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Homes for Ukraine: Arrival Infrastructures and the UK's "New Bespokism"

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Abstract

This article examines arrival infrastructures and arrival brokering practices emerging from the UK government's response to people fleeing the conflict in Ukraine. We focus on Homes for Ukraine, a private hosting scheme. The scheme is an example of the "new bespokism" that characterises the government's approach to asylum. It has given rise to new geographies of settlement against a background of a "brutal migration milieu" (Hall, 2017) and provides an interesting entry point to examine arrival infrastructures. Drawing on insights from place-based research on the policies and practices of the hosting scheme, we discuss how it has shaped the landscape of arrival infrastructures for a distinct group of newcomers in a London borough and Oxford/shire. Our research included interviews and multi-modal participatory ethnographic fieldwork with Ukrainians, as well as interviews with hosts, practitioners, and support workers. The article reflects on the role of hosts as "arrival brokers" and how the Homes for Ukraine scheme created a distinct arrival context and infrastructure with significant implications for the ability of Ukrainians to exercise agency in stark contrast to those within the UK asylum system. We reflect on the politics of the Ukraine schemes as a form of arrival infrastructure that facilitates certain forms of mobility while hindering other forms.

Keywords

arrival infrastructure; brokering; hosting; new bespokism; politics of arrival; solidarity; UK; Ukraine

1. Introduction

The UK's asylum system is a "system of suffering" (Darling, 2022): privatised, fragmented, and under-resourced (cf. Berg et al., 2023, p. 215). Asylum policies are increasingly characterised by what Tomlinson (2022, p. 33)

calls the "new bespokism approach to asylum law and policy," referencing the proliferation of ad hoc schemes set up to respond to the protection needs of particular groups of people deemed especially deserving of support and welcome. By implication, the asylum system is becoming a residual system for those implicitly deemed less deserving. Meanwhile, new legal measures curtail asylum by making it dependent on the mode of arrival (Prabhat et al., 2022), thereby undermining the UK's international legal commitments according to the UN Refugee Convention. It is important to understand these parallel developments as part of an "integrated whole" (Tomlinson, 2022, p. 33) and it is within this context that this article is situated.

We focus on the bespoke schemes that were designed as part of the UK's response to people fleeing Ukraine following Russia's full-scale invasion. The largest of these, the Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme, known as Homes for Ukraine (HfU), is a visa-based private hosting scheme that invites UK residents who have a spare room or property to sponsor Ukrainians and host them for at least six months (Department for Levelling Up, Housing, and Communities [DLUHC], 2023; UKVI & Home Office, 2022). HfU was launched with fanfare and was met with immediate enthusiasm; 120,000 people and organisations signed up in the first 24 hours (Wright & Strauss, 2022), including many public and political figures. As of 30 June 2024, 150,715 Ukrainians had arrived in the UK under the HfU scheme (DLUHC, 2024; Home Office & UKVI, 2024). While appearing to represent a U-turn from a government that was otherwise known for its hostility vis-à-vis refugees and migrants, we argue that the Ukraine schemes were a clear manifestation of the differentiation and fragmentation created by the "new bespokism" and have reproduced and further embedded racialised "hierarchies of belonging" (Back & Sinha, 2018).

The HfU scheme mobilised what we call "new actors," including newly created organisations and members of the public with no previous history of refugee campaigning or activism who stepped in to offer support for Ukrainians. This article reflects on the roles and activities of hosts as "arrival brokers" (cf. Hanhörster & Wessendorf, 2020) and how the HfU scheme created a new and distinct arrival infrastructure, which facilitated the agency of Ukrainians supported by the scheme. We highlight the exclusionary nature of the HfU infrastructure (as it was only accessible to those within the scheme), and advance current discussions about arrival infrastructuring and brokering by bringing the blurred and opaque state/non-state boundaries (cf. Giudici, 2021) that emerge in this context into focus.

The article draws on research we conducted in 2023 with Ukrainians hosted through HfU, hosts of the scheme, as well as practitioners, support workers, volunteers, and mental health professionals in Newham, a highly diverse London borough, and Oxford/shire, an affluent county that does not otherwise host people in the UK asylum system but had a strong uptake of the HfU scheme.

We start by situating the reception of Ukrainians in the wider context of the UK's new bespokism and increasing hostility vis-à-vis and criminalisation of people seeking asylum, before introducing the HfU scheme. We then situate the reception of Ukrainians drawing on arrival infrastructuring and brokering literature. In the methods section, we describe our fieldwork sites and the methods we used for the research. We examine the role of hosts as arrival brokers and how the political and policy landscape shaped arrival infrastructuring processes. In the conclusion, we return to the implications of the new bespokism for the wider landscape of refugee arrival and welcome and the distinct arrival infrastructure created by the HfU scheme. Following Macklin's (2021) work on sanctuary vs settlement programmes in the Canadian context, we ask how and if the arrival infrastructures and forms of support that were mobilised and developed as

individuals and communities signed up to host Ukrainians worked against and/or with the state: did hosting engender a politics of opposition and/or of collaboration?

