

Written submission from the Scottish Refugee Council

*Points relating to the crisis in Ukraine and the humanitarian response, particularly in Scotland*

1. The rapidly escalating forced displacement within and from Ukraine of over 3million people, as a result of the invasion by the Russian Federation under the control of President Putin's regime, is unprecedented in European terms. A further 7million have been internally displaced. UNHCR estimate that there may be at least 4million refugees from Ukraine by July this year, and in reality it could end up to be far more than that. As is typical in refugee populations across the world, the vast majority are likely to remain in countries neighbouring Ukraine, at least initially. This is especially where, in those neighbouring countries, there is significant diaspora communities, as we are witnessing for instance with the relatively high numbers of refugees from Ukraine that are in Poland.

2. We warmly welcomed the EU Justice and Home Affairs Council decision to adopt and implement the Temporary Protection Directive. This was designed for swift access to safety in situations of mass displacement. In particular, the lifting of visa requirements across the EU for those refugees displaced from Ukraine was commensurate with the urgency of protection needs. Furthermore, we welcome the floor of social and economic rights afforded across the EU to refugees from Ukraine and the granting of 3years protection based leave to stay in the territory. In contrast, we remain dismayed by the reactive, piecemeal and visa-based response by the Home office that the country has witnessed and has been rightly criticised. People need swifter access to safety and also a place where they can rebuild their lives for at least the next few years.

3. The Refugee Convention was created in response to the horrors of WWII and the Holocaust. There is a tragic irony that a lifesaving law over generations - as the Convention has been - was created to ensure peoples, including many Ukrainians after WWII and abandoned and wandering for sanctuary across Europe - is this week being dismantled in UK refugee law and policy through the Nationality and Borders Bill. This Convention was designed to deal with the types of forced displacement we are witnessing now from Ukraine, or last August in Afghanistan or previously in Syria or in other places such as Eritrea.

4. People need rapid access to safety and protection to rebuild their lives. It has wrong-headed, cruel and an eye-watering waste of public resources that successive UK governments have devalued and eroded the asylum system to such an extent that it is chronically slow with, presently 105,000 applicants just waiting for an initial decision, most of whom have been in limbo for at least 6months. This is the highest backlog for at least 20years, with decisions on applications down by 40% in the past 5years, at a time when the annual rate of applications is fairly stable. And, as a consequence of more people being stuck in decision making limbo, currently around one-third (£1.4billion) of a 10year asylum accommodation budget (£4billion) is being allocated in just one year, to private companies to house over one-third (30,000 out of 80,000) people seeking asylum, in typically inappropriate institutional ex-hotel accommodation. In these places, people are given £8pw to spend, are not allowed to

work, and mental health and suffer the longer they are in there. That, for us, is a major reason that we are witnessing the UK government's piecemeal, visa based and - actually - outsourcing (to communities) - response to the escalating Ukraine refugee crisis. The pillar of our response to Ukrainian and, indeed, all refugee crisis and populations, should always be fulfilment of the Convention via a well-funded, quality and swift asylum decision procedure and support system.

5. We welcome the scope of the Ukrainian Family Scheme but, as noted, visa requirements should be eased further to enable in-country processing so people can rapidly be safe and reunite with their families. Additionally, it remains a hidden scandal that Ukrainian temporary visa-holders in the UK and in particular, the low thousands of Seasonal workers stuck on farms across the country, have still not been brought into the Ukrainian Family Scheme (see attached brief).

6. We particularly welcome the generosity of people and communities across the UK, which has been inspiring and, inter alia, exposes how out of step the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister have been with mass public opinion, with their piecemeal, visa bureaucratic and slow response to this unprecedented refugee crisis, in Europe. Whilst Homes for Ukraine should supplement existing State responsibilities for refugees - such as achieved by maintaining and investing in the Refugee Convention and its asylum system - we do not think such an individual and community sponsorship should ever be the central plank of UK government refugee policy. However, that is what is happening and in the midst of the largest refugee movements in European terms, in almost a century. Given our severe concerns on the centrality of Homes for Ukrainians and the looseness or light-touch support and safeguarding arrangements at the UK level, we welcome the Scottish government's initiative and funded mobilisation as it being a community sponsor. This essentially inserts the power and resources of government here, to support both refugees and host sponsors, into an otherwise inadequacy light process sketched by the UK government via its Homes for Ukraine scheme.

7. Refugee flight always means first getting from immediate danger but it is also means finding place to restore one's self and piece of mind and wellbeing. In that vein, it particularly important to establish safety, structure and as much normalcy as possible. This means investment in statutory specialist support and robust safeguarding processes, and therein ensuring mental health and counselling have a solid basis to work from with recently arrived refugees. Similarly, children - who account for a large proportion of those displaced in and from Ukraine - especially need that sense of safety and normalcy. That means getting them into school and college education should be an early priority. It is therefore crucial that all programmes and schemes through peoples fleeing Ukraine come to the UK and Scotland, establish person-centred plans with stability in housing, mental health and education, made early priorities. People will be living with trauma here so, trauma-informed practice should be the minimum standard in services around new arrivals. For unaccompanied or separated children, all of the above applies, plus specialist expertise in Scotland's looked after children system, and therein its Scottish guardianship service.

8. Finally, we continue to press for lifting of visa requirements to travel into the UK. These matters can be sensibly handled at points of entry to the UK, such as airports or ferry terminals. The population arriving from Ukraine are predominantly women and children, many of whom have been separated from their partners (and for whom they will be worried sick), and we question why the UK alone among European states has refused to lift visa requirements before this population reaches the territory of the UK. This is no time for undue pre-arrival bureaucracy and, as the war in Ukraine may become more protracted, we hope that the UK government will rethink this overly bureaucratic approach. These matters can and should, as a matter of policy to this escalating crisis, be handled in not outside the country. We urge a rethink by the Home Secretary.

We hope this set of points is helpful.