

Government pausing super sponsorship visa scheme – and will use ship in Leith as temporary accommodation

The Scottish Government is to pause the super sponsorship visa process for displaced Ukrainians in a bid to ensure those who have already applied are given the best attention.

The number of people the government promised to help in March was initially 3,000, and this has been exceeded with 21,256 visas issued naming a Scottish sponsor – which is a fifth of the UK total.

And in an effort to deal with the issue of finding temporary accommodation the passenger ship M/S Victoria will be docked in Leith to provide an additional 739 rooms.

Those arriving from Ukraine require safe accommodation and the government says a temporary pause in the [programme](#) will be in place from 13 July for three months.

The number of visa applications has risen by a fifth in the week to 5 July, visas issued have risen by 27% and the number of those arriving under the scheme has risen by a fifth the government has assessed that this pause is now necessary.

In North Lanarkshire 200 unused council properties are to be refurbished with funding of £5 million provided by the government.

Additional staff will be deployed in “surge teams” to assist all local authorities moving from temporary to longer term accommodation.

The Wheatley Group will make 300 homes available for Ukrainians all over Scotland.

Minister with Special Responsibility for Refugees from Ukraine, Neil Gray will also meet today with Lord Harrington, UK Minister for Refugees, to seek clarity on existing funding arrangements for the Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme and, given the very high demand experienced by the Welsh and Scottish Government schemes, ask whether the UK Government will consider introducing its own super sponsor arrangements

Mr Gray said: “As a nation Scotland has risen in solidarity with Ukrainians in their hour of need. I am proud that thanks in large part to our super sponsor scheme, we are now providing safe accommodation to the most Ukrainians per head of population in the UK.

“We have been able to ensure thousands of people displaced by Russia’s horrific and illegal war were able to travel immediately and receive support and a place to stay without the need to be matched with a private host first.

“Our absolute priority has been to respond quickly to support those forced to flee their homeland and I thank all local authorities, third sector organisations, the private sector and the public, who have all mobilised in a major effort to

help – together we have coordinated accommodation and delivered essential services at a large scale and in a very short space of time.

“With a recent decrease in people applying for private sponsorship in England, and Wales having paused their own scheme, the number of applications naming the Scottish Government as sponsor has increased considerably in recent weeks. For this reason we have taken the incredibly difficult decision to follow Wales in pausing our scheme so we can continue to provide a high level of support and care to everyone who has already been granted a visa.

“We will review our position in three months, but of course if circumstances change during that time we will bring that date forward. In the meantime we are taking significant action to increase the capacity of our temporary accommodation and are also boosting our matching system to maximise the number of displaced people placed with volunteer hosts who have completed the necessary safeguarding checks.”

Scottish Labour External Affairs spokesperson Sarah Boyack said: “This is deeply disappointing news. The conflict is far from over, but Ukrainians are having the rug pulled out from under them.

“This scheme was a chance to lead the way and put our solidarity into practice, but right from the start there has been a gulf between the SNP’s soundbites and reality.

“They should have been using every lever available to support those fleeing the conflict but the lack of political will or imagination means much more work is needed to bring Scotland’s thousands of empty homes back to life and ensure that cash-strapped local authorities can provide the services that people urgently need.

“The SNP government must put do right by Ukrainians and get this scheme up and running again as soon as possible, while

making sure those who are already here are properly supported.”

Foyso Choudhury MSP said: “I have been warning the Scottish Government for months that while they congratulated themselves for welcoming thousands of new refugees, hundreds of Afghan and Syrian refugees had been stuck in hotels and other temporary accommodation for years on end with seemingly no plan to tackle this accommodation shortage. Now we finally have the admission that the Scottish Government cannot house many of the refugees who have arrived, to the point where they are suspending the Super Sponsor Scheme and chartering a ship to hold refugees instead.

“I cannot overemphasise the disruption that this will cause to the lives of refugees who have arrived in Scotland seeking sanctuary. Being stuck in temporary accommodation means that people are unable to put down roots and begin to rebuild their lives, because they never know when they might be moved on and forced to start again. It is safety without security.

“I have spoken to many refugees from Syria and Afghanistan who have now been stuck in hotels for several years, often accommodation that is unfit for the family they have with them. Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, I have urged the Scottish Government to learn the lessons from the experiences of these previous waves of refugees. That they have failed to do at best demonstrates their unrealistic expectations and at worst represents negligence.

“The Scottish Government must ensure that its plans to charter a ship to hold refugees are truly only temporary, and that conditions aboard are sanitary and fit for purpose in the meantime. We cannot afford to end up in a situation where people are still stuck on the ship as many years later as the previous waves of refugees have now been stuck in hotels.”