2. The Ukraine Visa Schemes and New Forms of Hospitality

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 quickly led to mass displacement into neighbouring countries. In response, the UK designed three schemes to protect those fleeing the war. Two required Ukrainians to apply for visas *before* travelling to the UK. These were the Ukraine Family Scheme (terminated in February 2024; Quinn & Syal, 2024) and the HfU (DLUHC, 2023; UKVI & Home Office, 2022), which we focus on in this article. Ukrainians who were already in the UK were able to extend their stay via the Ukraine Extension Scheme (for an overview of the schemes, including their differences, see Casu et al., 2023, p. 20). The Ukraine schemes complement other ad hoc schemes, including the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (2014–2021); four different pathways for people fleeing the 2021 war in Afghanistan; and the Hong Kong BN(O) visa route, which are all separate from the asylum system and differ from each other in terms of rights, access to the labour market and welfare support, length of residence, and pathways to permanent residence or citizenship (for a more detailed overview see Benson et al., 2024; Casu et al., 2023). Those entering the UK under one of the Ukraine schemes, do *not* enter the asylum or dispersal system and are *not* conferred refugee status. While the asylum system and the Ukraine Family Scheme are overseen by the Home Office, responsibility for the HfU scheme from the point of arrival of Ukrainians into the UK lies with the DLUHC, with the Home Office overseeing the processing of visas and suitability checks of sponsors (National Audit Office, 2023, p. 5).

In the months after the launch of the Ukraine schemes, the welcome of Ukrainians was visible in cityscapes from multilingual signage at sites of arrival and public spaces, through to the display of Ukrainian flags and colours on private and public buildings, as seen in Figure 1, creating a distinct climate of hospitality. At train

Figure 1. Ukrainian flag at Stratford Town Hall, London Borough of Newham, May 2023.

stations across the UK, volunteers and local authority staff were deployed to identify and welcome arriving Ukrainians, as seen in Figure 2. Government endorsement and emotionally stirring saturation media coverage were important factors in motivating hosts to sign up (cf. Armbruster, 2018).

Figure 2. Multilingual welcome sign for Ukrainians at Edinburgh Waverley Station, April 2022.

All three Ukraine schemes provided the right to stay in the UK for an initial three-year period (later, a possibility for extension up to a further 18 months was announced; Quinn & Syal, 2024). However, only HfU offers financial support to Ukrainians via a one-off arrival payment, their hosts through monthly support payments, and funding for local authorities through a tariff for each new arrival in their area, thus creating inequalities among and between Ukrainians who were fleeing the conflict and arriving in the UK in the same period (see Turcatti, 2024, p. 2; Vicol & Sehic, 2022, p. 3). HfU operates on the premise of a pre-arrival match between Ukrainians, usually referred to as guests, and hosts in the UK as a prerequisite for starting the visa application process. To facilitate this process, various matching services were set up both by established third sector organisations as well as new providers and private actors, but crucially *not* by the government (the government only provides a list of recognised providers), which thereby displaced the associated risks entirely onto individual hosts and guests (see also Burrell, 2024, pp. 10–11). Local authorities were tasked with carrying out accommodation checks prior to the arrival of Ukrainian guests and welfare checks after their arrival (there were issues reported with these especially during the early phase of the scheme), as well as leading the process of rematching in case of a breakdown of hosting arrangements or when hosting arrangements cannot be extended beyond six months and Ukrainians cannot move into rented accommodation. Once they have arrived in the UK, Ukrainians are allowed immediate access to the labour market, education, healthcare, and the social benefits system (Casu et al., 2023). By contrast, people in the asylum system are generally not allowed to work and cannot access mainstream benefits; their financial support is set below social benefit rates (Berg & Dickson, 2022). However, the HfU scheme entails distinct vulnerabilities associated with its specific set-up, organisation, and support mechanisms, including risks of modern slavery and sexual exploitation (particularly given that the majority of Ukrainian newcomers are

female) as well as homelessness in situations of host-guest relationship breakdown (for a more detailed analysis see British Red Cross, 2023; Turcatti, 2024).

The Ukraine schemes bore the hallmark of policies designed in a hurry and the poor implementation and lack of safeguarding measures led to scathing criticism (Townsend, 2022; Vicol & Sehic, 2022). Reflective of how hospitality and welcoming are always conditional and closely linked to hostility and exclusion (Berg & Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2018, p. 2; Derrida, 2000), the schemes were by design exclusionary; other groups who were fleeing war and violence were not offered bespoke routes or schemes, and were instead targets of deterrence measures. Critical voices noted a double standard based on racialised perceptions of Ukrainians as white and European (Zamore, 2022), and that the schemes individualised and privatised the state's responsibility to offer asylum (Burrell, 2024; Lewicki, 2022; Tomlinson, 2022). In the UK prior to HfU, private and community hosting for refugees had only existed on a relatively small scale after being introduced in 2016 (Phillimore et al., 2022, p. 387). Yet there are precedents of organised private hosting schemes. These include the Kindertransport, a privately funded and organised scheme that saw approximately 10,000 Jewish and non-Jewish children from Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia arriving in Britain in 1938–1940 and hosted mainly in private homes (Göpfert & Hammel, 2004, pp. 21–22). As with HfU, the Kindertransport was organised in a context of geopolitical tensions, anti-refugee sentiments, and an understanding that the children would eventually return home (Göpfert & Hammel, 2004, p. 22). Like HfU, the Kindertransport included selected groups while excluding others who were/are just as in need of protection. In the case of the Kindertransport, the parents of the children were not offered protection; most of them perished in the Holocaust (Göpfert & Hammel, 2004, p. 25).

