the responsibility has been put to the British public for this programme". This effectively positions hosts as "home level bureaucrats", leaving sponsors to do much of the administrative work of refugee settlement directly, and shape this support through their own discretion, moral codes, and capabilities (see Lipsky 2010). Consequently, attending to these bureaucratic needs is a political task in itself. On the one hand, there is the potential for hosts to be inadvertently engaged in the "intimate citizenship" (Gunaratnam 2021:717) of domopolitics, reliably delivering their guests to Job Centre appointments where their efforts to find work might well be recorded. Conversely, host confrontations with the austere state, grappling with the bureaucratic nightmare of Universal Credit especially, can also be, according to Refugees at Home, "a boost to kind of activism and engagement" (Blank 2021; Boccagni and Guidici 2022; Gunaratnam 2021:715; Lenard 2016). Certainly, hosts were shocked about the state of services they were encountering for the first time, although most were generally too exhausted to think about these issues more deeply (Elcioglu 2023).

Interviews with charities, hosts, and guests also pointed to problems with the scheme itself, especially in its early days, reporting uneven support and procedures across different areas, late and/or insubstantial checks, late thank you payments, poor communication, and general frustration. According to Opora, "it's not that, you know, local authorities are bad, or they don't care. It's that it's inconsistent. Some are very, very good. And some really don't know what's happening". As a host, Jess was coping well with domestic demands but felt unsupported beyond the home: "that's down to us being more organised but there's no check, no one has checked on the children, nobody has checked on Polina, no one has checked the house". Just as Juhila and Raitakari (2016:27) suggest, dispersed responsibility can be "messy". The heavy consequences of patchy or lacking LA provision were especially clear across the guest interviews. Oleksandra spoke of "these people in local authority, they don't, there is no, it was not feeling of safety at all". Yulya talked about feeling happy with her host but abandoned by any official body beyond this domestic space:

No one ever checked, no one ever even called. I'm not even talking about knocking on the door and checking, which I feel like they should do just, you know, irregular checks, unexpectedly knock on your door and ask how are you? But no one even called.

From these accounts, it is not surprising that for many of the sponsors, emotional support has also been as integral to their hosting responsibilities as practical and bureaucratic activity, blurring those boundaries further (Lenard 2016; Monforte

et al. 2021). Providing a genuinely safe space involves so much more again than physical shelter and hands-on help. Many of the hosts I interviewed, and especially the women within the hosting households (Rosello 2001), spoke not only about the everyday work of keeping the hosting home operating, but also keeping a close eye on their guests, hyper-aware of developments within the war and what kinds of news from home they might be receiving. According to Emma, “the day-to-day, it would be me doing most of the work and kind of psychological support as well ... it probably does fall more to the woman”. While most were happy to do this, and could not contemplate doing anything else, some admitted to feeling daunted by the new weight of responsibility on their shoulders. Amy shared that she “kind of felt another sense of responsibility that I didn’t have before”. In the words of Lauren:

I’ve been the main source of support for our guests ... I have my husband, but you know, he doesn’t see the day-to-day stuff ... It’s just it’s so much more responsibility than I thought it would be which is my fault for being naive. I will accept that. But I also do feel like we as hosts we have been misled ... what they say we’re responsible for on paper but the reality is it’s so much more, it is so much more work and responsibility.

The Homes for Ukraine Scheme has not just responsibilised (disproportionately female) hosts for accommodating their Ukrainian guests, but, in reality, for their wider settlement and security too.

