



Together for Ipswich Refugee, Asylum Seeking and Migration Support

– a two-year summary and reflection

Introduction

Immediately after the commencement of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine (24 February 2022) Together for Ipswich appointed Alan Cutting to lead their Ukraine response. This response continues to seek to coordinate everything that the Christian community in Ipswich is doing primarily with our local Ukrainian community, but also with other refugee and asylum-seeking communities, and to equip churches to better understand and engage with the opportunities, challenges and issues surrounding migration and cross-culturalism.

The Role of the Churches

During the last two years, a number of Ipswich Christians and Churches have worked with Alan to sponsor refugees (by hosting them in their homes), to hold regular Vigils, Job Fairs, Support Clinics, Training Events and English Classes, to set up Community Hubs and Day Centres (for refugees *and* asylum seekers), and to provide hundreds of our new arrivals with day trips, meals and theatre tickets, both for the strengthening of these communities *and* to assist their integration into the town they now call home.

All these initiatives have been undertaken out of a confident and compassionate gospel motivation, and in healthy collaboration with our local authorities and other support agencies (primarily Suffolk County Council, Suffolk Refugee Support, Community Action Suffolk and Ipswich Job Centre).

The churches and Christian agencies that have been most obviously involved with this service include All Saints (Kesgrave), St Mary-le-Tower, St Mary at the Elms, Shepherd Drive Baptist, Colchester Road Baptist, Hope, Burlington, River, Bridge, and Ipswich Community Churches, Oasis English Language School and Christians Against Poverty. However, many

others have contributed with their prayer, resources and energy, and include refugees and/or asylum seekers within their pastoral relationships and responsibilities.

At the recent Ipswich Vigil for Ukraine, for example (held at St Mary at the Elms to remember the second anniversary of the commencement of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine), eight churches donated equipment, members of at least twenty Ipswich churches attended, and the volunteer team consisted of 32 British people and 32 Ukrainians.

Support for Individuals

Although some of our work is relatively high-profile and public, the majority of the time we are quietly working and building relationships with individuals and families. Examples of typical 1:1 support activity recently undertaken include:

- Providing furniture (e.g. desks, chest of drawers) for Ukrainian families moving on to their own accommodation.
- Arranging CV training and employment advice.
- Arranging transport and/or accompanying families to complex appointments (e.g. education, medical, housing and employment).
- Signposting to (and/or offering) volunteer work placements.
- Finding free car parking places for Ukrainians taking up low paid jobs in central Ipswich.
- Arranging mechanical checks and advice for the purchase of a second-hand car.
- Introducing new-to-Ipswich Ukrainian families to others from their hometown.
- Providing translation and interpreting services.
- Making links between two different agencies providing humanitarian and spiritual support into Ukraine.

A fuller indication of the way that Together for Ipswich has approached this service can be found at <https://www.togetherforipswich.uk/ukrainian-refugee-support/>.

The Changing Needs

During the second year of our response, the situation in Ipswich has changed significantly.

The government's closure of the two local hotels that were housing asylum-seekers resulted in the vast majority of these people, mostly men, moving on, usually to the Midlands. Consequently, the much-loved Sanctuary Day Centre run by St Mary-le-Tower Church was closed. A few of our churches have maintained a healthy relationship with a number of these asylum-seekers across the miles, them having become good friends. Some who were seeking asylum whilst in Ipswich have since had their claims accepted, and therefore now face new challenges of finding employment, housing and integration into areas of the country that they are not familiar with and where they have far fewer support structures.

By 5 March 2024, and through the Home for Ukraine Scheme, 1,129 Ukrainians had found refuge either in Ipswich or in its three surrounding Boroughs. Together, our churches have connected with about 400 of them, and have regular contact with about 200. English language provision continues to be offered by Oasis English Language School and by Hope Church every week, and All Saints Kesgrave has partnered with similar initiatives in Woodbridge to continue to support Ukrainians living on that side of the town.

But their needs have also changed, and daytime events are fewer and less relevant now due to the increasing number of those who have found work. Probably up to 25% of our Ukrainian friends have returned to Ukraine, either missing their homeland too much, or finding it impossible to secure an income that would reasonably sustain a rent in the UK.

Learning *English*, finding sustainable *employment*, and securing suitable rented *accommodation* therefore continue to be the main practical challenges. Alongside this, our church communities are ideally placed to build trust, provide social integration and spiritual support to those new to Ipswich. The leader of the Suffolk County Council Homes for Ukraine team and I regularly recognise and agree our need for one another. "You do appointments and forms, and we do cakes and hugs," I jokingly suggested to him recently.

Not only have the *practical* support needs of the Ukrainian community changed, but also the *atmosphere* or underlying *mood* among them. A year ago, there was still, largely, that sense of energy and determination that is often evident immediately after a disaster – the '*rescue and response*' stage - when shock is mixed with understandable but somewhat unrealistic expectations. "We can do it! Let's pull together."

This year a sober reality has set in, with more question marks in people's eyes, and a growing and sometimes wearisome understanding that this is about the 'long haul'. This is not wrong as such. Rather it is the globally acknowledged *second stage* of disaster relief – the messy '*recovery*' stage, which is forced to embrace more realistic goals and encounter not-a-few setbacks, while slow and dogged progress is made into re-establishing wholesome norms, and the third '*reconstruction*' stage can begin to be anticipated just over the horizon.

Acknowledging all this, we worked hard to develop an appropriate *posture* for the second anniversary Ipswich Vigil for Ukraine (23 and 24 February 2024). We sought to position it as both an event for *lament* (depths of sorrow, and yet somehow with forward-looking hope), but also as a *celebration* of Ukrainian life and identity. Around 400 people came through the ancient door of St Mary at the Elms for that amazing two-day event.

Case study – one church's response.

During this time, Burlington Church has hosted and managed two significant grants – one that was given (by CUF) for the purpose of providing move-on furniture for Ukrainian refugees, and the other - given by Suffolk C.C. Engaged Communities - that provides 'Suffolk Tours' for the integration of refugees and asylum seekers into the county they presently call home. Over two hundred refugees and asylum seekers have benefitted from these grants, and our relationships with the beneficiaries has grown, in most cases significantly.

Burlington has also hosted a number of support events for the Ukrainian community at its centre in London Road, and individual members have sponsored (hosted) Ukrainians, donated furniture and parking permits, created magnificent artwork, set up sound and media technical services, and provided minibus drivers for some of the Suffolk Tours.

Burlington is now developing a 'Refugee, Asylum Seeking and Migration Support' Missional Community which, they anticipate, will quite simply seek to envision, equip and enable people to continue to provide these support services and build these relationships, in conjunction with Together for Ipswich's sphere of the same name.

Alan Cutting