Notwithstanding the problematic aspects of the Ukraine visa schemes as outlined above, for Mette (second author), who was completing research on the asylum system at the time, the Ukraine schemes seemed strikingly generous and premised on hospitality, compared to the slow, punitive, and hostile asylum system with its no-choice dispersal and exclusion from the welfare system and labour market for those within it (Berg et al., 2023; cf. Burrell, 2024, p. 16).

We now turn to arrival infrastructuring and brokering literature to situate the reception of Ukrainians while noting the distinct character of the HfU scheme.

3. Arrival Infrastructuring and Brokering as Framework

There is a growing body of literature focusing on arrival contexts, i.e., local conditions that migrants encounter and that enable them to access information, resources, and networks, and which in turn shape their arrival (Meeus et al., 2019; Wessendorf, 2022; Wessendorf & Gembus, 2024). This literature grows out of work on migration infrastructure, which directs our focus "towards those human *and* nonhuman actors that move migrants within specific infrastructural frames" (Lin et al., 2017, p. 169), in this case, the HfU scheme. We use arrival infrastructuring as a lens to examine the forms of support and new solidarities that have developed and been enabled by the HfU scheme.

A focus on arrival infrastructures highlights the importance of place-based opportunity structures in arrival and settlement processes. Meeus et al. (2019, p. 11) define arrival infrastructures as those "parts of the urban fabric within which newcomers become entangled upon arrival, and where their future local or

translocal social mobilities are produced as much as negotiated" and where they "find the stability to move on." The focus is generally on the "initial orientation and situatedness" (El-Kayed & Keskinkilic, 2023, p. 357) of settlement processes, including finding housing, employment, and navigating bureaucratic systems. As such, these discussions are distinct from work that is concerned with longer-term migrant integration. Infrastructures of arrival vary between areas; they are embedded in and shaped by local socio-economic conditions, including the availability and access to jobs and housing as well as local organisational and social infrastructures, e.g., the prevalence of civil society organisations and co-ethnic or other migrant networks (Wessendorf, 2022; Wessendorf & Gembus, 2024). As such, "chains of sorting" operate within arrival zones, distributing migrants across reception spaces (Hall, 2017, p. 1567).

Arrival infrastructures include a range of interlinked institutions, places, and different actors, such as community organisations, street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980), and residents of both migrant and non-migrant backgrounds. Different practices, activities, and technologies play a role in shaping the arrival processes of newcomers and can be crucial for accessing resources (Wessendorf, 2022; Wessendorf & Gembus, 2024). Key to migration infrastructures is the broker, "a human actor who gains something from the mediation of valued resources that he or she does not directly control" (Lindquist, 2015). In the context of migrant arrival, Hanhörster and Wessendorf (2020) refer to such individuals as "arrival brokers." By connecting newcomers to people, organisations, or institutions, arrival brokers are instrumental in facilitating access to resources for newcomers. They may aid newcomers in coping with everyday life or in accessing e.g., employment or housing through sharing their own knowledge. They also "fulfil an important mediation function by helping people get in touch with others ('social bridges') or connecting them with institutions ('social links')" (Hans, 2023, p. 387). To date, work on arrival brokers has often focused on longer-established migrant individuals (Hans, 2023; Wessendorf, 2022).

There is a large and rich body of literature on private and community hosting, especially in the Canadian context where the practice is well established (e.g., Hyndman et al., 2021; Macklin, 2021). Burrell (2024) has written about the hosting of Ukrainians in the UK specifically, including the affective dimension associated with hosting in the intimate sphere of private homes (see also Gunaratnam, 2021; Monforte et al., 2021; Phillimore et al., 2022). Literature on brokering meanwhile is focused on practices and activities in public or semi-public spaces and that is also the focus of this article. Our work sheds particular light on the "socially productive" nature (Lin et al., 2017, p. 168) of arrival infrastructure, and how the HfU scheme effectively turned those signing up as hosts into arrival brokers.

HfU provides an interesting entry point to examine arrival infrastructures for a distinct group of newcomers in the context of welfare state outsourcing and Britain's "brutal migration milieu" (Hall, 2017). We connect literature on arrival infrastructuring and brokering to debates on the increasing "bespokism" and privatisation of refugee reception and hosting. This allows us to critically examine the at times blurry roles and interplay of different actors (such as the state, street-level bureaucrats, and private citizens) as well as fuzzy boundaries between formal and informal infrastructuring and the emergence of "bespoke" brokering processes. Our work advances conceptualisations of arrival infrastructuring by adding the crucial dimension of "privatisation" of arrival infrastructures to current discussions and further asks what this means for migrant agency.

To date, work on arrival infrastructures has focused more on typical arrival areas and "transition zones" (Schillebeeck et al., 2019) and there are gaps in the literature on non-typical areas such as the ones we

examine in Oxford/shire. By investigating both a typical and a non-typical arrival area, this article contributes to current understandings of how "very different places shape arrival processes" (El-Kayed & Keskinkilic, 2023, p. 355). We thus add to current conceptualisations of brokering by investigating a new, particular group of actors, i.e., HfU hosts, including how their brokering practices were instrumental in shaping the experiences of a distinct group of newcomers. We argue for the need to understand the distinct arrival infrastructure that was created by HfU in the context of the "integrated whole" (Tomlinson, 2022, p. 33) of bespoke schemes, a privatised asylum system, and a hostile political and policy framework.

