



FEBRUARY 2025

# Still apart

The impact of Ukraine Scheme changes on families one year later

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INCLUDEPICTURE

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## ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

On 24 February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, triggering the largest humanitarian crisis in Europe since World War II. Millions of Ukrainians fled to safety, including to the UK. This report is the fourth in a series of publications which document the UK's response to the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine. Focusing on the changes to the Ukraine Schemes introduced in February 2024 with little warning or public consultation, this report captures the impact on Ukrainian families split between the UK and Ukraine.

**Cite this publication** as: Savitski, A. Vicol, D. (2025) Still apart: The impact of Ukraine Scheme changes on families one year later. Work Rights Centre. [Available online]

<https://www.workrightscentre.org/publications/2025/still-apart-the-impact-of-ukraine-scheme-changes-on-families-one-year-later/>

## ABOUT WORK RIGHTS CENTRE

Work Rights Centre is a registered charity dedicated to supporting migrants and disadvantaged British residents to access employment justice and improve their social mobility. We do this by providing free and confidential advice, and by campaigning to address the systemic causes of labour and social injustice.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to the more than 200 Ukrainians who completed our survey and shared their experiences with our team.

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# 1. Summary

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On 19 February 2024 the Home Office announced major changes to the visa schemes introduced to support Ukrainians affected by the humanitarian crisis triggered by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.<sup>1</sup>

Without public consultation or warning, the changes:

- Closed the Ukraine Family Scheme (UFS) with immediate effect.
- Restricted sponsor eligibility under the Homes for Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme (HFUSS) to only British or Irish citizens or persons settled in the UK, effectively preventing Ukrainians with status under the schemes from sponsoring their own family. Leave granted under the scheme was also halved, from 36 months to 18 months.
- Announced the closure of the Ukraine Extension Scheme (UES) from 16 May 2024, with an exception for UK-born children.

In response, we brought a legal challenge to the scheme changes. Following our action and advocacy by the third sector, on 31 January 2025 the Government reversed the HFUSS changes for minor child applicants, allowing parents with status under the Ukraine visa schemes to sponsor and bring them to the UK.

This briefing argues that while the recent concessions will be a real relief for Ukrainian parents, many households are still experiencing the profoundly damaging impacts of separation.

**FINDINGS.** Findings from our survey, the largest of its kind, indicate that:

- The need for sanctuary remains urgent and widespread. As many as 237 people reported needing to bring a close family member to safety or find sanctuary for themselves. Just 11% among them had managed to find a sponsor who met the strict HFUSS criteria introduced in February 2024.
- A total of 10% of UK-based Ukrainians in our sample, who were looking to reunite with minor children, would be positively affected by the January 2025 concessions. However, 84% remained separated from their adult relatives.
- For most respondents, finding a sponsor who can meet the strict eligibility criteria imposed was impractical. The vast majority (94%) felt unconfident or very unconfident in their ability to find a sponsor for their adult relatives.
- The lack of legal routes to safety is splitting families apart and causing Ukrainians real harm. As many as 85% of UK-based Ukrainians separated from their adult relatives reported an effect on their mental health, 71% had family relationships affected, and 41% struggled to integrate as a result.

**RECOMMENDATIONS.** To mitigate these risks, we argue that the Home Office should enable Ukrainians with status under the schemes to sponsor other family members under the HFUSS, recognising the continued humanitarian pressure generated by the war, and the need for safe and legal routes to sanctuary in the UK.

## 2. The UK's humanitarian response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine has triggered the largest humanitarian crisis seen in Europe since the outbreak of WWII.<sup>2</sup> From the start of the invasion on 24 February 2022 to January 2025, the UNHCR recorded 6.2 million Ukrainian refugees in Europe, most of whom were registered in Germany (1.1 million) and Poland (1 million), followed at some considerable distance by the Czech Republic (0.4 million) and other countries across the continent.<sup>3</sup> Just over 250,000 refugees were recorded in the UK.<sup>4</sup>

In response, the UK Government implemented three visa schemes which supported eligible Ukrainians and their family members to find safety in the UK. The three routes granted eligible applicants 36 months of leave, the unrestricted to right to work, and access to public funds - but not a route to settlement in the UK.