This model of intense hosting responsibility arguably shapes the experiences of guests as they attempt to settle. On the one hand, Refugees at Home sees advantages in the way it is “very integrating” for guests. On the other, as Komter and Leer (2012:19) also found, there is always the danger that guests are doubly disempowered, living in someone else’s home *and* reliant on their skills and knowledge to get set up. For Stock (2019:129), situations like these risk reinforcing “hierarchic relationships of dependence”, compounding the already asymmetrical power dynamics and trapping guests in their “refugee scripts” (Askins 2015:475; Lenard 2016). Olga spoke about all the help her host has offered her: “without her, I don’t know, maybe I couldn’t do this myself ... So it’s a big work, what we’ve done during the first two months”. Olena, when asked what advice she would give hosts based on her experiences of being a guest, underlined the role of the sponsor in making any kind of settling into the UK possible:

For the people that you’re hosting, the sponsor is everything. Because when you come here you don’t know the rules, you don’t know the laws, you don’t understand how everything works. You’re basically, you can’t help yourself. So you’re relying on the sponsor for everything.

Depending on fallible hosts for everything, as an even messier and less predictable diffusion of responsibility (Juhila and Raitakari 2016), places guests in potentially vulnerable positions. As Maryska, recently moved out of her sponsor’s house and living in shared accommodation, put it, “relying on sponsors is not the most reliable thing because they’re human beings, they have their right for personal space as well”. Some hosts were very aware of this, seeing their principal job as

empowering their guests to be independent, but guest interviews underlined how not all hosts have been so conscientious. Host care and responsibility will obviously vary widely, and guests, sharing the intimate spaces of their sponsors' own homes, are stuck with whatever hosting style is on offer, whether helpful or overbearing.

It is important to stress that this support from sponsors was not always one way—reciprocity was a recurrent, if inexplicit, theme across the interviews, with hosts and guests speaking about what they had learnt from each other, the genuine friendships which had emerged (Askins 2015; Stock 2019), and the contributions guests were making to the everyday functioning of homes, gardens, and life generally. Significantly, many of the conversations with Ukrainian women also focused on the importance of reclaiming more agency for themselves, narrating their work, local volunteering activities, post-hosting housing, and various bureaucratic successes as evidence of this increased independence. Most guests I spoke with were eager to take on more responsibility for themselves, not in a quest to become better neoliberal subjects, but to feel more in control of lives which had already taken too many unexpected turns.

Uncertain Temporalities: Moving On in a Housing Crisis

This yearning for more independence is closely tied up with the uncertain temporalities of hosting and guesting. Bassoli and Luccioni (2023:16) have identified a gap in homestay research on hosted refugee trajectories, and there are important questions to ask about what happens next. Hostings are by their nature temporary. Most of the interviewed hosts had signed up to hosting for six, nine, or even 12 months, but with very little thought about what happens then. Many are happily extending this, but the interviews made it clear that for sponsors, the intensity of hosting means it is very important to have an endpoint in sight. Relationship breakdowns between hosts and guests have meant that there have already been thousands of Ukrainians needing shelter all over again, and I also heard first-hand experiences of this in some of the interviews. One host ended their sponsorship when they felt their daughter was being impacted by the tension in the house; three Ukrainian women had to move due to feeling unsupported or unsafe in their hosts' homes. Described as "offboarding" in the DLUHC interview, responsibility for guests moving out of sponsors' homes has largely been delegated to local authorities and hosts and guests themselves. Interviews indicated that government responses have focused on encouraging the extension of existing hostings with enhanced financial incentives, or on re-matchings, with both local authorities and charities operationalising these steers. There has also been a move to earmark funding specifically to help councils find Ukrainians private rental accommodation (DLUHC 2023).

This funding, however, has not been a panacea. Post-hosting realities have been presenting problems, with "moving on" aspirations having to be realised within a wider context of a housing crisis which has seen further depletion of social housing stock and rocketing rental costs (Heslop and Ormerod 2020). The DLUHC and LA representatives spoke about this stark lack of social housing, and