We now turn to the methodology we employed to capture the new geographies of arrival and settlement that were mediated by HfU in two different localities in the UK.

4. Capturing New Geographies of Arrival and Settlement in Two Localities

Our research began in 2022 with geo-spatial mapping to establish the unfolding patterns of Ukrainian arrivals in the UK. Established "dispersal areas" for people in the asylum system tend to be deprived small towns and rural areas in decline, with few services and poor public transport, and hence available cheap rental housing (Berg & Dickson, 2022). By contrast, the HfU scheme attracted hosts living in affluent areas with a limited supply of affordable rental housing. From the beginning then, it was clear that Ukrainian newcomers were often settling in places that would have no or scarce existing arrival infrastructures raising intriguing questions about how they would fare compared to those settling in more traditional arrival areas. We therefore decided on a place-based approach focusing on the contrasting areas of Oxford/shire and the London borough of Newham. Oxford is a City of Sanctuary, but Oxfordshire is not an asylum dispersal area and is among the least deprived of local authorities in England (Oxfordshire County Council, n.d.). By contrast, the London borough of Newham is a "classical arrival area" (Wessendorf & Gembus, 2024, p. 6) and has high levels of deprivation (Newham London, n.d.). Based on data from the 2021 Census, Newham has been described as the "most-diverse district" in England and Wales (Catney et al., 2023, p. 7) and the local authority with the largest number of Ukraine-born usual residents (Barton, 2022).

After receiving research ethics approval, we conducted field research from March to September 2023. We interviewed 23 interlocutors split between three Ukrainians and four hosts in Oxford/shire and four Ukrainians and four hosts in Newham. We did *not* interview Ukrainians and hosts who lived together to ensure research participants felt able to speak candidly. We also interviewed an interlocutor from the local authority in Newham, and two frontline workers, one in Oxford and one in London. One of these was Ukrainian themselves. Additionally, we interviewed two mental health practitioners who work on refugee wellbeing, both of whom were also hosts and one of whom was Ukrainian; three "new actors," one of whom was a Ukrainian newcomer herself and one of whom was also a host and considered herself part of a new diaspora response. All interviews were in English and almost all were audio recorded with participants' consent.

In our interviews with Ukrainians, we took a narrative approach and invited our interlocutors to tell their stories of coming to the UK including making the decision, arriving, transitioning, as well as settling in in the context of the HfU scheme. Our interviews lasted about an hour each and were in places suggested by the participants, including a church, public libraries, cafes, or online. We invited the Ukrainian interlocutors to also participate in an auto-ethnographic app-based research component ($N = 6$), but in this article, we only draw directly on

the interview material. Interviews with hosts and others explored their respective roles, how they became involved, and their experiences of the scheme, including challenges and suggestions for improvements.

Religious groups have widely embraced refugee hosting and settlement (Phillimore et al., 2022, p. 386). We recruited Ukrainian participants in Oxford/shire via a Russian Orthodox Church with a mixed Russian-Ukrainian-British congregation, which had taken a public stance in favour of Ukraine's right to self-determination. We recruited hosts via the Anglican Diocese, which had an active outreach programme for Ukrainians and hosts. In London, we recruited participants via Newham Council's Welcome Newham Team who circulated information about our research among their pool of hosts and Ukrainian guests and provided us with contact details of interested individuals. These different channels may have skewed the profile of participants to a degree. It may also be that the material from Oxford/shire presents a more positive picture given the resources put in place to support the hosting by the respective faith organisations relative to the Newham material generated via the local authority.

Ukrainian participants were in their thirties to forties, and all were women; this was unsurprising and reflects the imposition of martial law in Ukraine (Benson et al., 2024). Several had arrived in the UK with children, two with husbands (there are some exceptions to the travel ban on men), and one with her sister and mother who were both living in separate HfU hosting arrangements. Reflecting the wider profile of Ukrainians in the UK (Vicol & Sehic, 2022, pp. 13–14), most of our research participants were middle-class and educated to a degree level. Two had continued working remotely in their jobs in Ukraine, several went back to visit during the period of research. Our host interlocutors were in their thirties to eighties, two were single, the others were married or lived with their partners; five of them were women. One host family had a teenage child, several others referred to themselves as empty nesters. Three of the hosts were white British, three were non-British, one was born in Ukraine and had been living in the UK for 18 years and described herself as British-Ukrainian; one British host described herself as a brown woman. All were middle-class and in comfortable living conditions. Some of our Oxfordshire-based hosts seemed especially affluent, which could partly be an effect of our recruitment channels, as it appears to be distinct compared to Newham. However, other research on refugee hosting has also noted a preponderance of middle-class hosts in comfortable conditions (Monforte et al., 2021). With regards to HfU specifically, Kathy Burrell notes similarly that the hosts she interviewed were financially comfortable and living in "salubrious neighbourhoods" (Burrell, 2024, pp. 7–8). Tellingly, none of the hosts we spoke to referred to rising costs of food and energy as part of the national cost of living crisis (see for example Harari et al., 2024) as impeding their ability to host or extend their hosting arrangements. Several of our host interlocutors passed on their monthly thank-you payments to their Ukrainian guests as they did not feel they needed them to cover additional costs. Reflecting a national pattern (Tryl & Surmon, 2023, p. 8), none of the hosts we spoke to had hosted before and they did not have a background in refugee rights activism.