- **The Ukraine Family Scheme (UFS)** was introduced on 30 March 2022, allowing Ukrainians or certain third country nationals resident in Ukraine to join family in the UK.
- **The Homes for Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme (HFUSS)** was launched on 14 March 2022, allowing people who were living in the UK to sponsor Ukrainian nationals and their family members to live in the UK with them. Anyone could become a sponsor provided they had at least six months of leave in the UK and met certain accommodation and personal suitability criteria.
- **The Ukraine Extension Scheme (UES)** was opened on 03 May 2022 to support individuals who previously had permission to stay in the UK to remain.

The schemes were enthusiastically taken up. According to Home Office statistics, by the end of 2023 the Government granted over 280,000 applications, including 80,100 grants under the UFS, 179,400 grants under the HFUSS, and another 23,100 grants under the UES.<sup>5</sup> And yet, without notice or public consultation, in February 2024 the Conservative government put an abrupt limit to eligibility under the schemes.

## 3. February 2024 changes to the Ukraine schemes

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On 19 February 2024, the Home Office amended the Immigration Rules via a Statement of Changes.<sup>6</sup>

The changes meant, among other things, that the UK:

- Closed the UFS with immediate effect
- Restricted sponsor eligibility under HFUSS through guidance,<sup>7</sup> to only British or Irish citizens or persons settled in the UK, and halved the grants of leave from 36 months to 18 months.

- Closed the Ukraine Extension Scheme from 16 May 2024, with an exception for UK-born children of parents with status under the Ukraine Schemes.

The cumulative impact of these changes has been to bar family members of Ukrainians who are not British, Irish or settled from applying to join them in the UK.

### **3.1. The Government's rationale and review**

According to the Economic Note<sup>8</sup> published with the Statement of Changes, the Government's rationale for closing the UFS included a desire to:

- 'mitigate the risk of homelessness resulting from accommodation being unsuitable or unavailable';
- 'ensure that Ukrainian arrivals are protected from harm';
- address 'criticism of the fact that the UFS does not attract the same financial incentives as HFU';
- cut administrative costs, in light of declining application numbers and grant rates; and
- reduce the risk of litigation.

Remarkably, in relation to HFUSS sponsor criteria the only issue stated was:

- an inconsistency between the HFUSS and Appendix FM, the part of the Immigration Rules that governs family migration, and where UK-based sponsors must hold British or Irish citizenship, settled or pre-settled status, or protection status. 'Continuing to operate the HFU[SS] with a different policy for sponsor eligibility', the Economic Note added, 'exposes the Home Office to additional risk of legal challenge'.

This justification was robustly challenged by opposition parliamentarians and experts. In a report jointly published with the Immigration Law Practitioners Association last August, we highlighted that the changes would not mitigate, but increase the risks of homelessness and harm to Ukrainians, as more people would see no choice but to enter illegally or claim asylum.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, we showed it would be erroneous for the government to interpret a decline in application numbers as an expression of diminished need for sanctuary – a more reasonable explanation was that sponsors were harder to find. We also flagged that the period of high refusal rates selected to rationalise the changes was rather arbitrary and not representative – when, overall, refusal rates across all three visa types were lower.

In Spring 2024, the Work Rights Centre started legal proceedings against the government, in an attempt to reverse the changes. During proceedings, the Home Office agreed to review their policy and consider the evidence presented in our report. This culminated in a change to guidance introduced on 31 January 2025,<sup>10</sup> which permitted Ukrainian nationals with status under one of the Ukraine Schemes to sponsor their minor children under the HFUSS. The January change was an important concession from the new government, that will bring relief to parents who had been separated from their children for months. And yet, many other people, including

elderly, disabled, and vulnerable individuals, remain unable to find a sponsor and so continue to be at risk. This briefing presents original research, analysing the effect that these changes continue to have on Ukrainian households.

