

Ukrainians to be moved off boat by July

Ukrainian refugees on board a cruise ship in Edinburgh will be moved into new accommodation by July, the council has confirmed.

Over 1,000 people are still living on the MS Victoria which has been docked at Leith since last summer as part of efforts to accommodate displaced refugees who have arrived in the country following the Russian invasion.

The ship's contract was renewed in December, however the Scottish Government said it will end on July 11 – with all on board due to be moved into settled accommodation by then.

Not all will be able to remain in Edinburgh due to housing shortages. Some will be moved to other local authorities or into hotels, and plans have also been announced to make up to 100 empty council homes available for Ukrainians leaving the boat.

In March the British Red Cross warned against continuing to house refugees on cruise ships in “isolated” and “windowless” cabins. The charity said the scheme, which also included a cruise liner in Glasgow, left many “still living in limbo”.

And a freedom of information request by the Local Democracy Reporting Service found that among the issues reported to the council by those living on MS Victoria were lack of living space, poor internet bandwidth and concerns about onward accommodation.

An update was given to the council's housing, homelessness and fair work committee on Tuesday (May 9).

A report said: "There are currently around 1,150 Ukrainian Displaced People on the MS Victoria, all of whom will require settled accommodation upon disembarkation.

"With the disembarkation of the MS Victoria required by 11 July 2023, there is a concern that sufficient accommodation will not be available in Edinburgh.

"Council officers are meeting regularly with Scottish Government officers, other Local Authorities, Social Housing providers and the private rented sector to resolve these concerns."

Many who have been living on board "have expressed a desire to remain in the city or nearby," the report added.

Paul Lawrence, executive director of place for the council, told councillors it was hoped children will remain at the school they were placed at on arrival "so they are not moved around the city".

The meeting also heard a funding bid would be submitted to the Scottish Government for £1.72 million to fix-up up to 100 currently void council-owned properties for refugees leaving the ship.

It is anticipated the first 20 refurbished homes will be ready by the end of this month with work continuing to get the rest up to scratch.

However, the report noted 30 require "more extensive work" and would not be prioritised in the short to medium term.

It added: "As it will not be possible to have all of the accommodation outlined in this report available for disembarkation, alternative plans are being developed to ensure that suitable accommodation is available to Ukrainian

Displaced People in the short term. This accommodation (which is likely to be mostly hotel accommodation) will be paid for by the Scottish Government.”

Service director for housing and homelessness Derek McGowan said: “The availability of community facilities, of schools, healthcare etcetera is an important point and there is a matching process that would be used in working with the Scottish Government and partners to understand when they’re disembarking the boat where they would go and how we do that most effectively.”

He said discussions are ongoing with Ukrainians on the MS Victoria about onward accommodation arrangements and officials from other local authorities have been on board to promote other areas of Scotland they could move to.

by Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter

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Towerbank Primary School – Ukraine Walk, Portobello,
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