We explained to all interviewees that participation was entirely voluntary and confidential and have used pseudonyms throughout, as well as changing other information to protect anonymity. We offered shopping vouchers to Ukrainian interview participants. We were mindful that we asked Ukrainian participants to share recent, potentially traumatic experiences with us and made it clear that interviewees were free to stop interviews at any point. The extent to which the impact and trauma of war and displacement were present in the interviews differed, but all participants were keen to tell their stories. As female researchers with a migration background ourselves and racialised as white, we felt it was easy to find common ground with our

interlocutors (see also Burrell, 2024, p. 9). Our Ukrainian interviewees especially expressed gratitude that we were interested in their experiences, and one said it had been cathartic to tell her story. Some of our host interlocutors pointed out that their participation in the interview helped them to reflect on and process their hosting experiences as well as their involvement in the HfU scheme more generally. The interviews provided us with a rich dataset and unique accounts of very different and often striking experiences of the scheme. We were in regular contact with each other during the fieldwork period, shared our reflections and observations through debriefs, and kept notes to capture the texture and tone of the narratives that were shared with us. Transcription and data analysis went hand in hand and coding was done manually focusing, for this article, on themes of motivations for hosting/coming to the UK, hospitality, providing and receiving support, challenges, and outlook for the future. In what follows, we discuss how the landscape of arrival infrastructures has been shaped by the HfU hosting scheme in the two fieldwork sites.

5. From HfU to Arrival Infrastructuring and Brokering Practices

Hosting arrangements come with their own affordances and logics (cf. Farahani, 2021, pp. 667–668), and we found a range of relationships between Ukrainians and their hosts from relatively distant to very involved, e.g., one host accompanying her Ukrainian guest on visits back to Ukraine. As Macklin (2021, p. 32) has argued, private hosting schemes inflect the relationship between hosts and the refugees they shelter "but does not fully determine it." How the requirements of the scheme were implemented at the practical level ranged from a spare room to semi-separate living arrangements within the same property to an entire house that was made available. Hosting arrangements also differed in their temporal availability, ranging from being as much as possible limited to the initial sign-up period of six months to being open-ended. Most hosting arrangements that were part of our study were characterised as positive and most of our Ukrainian interlocutors were still living in the accommodation provided to them through the scheme at the time of fieldwork. Most of the hosts we spoke to utilised a recognised matching service to facilitate their sponsorship and hosting arrangement; several pointed out that this was important to them, and they deliberately refrained from simply using social media channels. Two of the hosts we spoke to in Newham were matched with their Ukrainian guests through the local authority's rematching service. Some of the hosts had already navigated the moving-on period of their guests.

The hosting arrangements we heard about also differed greatly in the ways they were lived on a day-to-day basis, including how living arrangements intersected and were shared. In this section, we discuss how the arrival infrastructure of the HfU enabled and facilitated brokering practices, with what implications for the relations between Ukrainians and their hosts, and in what ways the scheme facilitated as well as restricted the agency of Ukrainian newcomers.

5.1. Hosts As Arrival Brokers

The way in which hosts acted as arrival brokers differed, but we noted extensive welcoming and brokering practices across all the accounts that were shared with us. To this end, the scheme created a distinct arrival landscape and interplay of formal and informal arrival infrastructures. The timing of our research is significant as the HfU had already been running for a year and resources and guidance were available (for an account of the early period of the scheme cf. Burrell, 2024).

All the hosts we spoke to expected to be actively involved in arrival brokering and infrastructuring beyond solely providing accommodation. This was also promoted in guidance about the scheme, for example, in a toolkit from one of the main matching services:

> Sponsors must provide accommodation to an individual or family for a minimum of six months. You will also need to provide a welcome to your area. Your local authority will be responsible for the wrap-around support for the people you sponsor, but you should expect to provide some support yourself. Later in the toolkit, we will cover the different types of assistance: registering with a GP, dentist, accessing local and public services and opening a bank account. (Reset, n.d., "Understanding the Homes for Ukraine Programme," para. 4)

This meant that hosts were often well-prepared and ready to act as first point of contact for their Ukrainian guests. Some of the hosts we spoke to explained how they proactively prepared for this prior to the arrival of their guests so they could help them with a range of administrative tasks, such as applying for their welcome payment or their biometric residence permit card as well as registering with a GP, and so forth. In some cases, hosts had already organised school places for children. Others had identified relevant information about resources that were made available specifically for Ukrainians, such as scholarships from selective private schools, free access to recreational facilities in their locality, and information about social activities. Hosts also frequently provided introductions to their local area, and some supported with childcare or English language tuition.