## 4. Methods

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Between 15 January and 24 January 2024 Work Rights Centre conducted an online survey of Ukrainian nationals and their family members. We wanted to understand the scale and nature of the impact of these changes on Ukrainians who were already living in the UK, or looking to find safety in the UK. This is the second research project we conducted since the February 2024 changes,<sup>11</sup> and the fourth report focused on the UK's response to the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine.<sup>12</sup>

**SAMPLE.** With 237 valid responses, this survey is the largest of its kind. An overwhelming majority (221 respondents) of the sample were Ukrainian nationals resident in the UK. Of these, 218 held status under the Ukraine Scheme, while two were on the Skilled Worker visa and one held Pre-Settled Status under the EU Settlement Scheme.

A further 16 respondents who needed to find sanctuary in the UK were comprised of 15 Ukrainian nationals, and one Russian national with permanent resident status in Ukraine. Out of these 16 respondents, 13 needed to reunite with family members who held non-permanent immigration status in the UK, while 3 had no family connection.

In terms of respondent demographics, 77% of respondents identified as female, 22% as male, and 1% as 'other'. Nearly two thirds (64%) were between 35 and 49 years of age, with the remainder being younger than 34 (20%), or older than 49 (16%).

**LIMITATIONS.** The survey was disseminated through partner organisations, Work Rights Centre's Telegram channels, and Ukrainian community Facebook groups. Due to this sampling method, we recognise that older respondents, as well as respondents with disabilities that reduce their interaction with online content, are underrepresented in the sample.

We also recognise that participation may be biased towards Ukrainian nationals who had experienced difficulties in reuniting with their family members, and who may be more likely to follow the channels the survey was disseminated on. However, the sample size is sufficiently large to make it clear that the changes to the schemes had a real impact on Ukrainians and their families, which cannot be discounted as merely anecdotal. Given our survey sample represents less than 0.1% of the population of Ukrainians in the UK, it is likely that the stories of family separation, fear for one's safety, and mental health anguish are shared by many more people.



## 5. Survey findings

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**The need for sanctuary continues.** Contrary to the government's Economic Note from February 2024, claiming that Ukraine was "no longer in an active migration crisis and increasingly focusing on reconstruction and recovery",<sup>13</sup> a substantial number of people continued to need status under the schemes. As many as 237 respondents reported needing to find sanctuary in the UK for themselves (16) or their family members (221).

This is unsurprising, given the ongoing humanitarian challenges that persist across Ukraine. In its own 'country policy and Information note' on the humanitarian situation in Ukraine,<sup>14</sup> the Home Office outlines that Ukrainians in parts of the country experience acute issues with basic living needs, including heating and electricity supply, access to drinking water, and shelter. The note also emphasises findings from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) 2025 report on Ukraine, which documents 'catastrophic' and 'extreme' humanitarian needs among the population living in eastern parts of the country. The document estimates that as many as 3 million people are still internally displaced in Ukraine.

Ukrainians also continue to seek safety abroad because the situation for civilians has become more, not less, dangerous since 2023. Data from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) shows that between 2023 and 2024, the number of civilian casualties in Ukraine increased by 30%, from 8,597 to 11,153.<sup>15</sup> Analysis by ACLED, a data analysis source on armed conflicts commonly referenced by the Home Office, finds that the rise in casualties coincided with increased military action on the frontline over the course of 2024, and an increasing rate at which Russian troops are advancing into Ukraine.<sup>16</sup> Far from suggesting a period of 'reconstruction and recovery', ACLED emphasises the likelihood of even greater military action ahead of potential ceasefire negotiations in 2025, targeting of Ukrainian infrastructure, and dangers posed to currently unoccupied Ukrainian oblasts (e.g. Kharkiv and Sumy).

**Just 11% of respondents who needed sanctuary in the UK** since the February 2024 changes had managed to obtain it. Among the 221 respondents who were based in the UK and were looking to bring family members, just 26 people had found a sponsor for their relatives. None of the 16 people based abroad had managed to find a sponsor.

**The January 2025 concession will be life-changing**, for the 10% of UK-based respondents who reported needing to bring minor children. We heard from 30 people who needed to bring minor children to the UK after 19 February 2024. Among them, only 8 had managed to do so at time of survey completion. The changes to the HFUSS announced in January 2025 will provide real relief to the remaining 22 parents (10% of respondents based in the UK) and others like them, who are now eligible to sponsor their children to join them in the UK.