prohibitive private rental costs, especially in the south, reluctantly having to rely on hotel accommodation to house Ukrainians in emergency situations. Private renting is also beset with structural obstacles, not least the need to offer rent upfront and have a guarantor. Several charity interviews disclosed that some private landlords have been refusing to rent to Ukrainians because they are on Universal Credit, further reducing available housing. Opora spoke about the intense nature of competition for properties and the danger of bidding war scenarios, something refugees, without UK housing market experience, are especially poorly placed to navigate. None of this is unique to Ukrainians. As Brown et al. (2024) document, refugees and asylum seekers outside of these kinds of settlement schemes have long been facing an ongoing crisis in available and suitable housing, and increased risk of homelessness, exacerbated in autumn 2023 by a reduction in the deadline for those with newly bestowed refugee status to leave Home Office accommodation. In this context, Homes for Ukraine remains a generous scheme, especially in the way it allows recourse to state funds and access to social housing, but Ukrainians are still vulnerable to housing precarity.

With this in mind, hosts face myriad responsibilities and tensions surrounding this “offboarding”. Just having conversations about deadlines and what happens next is difficult, as Lisa admitted:

We’ve not talked greatly about timescales, it’s an awkward conversation to have, to be honest. I don’t want her to feel unwelcome, that we’re kicking her out. But for my own sanity, I need an end, I need an endpoint to know I’m working to.

Given the intrinsic geopolitics of the hosting home (Brickell 2012), where hosting timelines are so closely entwined with war developments for those hoping to return, these discussions are extremely sensitive. Furthermore, to have any chance of their guests getting social housing, hosts actively need to make them homeless. Judy was stunned to realise this when she attended a “moving on” council information session:

I was told you’ll have to make her homeless. Well there is no way I am going to make somebody who has been very dependent on me for security, homeless after six months. Who in their right mind would do that? But that’s the only way for a social house.

Private renting, alternatively, raises the spectre of hosts stepping up as guarantors themselves, a financial responsibility far beyond the original commitment people signed up for. Lisa told me that she was “not comfortable being a guarantor” but couldn’t see how her guest, who is in work, could possibly find any accommodation with her income and situation. In the end Judy did decide to be a guarantor for her guest, going against council advice, because she felt there was no other option.

As Refugees at Home put it, hosts “don’t lose responsibility necessarily after they leave”. Sponsors were also concerned about where their guests would end up living—certainly not in the more expensive areas they had settled in. They would be forced to move, again, away from work, schools, and any nascent support networks, undoing some of that early “integration” work. A common thread

across all these interviews—DLUHC, LA, hosts, and charities—was frustration that none of this had been considered at government level. There has been a lack of realistic and sustainable central planning for what happens once hostings end, and while local authorities have been working hard, it has often been up to hosts—and guests—to draw on their own resources and initiative, at their own risk, to find ways through.

It is fitting to end this discussion with a reminder of the impact of this lack of planning on these Ukrainian women themselves. As interviewed hosts and people in roles supporting refugees recognised, there is something especially destabilising about insecure housing arrangements for people who have already had to flee their homes. The Welsh council employee, tasked with arranging rematches, was trying to make sure that guests had a say in where they were going next: “you want to consider the person’s dignity and their experience and make it as easy and bearable”. The women I interviewed who had had to escape difficult and sometimes abusive hostings, with their children, tended to recount a several-step process in finding somewhere new, relying on the kindness of a series of different strangers and acquaintances for overnight shelter while councils struggled to find them somewhere to stay. Oleksandra felt completely abandoned by her local council in Wales after she and her daughter were evicted from their sponsor’s house, and was shocked that she was expected to have the resources already to secure her own shelter: “she said to me, ah, you don’t have friends? You don’t have friends to go to? I’m a refugee, I came from the war. I don’t have, sorry, I don’t have anybody in Europe”. Yulya was very eloquent about the psychological strain of leaving a war zone but knowing your safe housing is only temporary:

So it’s just constantly, you have to be prepared for anything ... this is just another thing that doesn’t really let you settle ... you always have the thought in the back of your head, that it might not work out ... what if you get kicked out, tomorrow?