Many of the hosts were regularly contacted by their local authority and the matching services and other third-sector organisations they had utilised to organise their sponsorship to provide ongoing support for them as hosts. Our interlocutors made use of resources such as webinars, toolkits, and in-person events in different ways and to different degrees, which made them feel supported overall. All this could have a profound impact on the newcomers' experience of arrival and navigating a new environment. As one of our Ukrainian interlocutors in Newham, a mother in her 30s with a primary school-aged child explained:

> My hosts, they were very prepared for this, because, yeah, I suppose they attended some courses or meetings. So, with all the registration, I mean GP, school, Universal Credit, what else, so insurance, BRP residential permit, I mean, so with all these things they helped me a lot….When we came to the One Stop Shop in the library [set up by the council for Ukrainian newcomers], so they were just a few things, I mean, maybe job or, hmmm, I think by that time we already did most things with my host. But I know that not all hosts can do this….So I'm not a good example to find out the difficulties. (Anastasiya)

In their work, Wessendorf and Gembus (2024, p. 11) point out that, "often, it just takes one crucial piece of information to access a support network from which many other resources can be accessed." This "one first contact" subsequently helps with navigating the system and takes on the role of facilitating access to arrival information and next steps for newcomers. Their research shows that it can be challenging for newcomers to find arrival brokers, and they do so in different ways through navigating local social infrastructures often relying on serendipitous encounters (Wessendorf, 2022). By contrast, a "first point of contact" was built into the set-up of HfU through private hosting. Many of our host interlocutors were well aware of the importance of being the first contact, as one of our hosts in Oxford describes:

> By the time [name of guest] came to us, Oxford had some pretty established networks and because I was already in contact with [name of mother and son hosted by host's sister in a self-contained flat nearby] and through somebody I knew at church, she was also hosting and bizarrely my boss at work who lives outside Oxford was also hosting a family....I knew exactly kind of what to do, to sort of plug her into all of the networks, which was really helpful. So, all the practical side of kind of sorting out things for her we did in the first couple of days. That was really smooth, but then I took her up to there's a church...that has a weekly meetup of Ukrainian families in Oxford, and we went there, kind of the first week she was with us, and then she probably about two or three times a month used to go there. So, she found herself a sort of network of support quite quickly. She also got herself a job very quickly [Claire later explained that her guest got the job through a contact from the church network]. She was very kind of self-sufficient. So, I would say we were probably quite useful in the first kind of month or so. (Claire)

Given the challenges in identifying arrival brokers, Wessendorf and Gembus (2024, p. 12) see it as "crucial" for newcomers to be in an arrival area as this "facilitates encounters with brokers who have specific arrival expertise as well as empathy with the arrival situation and are thus able and often willing to help." However, our accounts from hosts and guests suggest that being in a typical arrival area was less important for Ukrainian newcomers as the high media and public profile of the scheme and the host-guest relationships that were built-in, meant that hosts became arrival brokers for their guests and acted as the crucial "one first contact." The brokering practices of the hosts in smaller towns and villages in Oxfordshire, were comparable to the integral "bridging role" of volunteers and civil society that Mehl et al. (2023) identified in their work on refugees in rural areas in Germany, which they see as compensating for structural and institutional challenges, particularly in the areas of housing, job market, navigating bureaucracy, and the enabling of mobility.

The brokering practices of our host interlocutors would frequently go far beyond signposting their guests to services and resources which has been highlighted in previous work on arrival infrastructures (Wessendorf, 2022; Wessendorf & Gembus, 2024) and were more akin to the activities of arrival brokers identified by Hans (2023) who focused on longer-established migrants. In many instances, hosts would accompany their guests to appointments and help them navigate formal or informal support services and activities. Jane, one of our Oxfordshire-based hosts, a woman in her 80s who with her husband hosted a mother with two children in their self-contained guest cottage, remarked that "there was quite a lot in the early days of having to commute around." This is one of the examples she shared with us:

> And I had to get them their Covid jabs sorted. We had to go to Northampton one day with the two children. They wouldn't do the mother. That's an hour's drive. So off we went on Saturday and got the two children done. They were doing adults but no, they wouldn't do [name of mother]. So, the next day we had to go to Oxford, which was 45 min in the other direction to get her done, and then, when it came for the biometric thing, we had to go to Gloucester, or was it Worcester? But it was an hour, an hour and a half's drive.

As Jane's account shows, many of the hosts spent considerable time, effort, and their own resources to broker the arrival of their Ukrainian guests. In effect, they became "home level bureaucrats" (Burrell, 2024, p. 13) acting as intermediaries between bureaucracies, "street level bureaucrats" (Lipsky, 1980), and their

Ukrainian guests, which could be challenging to fit around their own lives. For example, Helen, one of our Oxfordshire-based hosts who had a busy working life, explained: "It was hard, and it was time-consuming, and I may have done some things that I wouldn't have needed to do. But if I hadn't done them, who would?" Helen's reflections raise important questions about the absence/presence of the state in the HfU set-up and arrangement and the "passing on of responsibility" (Burrell, 2024, p. 9), and the issue of "privatisation" of arrival infrastructures inherent to the scheme (see also Giudici, 2021; Macklin, 2021).