**However, the majority (84%) of Ukrainians remain unaffected by the change.** A total of 207 survey respondents who were based in the UK reported needing to bring parents (65%), partners (40%) and adult children (16%) since February 2024. Of those



207 people, just 20 had managed to find a sponsor for their adult relatives by January 2025. The remaining 187 (84% of UK-based respondents) remain unaffected by the January concession. The same applies to the adults who wrote to us from Ukraine, hoping to join loved ones who had come to the UK earlier.

**Finding a sponsor is increasingly challenging.** Despite the previous government's assurance that Ukrainians would be able to obtain status under the HFUSS if they needed it, survey respondents had little faith in their ability to find a sponsor who would meet the strict HFUSS eligibility criteria announced in February 2024. We asked them to rank their confidence in finding a sponsor on a scale of 1 to 4, where 1 is 'very unconfident' and 4 is 'very confident'. Of the 199 people who told us they still needed to find a sponsor for either themselves or an adult family member, more than two thirds (69%) selected 'very unconfident', and a further one quarter (25%) selected 'unconfident'. Results were nearly identical to those for an analogous question we asked in our previous survey, showing the persistent, long-term nature of this challenge.

Finding a host is particularly difficult for vulnerable Ukrainians. Alla, who is in the UK with her children under the Homes for Ukraine Scheme, spoke about the impossibility of finding a sponsor for her two elderly, disabled parents in Zaporizhia. On 8 January 2025, an aerial bombing in the city resulted in the highest number of civilian casualties in nearly two years, killing 13 and wounding 110.<sup>17</sup>

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*"My family is from Zaporizhia - city in the midst of military action. I managed to come to the UK with two little kids, one of which requires constant care and medication. My brother disappeared on the frontline, and only my parents remained in my hometown - they're 70. Father is disabled after a stroke and has Jackson epilepsy. Mother has coronary artery disease. I integrated well here, found a job, kids and I have social housing. If I could've brought them here myself, I could've provided care and medication here. Now, I don't know what to do. Sponsors don't want old people with illness. Nobody agrees to it. Parents have been left in a city that's bombed daily!"*

**Alla, 43, Homes for Ukraine Scheme**

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**The lack of safe routes put lives at risk.** Since 31 January 2025, this is particularly true of the elderly and those with disabilities. In addition to general safety-related and financial obstacles to leaving Ukraine, older adults are more likely to face mobility and health difficulties, making them more dependent on family members to assist with relocation. Maryna, a woman who has HFUSS status and is unable to sponsor her elderly mother and disabled brother, described the anguish of knowing they are trapped under 'constant fire.'

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*"I am in a safe place in the UK, but my heart breaks and I am always crying because I cannot bring my mother and brother to a safe place. They are under constant fire and not far from the frontline. I am scared to lose them and never see them again."*

**Maryna, 40, Homes for Ukraine Scheme**

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Other survey respondents described family members at risk in regions occupied by Russian armed forces. Such was the case for Tetiana, who was unable to sponsor her parents from territories occupied after February 2022.

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*"I have continuous fear for my parents who are in occupied territories - I cannot sort my life [in the UK] as a result, as I'm always worried if they will be cut off from me. I can't help them in any way."*

**Tetiana, 34, Ukraine Family Scheme**

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**Family separation takes a toll.** Most respondents to our survey needed to reunite with *immediate* family, with whom they had strong emotional connections. Many of them described in moving detail the stress and powerlessness of being unable to bring loved ones to safety.

Kateryna, a woman with HFUSS status in Scotland, recounted the frustration of applying for a visa for her mother before the February 2024 changes, and being refused due to her accommodation failing to meet requirements, only to then be completely shut out of the route by the scheme changes. At the time of survey completion, Kateryna had been looking for a sponsor for nearly a year.

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*"Before February 2024, I moved from a ship (Note: Scottish Super Sponsor scheme accommodation) to social housing, applied for a visa for my mum (who lives in Sumy,) but it was refused because I had no separate room for my mum. I wrote that she could live in one room with my 9-year-old daughter, but it was still refused."*

*I've now been looking for a sponsor for my mum for a year, to no avail. Sumy is a border city, it's always under shelling and fire. I am so scared she will be left there alone without relatives. She is 67, asks for help, but I cannot help her as I cannot find a sponsor!*

**Kateryna, 38, Homes for Ukraine Scheme**

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The separation had serious consequences for people's safety, mental health, social mobility, and even job performance. As many as 187 (85%) of 207 survey respondents who were unable to find a sponsor for their family since February 2024, told us that the separation affected their mental health, and 41% believed it affected their ability to integrate into society. Another 71% added that being apart affected their relationships, and 25% described an effect on their financial circumstances. This reaffirms the findings from our August 2024 report.

