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**New UCL & FLEX study highlights risks and protective factors for exploitation of Ukrainians seeking safety in the UK.**

The Westminster Government’s response to Ukrainian refugees contrasts sharply with its increasingly punitive approach to refugees and asylum seekers at large. Nevertheless, even the Ukraine Schemes themselves have been suddenly and dramatically restricted as of February 2024, as the Government seeks to cut migration numbers.

This new joint academic and NGO report looks back on the implementation of the UK’s Ukraine humanitarian visa schemes. This report, published a year after the ‘Homes for Ukraine’ Scheme was launched, focuses on local responses, based on 26 in-depth interviews with representatives from Local Authorities, Strategic Migration Partnerships and civil society organisations. It examines Local Authorities' responses to supporting displaced Ukrainians in the UK and how they were managing risks of trafficking and other exploitation across the various *Ukraine Schemes*.

The report identifies four main themes in terms of issues already encountered and factors widely seen to increase the risks of trafficking and exploitation among displaced Ukrainians in the UK;

* Housing insecurity as a source of multiple dependencies
* Challenges around work and labour exploitation
* Immigration insecurity and limits to access to specialist immigration advice
* Challenges in identifying and acting on potential trafficking or exploitation

Since the research was conducted, there have been growing numbers of Ukrainians presenting in the UK as homeless or at risk of homelessness. The risks that can also entail from the perspective of exploitation are illustrated below.

*“So they can’t get access to the private rented housing market because it’s too aggressive and too expensive and they can’t find meaningful employment. So, it’s just leaving them in this state of flux where they’re at the mercy of their hosts. And if they’re in an exploitative situation that’s just going to continue because they don’t have any alternative over the homelessness or destitution.”* (Research participant, Civil Society)

Particular concerns were raised about the limits to current responses if exploitation was occurring but not seen to cross the threshold to be considered modern slavery. Issues were also identified around apparent misuse of the *Homes for Ukraine* scheme by some sponsors to secure cheap (or free) labour, to which the authorities were said to have been slow to respond. Mistreatment of Ukrainian seasonal workers in agriculture was also highlighted, with concerns that neither the State or Scheme Operators had done enough to inform Ukrainians in this situation of their right to switch onto the less restrictive Ukraine visa schemes that gave access to the broader labour market and recourse to public funds.

*Report author Ella Cockbain of UCL said,*

*“It is vital to ensure displaced Ukrainians in the UK are not pushed into exploitative situations or left trapped there because of a lack of alternatives and a struggle to meet basic needs. As Russia’s war in Ukraine drags on, there are lessons in this research both for ensuring the safety of the most precarious Ukrainians in the UK and improving state responses to other groups fleeing conflict”.*

Crucially, the report also highlights the protective functions of allowing people safe passage, the unrestricted right to work, access to public funds, and regularisation options. There were concrete examples given that showed how having these visa schemes enabled some Ukrainians in exploitative situations in the UK to seek help, without fear of immigration detention and removal. There are important lessons from the Ukraine schemes for improving crisis responses to other people seeking sanctuary in the UK from other conflicts.

*Another report author Kate Roberts of FLEX said,*

*“The Ukraine Extension Scheme has shown the importance of the UK’s immigration system offering options to migrants which mean that rather than spending years in limbo and at risk of exploitation people have options to apply to change or regularise their immigration status”.*

Overall, the report’s findings speak to a clear need to focus on alleviating insecurity in housing, work and immigration status. The recommendations aim to address risks of ongoing or escalating exploitation in the UK that relate to the war in Ukraine. Recommendations include introducing pathways to settlement for all on the Ukraine humanitarian visas and extending access to the schemes to other people displaced by the same conflict but still excluded from these protections. There also needs to be work to identify and respond to situations of exploitation more effectively. That must include prevention of exploitation which does not reach the threshold of trafficking or modern slavery but nevertheless causes harms to those affected and could escalate if left unchecked.

The study was a collaboration between leading workers’ rights NGO Focus on Labour Exploitation (FLEX) and UCL.

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