5.2. Providing Material and Practical Support and Mobilising (New) Networks

Besides facilitating access to information or services, providing material and practical support has been highlighted as a crucial support mechanism for refugees and people in the asylum system who often rely on third-sector organisations, settlement services, and educational settings to access these supports, e.g., help with filling in forms to access welfare or other government-provided assistance, as well as direct financial assistance or donations (Griffiths et al., 2005; Ziersch et al., 2023). By contrast, we found that many Ukrainians had wide-ranging access to material and practical support through their hosts. Besides providing support in navigating administrative systems, some hosts would also pass on their monthly thank-you payments to their guests, buy food for them, or help them furnish their new accommodation once they transitioned from the hosting arrangement into rented accommodation (see also Burrell, 2024).

Furthermore, hosts often mobilised their own networks to facilitate and broker the arrival and settling in of their guests, which could be pivotal, e.g., for accessing job opportunities, in some instances preventing downward occupational mobility, or facilitating moving on to independent housing. The latter was experienced as challenging by most of our host interlocutors. One of our Oxford-based hosts, a retired couple who had been hosting a three-generational family (grandmother, mother, daughter) for seven months, recounted the experience of brokering the guests' moving on to independent housing. This particular case illustrates the hosts' extensive engagement with the local authority as well as mobilisation of local networks:

> And we helped them to rent the house. It's actually rented through our church...and we negotiated with the church to give us a slightly reduced rent and so they could afford it...they got two lots of housing benefit. Because [name] the mother, she's got universal credit and she's got a housing benefit and the granny she's got a pension. She's got a UK pension, so she also gets a housing benefit. Putting the two housing benefits together meant they could afford something. Because initially, we thought they'd only have the one lot of housing benefit...and you know with the budget that we'd worked out...they weren't very nice houses, very small or dirty or cramped. Then we talked to the local council who have a specialist Ukrainian desk to help the Ukrainian people in this area. We talked to them, and they worked it out, and they said: "Well, you should be able to get two lots of housing benefit"...and that made, you know, made a big difference. You could get a better sort of standard of housing. And then this church house became available which was sort of in that housing, that bracket. They just gave a bit of a discount. And they're very happy there. They're settled. It's within walking distance of the school and to the shops and the buses....It was an unfurnished house, we got to basically furnish the whole house in a week, just from, you know, putting a notice on Facebook and people had a spare this and a spare that. And we drove around collecting stuff and putting it in the house. We basically had everything we needed. We got a fairly big church, anyway....So we got crockery, and cutlery, and pots and pans, beds, and sofas. We have several Ukrainian families in our church, staying with people from our church,

and they've all managed to get into accommodation, and we've been able to provide furniture for all of them. (James)

Besides using their existing networks, hosts, particularly in Oxford/shire, also became involved in or set up new networks, often through social media, such as WhatsApp or Facebook groups to support their brokering activities (see also Burrell, 2024; Tryl & Surmon, 2023). Others mobilised their local community, as one of our Oxfordshire hosts remarked: "We live bang in the middle of a very, very lovely, friendly village, and we've had lots of support from neighbours" (Jane). The pre-existence of social infrastructures typically found in more conventional arrival areas were thus compensated for by resourceful hosts, community support, and new HfU-specific networks that hosts were able to mobilise.

5.3. Between Facilitating and Constraining Agency

The accounts we heard from our interlocutors revealed how the extensive and distinct arrival infrastructuring and brokering set in motion by the HfU scheme enabled this group of newcomers to access services and different supports relatively smoothly. The HfU scheme thus facilitated a degree of agency for the Ukrainians who came to the UK and enabled them to begin to forge a sense of belonging. This aspect of the scheme again provided a striking contrast to the asylum system, which actively restricts agency and hinders those seeking asylum from establishing a sense of belonging (Berg et al., 2023; Gill, 2009). In addition, there was a noticeable effort from many local authorities, civil society and faith-based organisations, and other support and advice services to provide multilingual information and support in Ukrainian and Russian through translating information, websites, and guidance notes. Local authorities and other organisations were also making significant efforts to employ Ukrainian and/or Russian-speaking staff, at times recruited from among the Ukrainian newcomers, to run HfU-related projects, services, or special activities. Overall, this helped to limit barriers for Ukrainians in accessing resources and allowed them more agency in navigating their arrival and initial settlement processes as several of our interlocutors including Ukrainian guests, hosts, as well as practitioners pointed out during interviews. However, the temporal uncertainty of the scheme is a key constraining factor. At the time of our research, there was no communication from the government about what would happen once the schemes close down. This came up in some of the interviews with practitioners:

> There is a lot of uncertainty, and we are getting increasing kind of queries about, you know, what next for me? What do I do? And at the moment, all I can say is, wait until the government decides. At the moment you're okay, you have two to three years left [on] your visa. But what next, I can't say, and that is a cause of concern….Long-term planning is very difficult for people. (Frontline worker in London)

Other research has also found that Ukrainians are faced with a "prevailing sense of temporariness and uncertainty" which left them "feeling protected but lacking certain rights" (Benson et al., 2024, p. 2; Burrell, 2024).