Yuliia, who had fled Ukraine with her children shortly after the Russian invasion, described the anguish of being separated from her young brother. A minor aged just 14 and an orphan, the boy was cared for by an elderly grandmother in a region that is under constant shelling:

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*My brother Bohdan is 14 years old; he's an orphan. He is cared for by my nan who is 78. They are living in a village in Kyiv Oblast, not far from the military town called Desna (15 min away by car) where there was a rocket strike.*

*My brother and son are of the same age and grew up together. My father has fought in the army since 2016 and died in late Jan 2022, shortly before the full-scale invasion. My mother died of cancer in 2020. I have a closer relationship with my brother and haven't seen him since Feb 2022. We miss each other. He needs an education, as with regular electricity outages and warning sirens he has no opportunity to study and have a social life.*

### **Yuliia, 37, Homes for Ukraine Scheme**

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Overall, respondents described feeling powerless and consumed by worry. Whether they centred on young siblings, elderly parents, or life-long partners, their accounts captured the painful weight of separation – while the prospect of peace in Ukraine was still distant, and their own future in the UK was uncertain. It is important to note that, unprompted, several people noted in their open-ended responses that the lack of a route to settlement added another layer of stress, and a spectre of insecurity over the lives they had come to build in the UK.

## 6. The options left for Ukrainians

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For the thousands of Ukrainians who continue to need sanctuary, the safe and legal routes into the UK are limited.

**To qualify for status under the HFUSS**, ever since February 2024 most Ukrainians have had to find a sponsor who is British, Irish, or settled, to support their HFUSS application. Minor children are the only notable exception - following the January 2025 concession, they can be sponsored by a parent who holds status under one of the Ukraine Schemes. For the majority of adults, by contrast, status under the HFUSS is significantly harder to obtain.

Home Office statistics confirm this trend. HFUSS visa grants decreased substantially after the February 2024 changes (see Figure 1). Between Q4 2023 and Q1 2024 the number of HFUSS visa grants fell by 38%, from 7,754 to 4,822. Following a slight uptick in Q2, this fell even further towards the end of the year, with just 3,870 visa grants in Q3 2024. This represents a 50% reduction compared with the quarter before the changes were announced (Q4 2023).