Even those I spoke with who had moved on “successfully” were still facing a certain level of housing precarity, having taken up very short tenancies in multiple occupancy houses, renting rooms found through the flat sharing website “[spareroom.co.uk](https://www.spareroom.co.uk)”, living and sharing facilities with strangers. In desperation, Oleksandra was paying a crippling £950 per month in a temporary Airbnb arrangement. Homes for Ukraine may have been able to offer, through the goodwill and labour of hosts, high standards of limited term housing and associated care. What it is not offering is more durable security for people who have already been displaced.

Conclusions

Refugee hosting has a lot to recommend it. This article has been clear sighted about the problems with the Homes for Ukraine scheme, but it is also important to acknowledge what has been working well, and why, within the programme. Responsibilising private citizens to open their homes to people seeking shelter *can* lead to the creation of new spaces of care. Going back to the questions posed at the start—what does hosting responsibility entail, and what are the consequences

of devolving it in this way—one immediate answer is that it offers the potential for motivated hosts to offer safe and homely accommodation for new refugees. This responsibility manifests in the physical and material comfort of the home and the labours and practices which underpin it; in the one-to-one practical support in navigating the bureaucratic hurdles of living in a new place; and in the emotional care of simply, properly, being there. The possible benefits for guests are innumerable, and for sponsors, hosting offers avenues for frustrated political consciousness and nurture to develop. There is a certain emotional bankruptcy in assuming that ordinary (albeit fairly well resourced) people would not have the capacity and inclination to care, and act, in this way. It is also impossible not to juxtapose this kind of experience with what is more usually, grudgingly, offered to new refugees and asylum seekers. When state efforts to shelter those arriving in need are so woeful, the arguments for removing some of this responsibility from the state start to look more serious. It is perhaps pertinent to ask instead how private hosting can be extended, so that other displaced populations can also receive these kinds of welcomes. Certainly, this was a conversation point in one of the local authority interviews.

And yet, the jeopardies embedded within Homes for Ukraine, if not hosting more generally, need to be taken seriously. If these schemes are to expand in the UK, more state oversight is needed. This warm welcome is a high-stakes kind of responsibility and is disproportionately being handed over to sponsors with little experience of supporting vulnerable people. Offloading responsibility to private homes relies on an assumption that the domestic is always a space of comfort and homeliness, and that domestic custodians are biddable and benign agents. Decades of feminist social science research would dismantle this position in an instant. In the great risk/responsibility offset calculation, more responsibility inevitably translates into more risk, borne by the bodies of guests especially. Homes for Ukraine has not been robust in mitigating these risks, especially with matching and vetting, and volunteers and third sector actors have had to step in to provide safety nets. Add to this the sheer intensity of hosting labours and it becomes clear that diffused responsibility can be weighty as well as dangerous—hiding these labours behind closed doors does not mean they suddenly evaporate. This is also what hosting responsibilisation looks like in practice. With all this care comes costs and risks, and while these might not all be felt evenly across time and space, it is this complicated mix which shapes the day-to-day realities of the hosting home.

The final point to make is that Homes for Ukraine, and of course hosting and refugee settlement more broadly, does not exist in a vacuum. This scheme is ultimately a short-term programme, following short-term logics. Flying in the face of the wider geopolitical temporality of war, which makes a mockery of hopes and plans, hosting as a resettlement strategy has to have a discernible, workable, end point, something a lack of forward planning and a difficult post-hosting environment have thwarted. In the UK, years of austerity and the wider crisis in private and social housing curtails the potential of the scheme. More responsibility falls onto hosts and charities to provide services and guarantees that are missing, for longer. Local authorities have to stretch an already depleted resource to even enable the scheme to function. And guests, who have already been displaced,

must contend with new temporal uncertainty and precarity here, as well as in Ukraine. The capacity to provide, and receive, this responsibility, and care, is compromised on all fronts. However comforting they may be as material spaces, the private homes of hosting are ultimately shaped by and through the world around them.

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