

Ukrainian women fear childcare issues will affect their ability to work in UK ^[1]

Mothers shocked by the cost as charities urge government to step in

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EXCERPTS

Childcare issues and inflexible working hours are preventing Ukrainian women from getting jobs as they attempt to rebuild their lives in Britain. Ukrainian refugees told the Observer they were shocked to discover the cost and inaccessibility of childcare and after-school provision and that they were struggling to navigate the system.

For many, the problem is exacerbated by language issues – meaning they cannot access better-paid jobs, even if they are highly qualified.

With childcare unaffordable for many, Anya Abdulakh, a trustee of the charity Families4Peace, which is helping newly arrived Ukrainians in north London, said mothers are struggling to find work that fits around school hours. Abdulakh is trying to get childcare providers to offer free or reduced-cost places for Ukrainian children. In the long term, she said, government help is needed for the “thousands” of women she thinks will be affected.

Under the Homes for Ukraine scheme, refugees are theoretically guaranteed free accommodation for six months, but many are worried about not having a job and enough money saved up for when they have to rent for themselves.

“So, being able to be employed is security that you can offer to your child going forward when you have to pay for the rent,” said Abdulakh. If they can’t, she added, some may be forced to go back to Ukraine, even if the war is continuing.

When she tried to help a beautician get free childcare for her two-year-old son so that she could work, she was told there was nothing until September. Another Ukrainian mother, Victoria Shcherbyna, 42, has been living in temporary accommodation for seven weeks in a village in Ukraine near the Hungarian border with her seven-year-old daughter, Sofia. They are waiting for their UK visas to be approved while her husband remains in Kyiv. Although she has a Homes for Ukraine host, and a job in sales, set up in London, she is becoming increasingly concerned about childcare.

She had hoped that Sofia would be able to attend a summer camp during the holidays at relatively low cost, like in Ukraine before the war. But after speaking to UK-based Ukrainian mothers, she realised that it would be unaffordable and finish too early in the day. “I have received many messages back like ‘This is the reality, you get used to it’,” she said. She is also concerned about after-school care. While she feels fearful and powerless, she is trying to make the process as stress-free as possible for Sofia, who she said “has seen enough”, by presenting their move as an adventure.

“There is not much I can do. I just need to adapt somehow and I have only one thought in my mind: that there is nothing that is impossible for me, that I have to cope with everything and find solutions because otherwise it won’t work.”

Through tears, she said at first she didn’t want to leave her husband and Ukraine, but that she must, for her children’s future. Her son Danylo, 19, is at Manchester University, so this way at least they will keep part of their family together.

Kateryna Chernyaeva, 43, arrived in London from Kyiv only last week with her son Dima, 12, and is now trying to find a school for him that also runs after-school clubs, to fit around her work. In Ukraine she worked as an HR director and is hoping to find work in the UK but, she said, “at the same time I need to know that my child, [for] the whole day, will be safe.”

“I left all of my life and family in Kyiv. It’s very hard to realise everything has changed,” she said. But she is determined to work out their new life in London. “I’m trying to adapt to a new life and I understand I have to start from scratch. I’m ready because I’m a strong person and, if I believe in myself, I’ll be OK. But at the same time I really want to see my parents, husband, brother.”

Meanwhile, community organisations said the hurdles faced by Ukrainian refugees – mainly women and children fleeing the Russian invasion alone as the family’s sole breadwinner, while most men are required to stay in the country – highlight the existing systemic issues in childcare provision for all families across the UK. They also accused the government of leaning too heavily on the voluntary sector to help newly arrived Ukrainians, and called for more funding to help the charities and organisations that were attempting to fill in the gaps.

Iryna Terlecky, head of the Association of Ukrainian Women in Great Britain, said that the difficulties faced by Ukrainians, “to a huge extent have highlighted some of the systemic issues there are for childcare and children’s activities – not only for smaller children but also for older children and teenagers”.

The Local Government Association said access to good quality childcare was vital and called on the government to significantly increase funding.

A government spokesperson said: “All children and young people living in the UK have a right to access education and childcare, including those from Ukraine, and ministers have been clear that supporting families is a priority.

“We have invested more than £3.5bn in each of the last three years to deliver free childcare offers, and are working across government to look for more ways to improve the cost, choice and availability of childcare places. We have also legislated for the right to flexible working, and shared parental leave and pay, to better support eligible working parents.”

Region: Europe ^[3]

Tags: child care ^[4]

women ^[5]

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Source URL (modified on 24 May 2022): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/22/05/ukrainian-women-fear-childcare-issues-will-affect-their-ability-work>

Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/22/05/ukrainian-women-fear-childcare-issues-will-affect-their-ability-work> [2]

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/22/ukrainian-women-fear-childcare-issues-will-affect-their-ability-to-work-in-uk> [3]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/europe> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/child-care> [5]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/women> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/workforce>