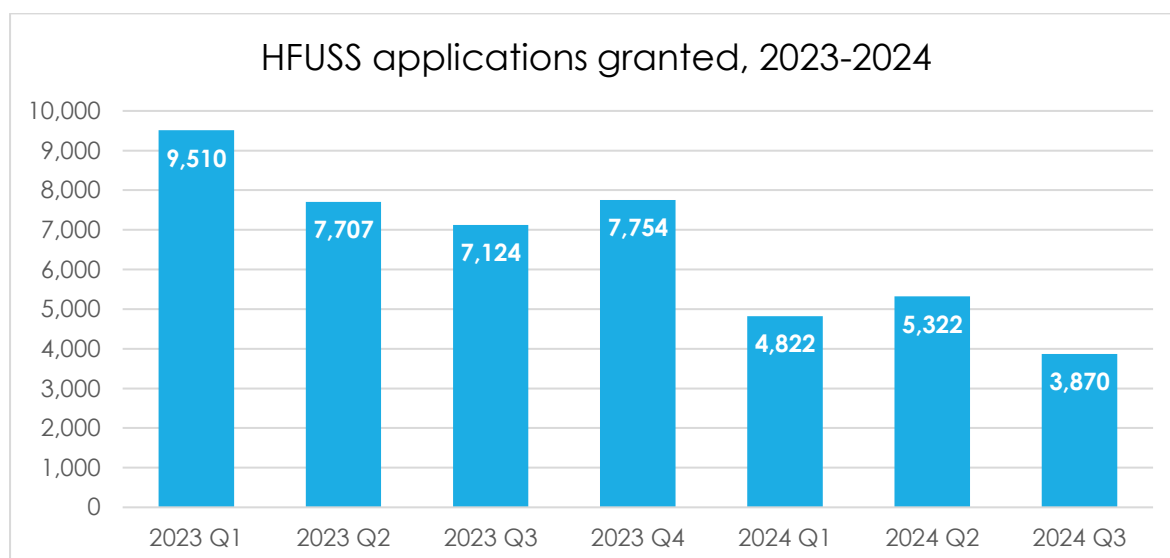


Figure 1: Number of HFUSS applications granted, 2023-2024. Source: Home Office Immigration system statistics quarterly release, Entry Clearance Data Tables, Q3 2024

Contrary to the government's assertion in the Economic Note from February then, sponsorship under the HFUSS is no longer an accessible route for most Ukrainians. What options remain?

**An application under Appendix FM**, the section of the Immigration Rules which governs most family migration to the UK. Similar to the HFUSS however, this route would only be accessible to Ukrainians who have a UK-based relative with a British or Irish citizen, have ILR, hold settled or certain pre-settled status under the EUSS, or have protection status (among other criteria).

**An application outside of the Immigration Rules / human rights claims.** This is a complex route that relies on Home Office discretion or as part of its compliance with the European Convention on Human Rights, and usually only applies in exceptional circumstances. The time frames for decisions typically exceed six months, and applications will often require specialist immigration advice. This is hardly a suitable response to a humanitarian crisis.

**Claiming asylum / humanitarian protection.** This would require the applicant to have already entered the UK – which, given that Ukrainians require a visa, is difficult to do legally and creates the dangerous incentive of crossing illegally in ways that leave people exposed to trafficking and exploitation. It is important to note that the number of asylum applications from Ukrainian nationals increased more than threefold after the changes to the sponsorship scheme - from 57 in Q4 2023, to 186 in Q3 2024. Notably, while the overwhelming majority (94%) of asylum decisions made in 2024 were positive, according to the latest data more than 740 asylum claims from Ukrainians were still pending, including 414 which had been pending for more than six months.<sup>18</sup> While Home Office caseworkers are reviewing decisions, applicants are left in a state of limbo, unable to work and rebuild their lives. Home Office guidance has recently concluded that conditions in Ukraine no longer mean humanitarian protection should be offered to Ukrainians.<sup>19</sup> This will likely see a significant reduction in the numbers of Ukrainians awarded protection in the UK.

**Other options** under the Immigration Rules are generally costly and have strict eligibility requirements that exclude most Ukrainians. Examples include the Skilled Worker and Global Talent visas, effectively work-based visas that are not an adequate response to a humanitarian crisis. Indeed, entry clearance data indicates that since Q1 2023, the number of non-temporary worker visas, family visas (including EUSS Family Permits), other settlement visas, and investor/business/talent visas issued to Ukrainian nationals has remained very low and relatively constant (see Figure 2). Overall, in 2023 just 632 such visas were issued to main applicants and dependants combined.

