

Letter from Scotland

One of the acts of kindness to come out of the Ukrainian refugee crisis is the rescue of 48 orphan children by what's called the "Hibernian family", supporters of Hibernian Football Club in Edinburgh.

The Dnipro Kids Appeal has raised more than £50,000 to bring the children, and their seven carers, out of their war torn city and to safety in Poland.

There was then a delay of several days until the UK Home Office finally granted the children visas. It's been a constant complaint of The Scottish Government that the Home Office has been slow and over-bureaucratic in granting visas to desperate refugees. But the children are now expected to arrive in Edinburgh early next week. An appeal has gone out for suitable accommodation, bearing in mind that the children are grouped into "families" of between 7 and 12 children, each with a Ukrainian "mother".

The link with the Dnipro orphanages goes back to 2005 when a group of Hibs supporters travelled to Dnipro to watch their team play the local club in a qualifier for the European cup. Hibernian lost the match but the supporters, led by Steven Carr, had brought with them gifts for local orphan

children. Over the years, similar acts of kindness have grown into an official Dnipro Kids Appeal, still led by Steven Carr.



The power of football in times of war

The Scottish Government, for its part, is hoping to be a “super sponsor” for up to 3,000 Ukrainian refugees, under the UK Government’s sponsorship programme. And it’s allocated more than £11 million to local authorities to help them provide accommodation and services. Nicola Sturgeon told The Scottish Parliament that the first refugees could arrive in Scotland this weekend, but, as with the Dnipro children, it depends on the UK Government granting visas. Ms Sturgeon said she would take refugees into her own home “if necessary”, joining the 138,000 people in Britain who have so far offered accommodation.

The refugees should be warned they are about to arrive in a country where the number of Covid cases has soared in recent weeks. It’s been explained by the increased infectiousness of

the latest variant, Omicron BA.2. At one point last week Orkney had the highest case rate in the UK. It's estimated one in every 14 people in Scotland have Covid in its new milder form. But this has led to a high number of hospital admissions, more than 2,038 on Thursday, and 28 deaths.

So The Scottish Government has decided to keep the legal requirement to wear face-masks in shops and on public transport for another fortnight, till the beginning of April. But we will join the rest of the UK in dropping all other legal requirements from Monday. And all official testing will stop at the beginning of April because, without UK government funding, Scottish ministers say it cannot continue.

There has been more talk this week of the effect of the war in Ukraine on fuel prices. The Conservatives are pressing for new oil and gas fields around the Scottish coast to be opened up. But the SNP say the rise in energy prices should spur us on to developing Scotland's renewable sources of power. Both Nicola Sturgeon and the Labour leader Anas Sarwar have criticised Boris Johnson's mission to Saudi Arabia this week seeking replacements for Russian oil and gas. They say he's just replacing one dictatorship with another, both of which are unreliable and unsavoury sources of supply.

On Thursday morning we woke up to the news that P&O ferries had suspended all its ferry services in Britain, which includes the busy port of Cairnryan on the Ayrshire coast which is the main route for traffic to Northern Ireland. P&O ferries is owned by DC World, based in Dubai, and the company told its 800 employees in Britain it was making them redundant with immediate effect in a video message ...as you do in Dubai apparently.

The company said it had been making losses of £100 million a year, made worse because of Covid. P&O Ferries, it said, had no future unless it replaced its current staff with cheaper labour. As I write, sailors and shore staff are staging

protests and sit-ins at the ports affected.

Finally, one migrant making a temporary home in Scotland again this year is Laddie the Osprey at the Scottish Wildlife Trust's reserve at Loch of Lowes in Perthshire. He arrived from Africa on Sunday and has been watched by web-cam viewers around the world rebuilding his nest, in preparation for the hoped-for return of his partner, Lassie.

Let's hope she makes it, like all the other migrants seeking a home in peaceful Scotland.