

Ukraine – First Minister calls for visa requirements to be waived

The UK Government has been urged to waive all visa requirements for any Ukrainian nationals who refuge from the Russian invasion in their country in the UK.

In a letter to the Prime Minister, First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, said “It is vital that rapid, safe and legal routes be established immediately, cooperating with our international partners wherever possible.

“We must learn the lessons from the Afghanistan resettlement schemes in order to provide rapid and appropriate support to those who need it.”

The letter also says Scotland stands ready to offer refuge and sanctuary for those who may be displaced as it did with the Syrian Resettlement Programme, which saw all 32 local authorities in Scotland welcome Syrian families into their communities.

The Scottish Government is committed to working alongside local authorities to support Ukrainian refugees to settle in Scotland.

The First Minister said: “For those Ukrainians who were already in the UK prior to Russia’s unprovoked and illegal invasion, the UK Government announcement of temporary visa

extensions and in-country visa category switching measures simply do not go far enough. Ukrainians in the UK should be offered the assurance that they will be offered protection in the UK for as long as is required, regardless of their migration status.

“In this respect it is vital that you lift No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) and any employment restrictions so that individuals can support themselves and access vital public services during this difficult time without fear of breaching the conditions of their visa.”

Full text of the letter:

Dear Prime Minister

On Sunday you said that your government would be “very generous” with people displaced by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. I appreciate that this is a fast moving situation but the confusion over the last few days about the UK Government’s offer is putting people at risk and causing distress. I am concerned that the proposals from the UK Government are still insufficient given the gravity of the current situation.

We cannot turn our back on the people of Ukraine during what is arguably the most serious moment the world has faced since the end of the Cold War, and one of the most dangerous since World War II. I urge you to offer immediate refuge and sanctuary, where necessary, for those who may be displaced.

The situation demands further action on three fronts: to support UK nationals and their family members who currently have a right to enter the UK but who face bureaucratic barriers; to establish a safe route for those fleeing conflict, with particular consideration given to those with family members already in the UK and any unaccompanied asylum seeking children who may arrive; and to support Ukrainian nationals currently in the UK or arriving here seeking refuge.

Angus Robertson wrote to Liz Truss last week outlining our concerns for UK citizens and their family members who are still experiencing difficulties in leaving Ukraine. The decision by the UK Government to extend the family migration visa to adult relatives is welcome but the delay in providing this clarity is concerning. However, individuals are also still expected to provide documentary evidence and biometrics in order to obtain a family visa.

In the midst of conflict it is neither reasonable nor morally acceptable to expect individuals to go through bureaucratic processes, abandon their family members and surrender their travel documents whilst awaiting visa application outcomes. The UK Government should follow the example of countries like the Republic of Ireland by waiving all visa requirements for any Ukrainian nationals seeking refuge in the UK, as well as implementing the temporary protection regulations. It is equally vital that rapid, safe and legal routes be established immediately, cooperating with our international partners wherever possible.

We must also ensure that we learn the lessons from the Afghanistan resettlement schemes in order to provide rapid and appropriate support to those who need it.

I note the announcement of a community sponsorship route to be led by Michael Gove with further details to be provided in due course. It is important that any proposal is developed at pace but in partnership with the Devolved Governments through meaningful collaboration and I would ask for confirmation that the Department for Levelling Up will work with the Scottish Government in developing this route prior to publishing further detail.

However, I am concerned that this route will take time to establish and be limited in its scope. Scotland stands ready to offer refuge and sanctuary for those who may be displaced, as we did with the Syrian Resettlement Programme, which saw

all 32 local authorities in Scotland welcome Syrian families into their communities. There is still a need for such a programme and I should be grateful to know as a matter of urgency whether you intend to offer one. If you do, the Scottish Government will work with local authorities here to support refugees to settle in Scotland. Local authorities in Scotland have made clear their readiness to support such a programme for Ukraine.

For those Ukrainians who were already in the UK prior to Russia's unprovoked and illegal invasion, the UK Government announcement of temporary visa extensions and in-country visa category switching measures simply do not go far enough. Ukrainians in the UK should be offered the assurance that they will be offered protection in the UK for as long as is required, regardless of their migration status. In this respect it is vital that you lift No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) and any employment restrictions so that individuals can support themselves and access vital public services during this difficult time without fear of breaching the conditions of their visa.

Further, it is vital that the UK Government extend the deadline for the EU Settlement Scheme Family Permits, which is due to end on 29 March 2022 or introduce concessions for late applications. More than 12,000 Ukrainians have already applied to the EUSS and extending the family permit route could enable more individuals to settle here in the UK legally and without the financial burden associated with other immigration routes.

Finally, I call again on the UK Government to drop the Nationalities and Borders Bill, which would effectively criminalise people from Ukraine (or anywhere else) entering the UK in order to seek asylum: points made repeatedly during the Bill's scrutiny at Westminster.

We must stand in solidarity with the people of Ukraine and provide them with practical support, aid and refuge. Scotland

has always played its part in providing sanctuary to those fleeing conflict and persecution. We stand ready to do so again.