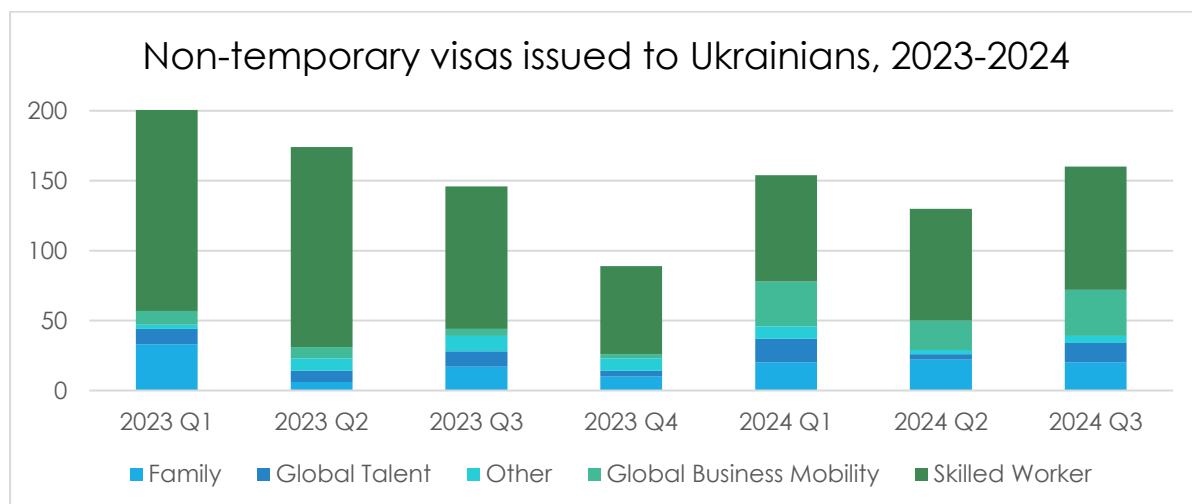


Figure 2: Number of non-temporary work, family, settlement and investor/business/talent visas issued to Ukrainian nationals, 2023-2024. Source: Home Office Immigration system statistics quarterly release, Entry Clearance Data Tables, Q3 2024

The legal routes left open to Ukrainians after February 2024 are no match for the scale of support required. In directing Ukrainians towards them and away from the Ukraine schemes, the Home Office has ended up creating precisely the type of administrative inefficiency it had set out to avoid, increasing pressure on applicants and caseworkers, as well as the risk of litigation. It is likely that, in response, some Ukrainians leave the UK, contributing to the government's long-standing goal to reduce migration. However, many others will likely see no choice but to enter irregularly. Without a right to live, work, rent or claim funds in the UK, this puts people in a precarious position where they are at risk of exploitation, destitution, and trafficking. As the new Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill is making its way through parliament, promising to further criminalise irregular entry, the need for safe and legal routes has never been higher.

## 7. Conclusion and recommendations

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The abrupt changes to the Ukraine Visa Schemes in February 2024 came as a shock for Ukrainians and the immigration advice community.

At a policy level, this marked a sudden departure from the message of solidarity with Ukraine, and paradoxically increased the very risks the government was hoping to prevent. Contrary to the stated objective of safeguarding Ukrainians, those who are still abroad and in need of sanctuary now face higher risks of falling prey to human traffickers and being exploited. The other unintended policy consequence is that, after these changes, the Home Office is likely to face more, not less litigation, as well as continued administrative costs as people opt for the more complex immigration options, such as asylum or leave outside of the Immigration Rules.

Beyond policy, the changes to the Ukraine Schemes have a real human cost. In line with our previous research, data from this survey revealed that as the need for sanctuary continues, restricting these bespoke routes to sanctuary in the UK is risking lives.

The new government's decision to reverse the HFUSS rule changes for minor children on 31 January 2025 is a step in the right direction, that will bring huge relief to parents. We fully welcome the concession, which came after we brought a legal challenge and officials agreed to review our evidence. We would urge the government to give equal considerations to this report, and make further concessions.

**RECOMMENDATIONS.** To mitigate the risks identified in this report and address the continued need for sanctuary, the government should restore the eligibility of Ukrainians with status under the Ukraine visa schemes to act as sponsors under the HFUSS. In addition, successful applicants should be granted leave for 36 months, as per the original scheme design, to enable people to better integrate.

When Russian tanks rolled into Ukraine, the UK message of solidarity was unequivocal. Three years later, as the prospect of peace is still uncertain, that solidarity remains just as important.

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<sup>14</sup> Home Office, 'Ukraine CPIN: Humanitarian Situation', 29 January 2025, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6797b296419bdbc8514fdebf/UKR+CPIN+Humanitarian+situation.pdf>.

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<sup>16</sup> Nichita Gurchov, 'Conflict Watchlist 2025: Ukraine', *ACLEDD* (blog), 12 December 2024, <https://acleddata.com/conflict-watchlist-2025/ukraine/>.

<sup>17</sup> 'Zaporizhzhia Attack Marks Highest Civilian Casualties in Two Years; Glide Bombs Drive 30% Rise in 2024'.

<sup>18</sup> 'Immigration System Statistics Data Tables. Asylum and Resettlement.', GOV.UK, 28 November 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/immigration-system-statistics-data-tables#asylum-and-resettlement>.

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