Some of our interlocutors alluded to how hospitality and the scheme-facilitated opportunity to exercise agency was fragile and conditional. This was, for example, emphasised by one of the Newham hosts, Mariya, a single woman in her late 30s who was born in Ukraine and had been living in the UK for 18 years and holds UK citizenship, thus describing herself as British-Ukrainian. In addition to hosting her friend's family via HfU,

she had also brought her parents to the UK via the Family Scheme. In the early days of HfU, she had facilitated matching via her social media networks. At the time of the interview, she was very involved in different support networks and herself provided different kinds of informal support and advice both to Ukrainians as well as hosts. During the interview, she highlighted the risk of Ukrainian newcomers being "too choosing" and thereby breaking trust or goodwill, e.g., when using the sponsorship scheme in an agentive way:

> People come here, stay with the host in Brighton for the first six months, and then they look for the host in London....you need to be realistic, because other people in London pay high rent...work hard and do something very, very hard, and it's very important for the host as well. There has to be a really good balance with us....The minute you break the trust you will start losing the opportunities and that's what I see after the first seven, eight months, it started to be, and I speak to a lot of English or British or other culture hosts who are hosting. We have to be careful with this because...as we know one little rotten apple can spoil the entire bucket, you know, we really need to be careful. We can, we cannot ruin an impression by doing something that would disappoint the hosts. But at the same time, we are not here to please the hosts, so it's something, something [moves her arms back and forth] because we are not here for holidays. It's a balance.

Mariya's reflections are a poignant reminder that notions of deservingness are fragile and contingently constructed. She feared that the hospitality extended could be rescinded if Ukrainians were not seen as sufficiently appreciative or were perceived to be too demanding. As Farahani has argued, ideas of deservingness "influence even private hospitable practices and condition the direction, quality, and form of hosting" (Farahani, 2021, p. 667), and by implication the extent of agency Ukrainians were able to exercise.

Overall, we observed how the private hosting scheme provided a unique framework for different interplays of informal and formal arrival infrastructuring and brokering processes. It generated distinct practices embedded within host-guest relationships and the wider social infrastructures of the scheme. In general, the informal brokering practices provided by the hosts worked in tandem with the formal arrival infrastructuring put in place by the local authority, e.g., the wrap-around support mentioned in the toolkit earlier and for which councils received a tariff for each new arrival. In Newham, this formal arrival infrastructuring took the form of a "one-stop shop," set up by the Council in the local library and a specialised Ukrainian desk at the local authority in Oxford. However, our conversations with practitioners revealed that the level of formal infrastructuring varied greatly between different local authorities. The landscape of arrival infrastructures for Ukrainian newcomers was further enhanced by support from civil society, faith-based, as well as diaspora organisations (see also Tryl & Surmon, 2023) and Ukrainians' own networks and resources, facilitating agency but with a growing sense of uncertainty given the time-limited leave of the HfU scheme.

6. Conclusion: HfU and the UK's New Bespokism

In this article, we have shown how the arrival infrastructure of the HfU scheme was socially productive in generating a bespoke infrastructure for Ukrainians including in areas or places with no history of asylum dispersal or refugee settlement, principally through mobilising private individuals to host. The unprecedented response from civil society which HfU set in motion is seen as one of the scheme's key successes and HfU is being considered a "model for the future" (Kandiah, 2023). In this context, interrogating

the mobilisation seems especially pertinent, and as we have argued, ad hoc government-endorsed schemes like HfU need to be seen as part of the "integrated whole" of the "new bespokism" (Tomlinson, 2022).

Private hosting resonates with neoliberal retrenchment and restructuring of the welfare state. In that vein, Burrell (2024) has questioned the "domesticating" of responsibility the scheme entails (p. 3). The scale of the private hosting programme and offering of hospitality towards a distinct group of newcomers also entrenches racialised differentiation among protection seekers resulting from the "new bespokism" (Tomlinson, 2022). The HfU thus reproduced and further cemented gendered, racialised, class- and age-based "hierarchies of belonging" (Back & Sinha, 2018).

A government-endorsed private hosting scheme such as HfU rests on collaborative politics by citizen-hosts (Macklin, 2021) and is unlikely to foster radical or transformative forms of solidarity (Dadusc & Mudu, 2020) although hosting did appear to work as a political catalyst for some of our hosts. In the case of HfU, and the UK's societal response to Ukrainians arriving, we can see potential germs of new forms of solidarities where arrival infrastructures and brokering extend beyond conventional areas and groups. The scheme exposed a large group of middle-class UK residents with no prior history of refugee activism to the complexity of the benefit system for the first time as hosts started navigating "the austere state" and its welfare and social support systems and found them woefully inadequate (see Burrell, 2024, p. 13). In the early months of the Ukraine schemes, the press carried stories of the disbelief of hosts at the intransigence of the UK Home Office as the body responsible for issuing visas, with newly formed host activist groups considering legal action (see, for example, Bowden & O'Dowd, 2022). In our research, some hosts articulated unease about the exclusionary and racialised underpinnings of the scheme, but overall, a politics of collaboration and accommodation prevailed.

Lin et al. (2017, p. 169) have argued that migration infrastructures are "entangled with power geometries that result in differential access to resources, thereby invoking questions of equity and distributional justice." Indeed "infrastructures are often constructed in ways that exact the political interests and discriminatory wills of their designers" (Lin et al., 2017, p. 170), illustrated most starkly in this case by the exclusionary nature of the Ukraine schemes at a time of escalating conflicts in other parts of the globe, but with no equivalent schemes for differently racialised groups, many from former British colonies or countries in which the UK has had active military deployment.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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