

# "Homes for Ukraine" - lessons from Poland

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Dear British friends!

It's incredible to see such a huge response to this unprecedented humanitarian crisis. Since the outbreak of the war on 24th February, more than 3.7 million Ukrainians have been forced to flee their country, of which 2 million have found shelter in Poland. In these four short weeks, Polish people had to quickly establish a nationwide refugee support network, learning mostly by trial and error. We would like to share their experiences to help the British public prepare to welcome Ukrainian guests into their homes.

## ***Part I. Before the arrival***

Please remember that people you are inviting into your home likely have been through a lot. They may be traumatised by their ordeal and may still have family members trapped in Ukraine, fighting in the Ukrainian forces, or even already killed. They are in a strange country and will feel uncomfortable because they are imposing themselves on you. Your tact, patience, and empathy will be vital, and it will be the little things that matter most.

- 1) 🏠 Most Ukrainians will have come from warm homes with many of the same comforts we are used to, so please ensure the accommodation you are offering is warm, with natural light, sufficient space, child proof (where they have small children), and allows them privacy. If your guest is elderly, with mobility issues, then ideally they may prefer to be on the ground floor, providing they can easily get to a toilet and washroom.
- 2) 📝 Write down all essential information that your guests might need – your name and phone number, full address of the accommodation, WiFi password, door code, contact numbers to local organisations that are helping Ukrainian refugees etc., and leave it in a clearly visible place in the room.
- 3) 🛏 Prepare fresh bed linen and towels, preferably washed in a hypoallergenic detergent – especially if you're hosting families with young children. Some people from Eastern Europe can experience a mild skin reaction to British tap water immediately after arrival, so bottles of mineral water may well be really appreciated.
- 4) 🧴 Other useful items to leave in their room are personal care items, such as toothbrushes, toothpaste, shampoo, conditioner, comb/hairbrush, hypoallergenic body wash, face moisturiser, and hand cream. Depending on who you are welcoming into your home, other items could be nappies, sanitary towels, nursing pads, hair ties, baby care products, shaving items, a sewing kit and basic medicines like painkillers and anti-diarrhoea tablets. Many of these items are deeply personal, and your guests will likely be too embarrassed to ask for them.
- 5) 👕 Once your guests have arrived, then you can think about more particular items such as underwear, a few changes of clothing - you can ask at any local donation collection point like Quex Barn if you cannot provide these yourself. Other homely and welcoming touches include slippers for your guests by the front door, and net curtains on their windows for privacy.
- 6) 🍴 Ukrainian cuisine is vastly different from British cooking, and some foods (for example toast bread) might even cause your guests some discomfort. Your closest Eastern European or Polish grocery store will have the essentials to help those you're hosting feel far more at home, including

sourdough bread, cold meats, sour cream, Polish-style sausages, honey, curd cheese, eggs, and plain flour. Some large supermarkets also stock Eastern European products grouped together in separate sections.

7) ↔ Don't forget to remove everything you'll need to use from the room where your guests will be staying. It's very important to give them privacy and a space just for themselves.

8) 😞 Keep in mind your guests may be feeling stressed and anxious of being in a strange home in a strange country, while also deeply worried about other family members and friends who either haven't been able to leave Ukraine, or are refugees elsewhere. As a result they may act in strange ways, or even swing between different moods, being withdrawn or overly chatty, shy and scared or nervous and emotional, grateful for every small gesture of kindness or acting as if they came to a hotel on a business trip. Give your guests space, and let them come to terms with their new circumstances in their own time. Offer help, but don't push, and they will start opening up when they're ready. If you're hosting a family with small children, maybe offer to babysit so the mother can have a moment to rest, collect her thoughts or even cry in private.

9) 📖 As part of your preparation for welcoming your guests, do read up on some Ukrainian history and traditions first, there are excellent books by a Kyiv-based publishing house available to download for free: <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=5390482984317856&set=gm.692272092209556> (but you can donate to help their business). Talk to other household members and share your knowledge with each other, and let your neighbours know you will be hosting people from Ukraine. British and Ukrainian cultures differ significantly, so if you've never met anyone from Eastern Europe you may be in for a surprise. They are a proud, passionate and resilient people who value family ties above all else and don't beat around the bush, which is sometimes interpreted as rudeness by the more reserved Brits. But kindness and concern are a universal language, alongside patience and space.

10) 🗣️ A good tip is to install a voice translator app, Ukrainian language pack and keyboard on your phone. It's likely that most Ukrainians coming to the UK will speak English to at least some degree, but their older family members might only speak Ukrainian and Russian. Some might not know how to use a smartphone either. If you can familiarise yourself with Cyrillic, that will make communication so much easier (but please don't think you have to be fluent or even hold a conversation. A couple of greetings, please, thank you, and welcome in Ukrainian will speak volumes). If you're feeling motivated, you can start learning Ukrainian from scratch e.g. on Duolingo (all the ad revenue from people learning Ukrainian on the app will be donated to Ukraine relief).

11) 😊 Remember, they will also want to feel they are choosing to come and live with you, so do let them ask any questions they may have before they finally decide to come to you. Exchange as much useful information as possible before extending your offer, and don't be discouraged if they keep asking for more details, photos or even personal references. They aren't being choosy, just ensuring they are emotionally safe and can relax after the trauma of losing everything and fleeing to a strange country.

12) 🧑🏻‍🦱 Hosting refugees is hard work, and a sacrifice – not unlike becoming a parent. It will require time, patience, compassion, organisation, determination, creativity, your own initiative and, inevitably, money. These people will be relying on you to make them feel safe and cared for. You are also indirectly inviting the war into your own private space - so expect for it to be a transformative experience that leaves a huge emotional mark. But remember, your help and patience will be invaluable, and you may well make new amazing friends who want to show you equal kindness once they are over the worst of their experiences.

Thank you so much for helping Ukrainian people in their hour of need. ❤️❤️