

Ukrainian Refugee Children in UK Schools: Recommendations and resources for educators

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Introduction

Responding to the Russian full-scale aggression against Ukraine, the UK created special safe routes for Ukrainians fleeing the war, named the Ukrainian Schemes. These comprised three programmes – the Ukraine Family Scheme, the Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme, and the Ukraine Extension Scheme. As of 16 December 2024, a total of 218,600 Ukrainians have arrived in the UK via these routes since Russia's invasion in February 2022, with 28% of them being under 18 years old.¹ According to government statistics, over 20,000 school places had been offered to displaced Ukrainian children before the start of the academic year in 2022 when the largest number of refugees arrived.²

Approximately two-thirds of Ukrainians would like to stay in the UK even when it feels safe to return to Ukraine, according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS) survey conducted in April 2024,³ and our research confirms this desire to remain.⁴ Overall, British schools and local communities provided considerable support to displaced children, many of whom were able to successfully complete their education in British schools and start further study or work. This guidance highlights various challenges and experiences faced by Ukrainian children in UK schools, including cultural sensitivity, bullying, and the importance of talking with children about the war. The recommendations are designed to address these concerns and continue making schools welcoming and safe spaces.

¹ UK Government. (2024) *Ukraine Family Scheme, Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme (Homes for Ukraine) and Ukraine Extension Scheme visa data*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ukraine-family-scheme-application-data/ukraine-family-scheme-and-ukraine-sponsorship-scheme-homes-for-ukraine-visa-data--2>

² One year on from Russia invading Ukraine: school places.

<https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2023/02/one-year-russia-invading-ukraine-school-places/>

³ Office for National Statistics. (2024) *Visa holders living in the UK under the Ukraine Humanitarian Schemes: UPE analysis*. Available at:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/datasets/visaholderslivingintheukundertheukrainehumanitarianschemesupeanalysis>.

⁴ See Kuznetsova, I., Kogut N., Jones S. with Round, J., Kraftl, P., Kogut, A., Myuselmyan, V., Rybna, L. & Tymchuk, T. (2024) *Young Ukrainians in the UK two years on: Lives in Limbo*. University of Birmingham. <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/gees/research/projects/futures-of-ukraine/futures-of-ukraine-youth-mobility-and-post-war-reconstruction>



At the end of this document, we provide some resources for school educators regarding trauma-informed approaches and supporting refugees in schools. There are also some informational resources about Ukraine's history which might be included in lesson plans. In addition, there are some helpful links regarding the British system of education and access to schools in Ukrainian which can be shared with parents/guardians.

Our findings and recommendations are based on 30 interviews with young, displaced Ukrainians (16-29 years old),⁵ several interviews with different stakeholders, two listening events with Ukrainians, and one listening event with "Homes for Ukraine" hosts. We provide summaries and reflections based on stories shared by the participants.

⁵ See Kuznetsova et al (Ibid).



General Challenges in Schools and Education

Enrolling in Schools: Some parents and young people mentioned that finding school places was a lengthy and challenging process. In many cases, they had to rely on help from hosts who put in significant time and effort. As one of the hosts shared:

'I felt it was a full-time job – getting a child to school, to uni. I do not imagine anyone without good English doing it all by themselves.'

Educational Standards: There are differences in educational standards and qualifications between Ukraine and the UK. Some Ukrainian children feel they are ahead academically compared to their UK peers. For instance, one participant mentioned that their 12-year-old guest was academically well ahead of her English equivalents. Some Ukrainian pupils feel discouraged and demotivated by the different approach to learning.

Continuing Schooling in Ukraine Online: Some children continue education in Ukrainian schools online. There are several reasons for this: firstly, there is uncertainty about how long displaced Ukrainians can stay in the UK as currently their visas do not provide a route for leave to remain. Continuing education in Ukraine enables a smoother return to the Ukrainian educational system should that become necessary. Secondly, it is an opportunity for children to master their knowledge and skills in some subjects or extra-curricular activities, such as music and art. Lastly, it enables them to feel connected with their school, friends, language, and culture.

Attendance: In Ukraine, it is common practice not to attend school in case of minor illnesses such as a cold or a cough. Often parents are not aware of strict attendance policies in British schools and the possible consequences.

Support for Special Needs: Ukrainians report positive experiences with support for children with special educational needs in the UK compared to Ukraine. One participant mentioned that their child received special support and was placed in a special group at school, highlighting the better attention to additional learning needs in the UK.

Higher Education: Challenges with accessing higher education, including financial concerns, qualification recognition, and visa issues. Participants discussed the need for more information on financial support, requalification opportunities, and the impact of visa status on education. We have developed guidance in Ukrainian to support those aiming to access Higher Education in the UK:

<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/gees/research/projects/futures-of-ukraine/futures-of-ukraine-youth-mobility-and-post-war-reconstruction>



Bullying and Discrimination

Pupils' Experiences: Ukrainian children face bullying in schools due to language barriers, accents, and being new arrivals. Instances of physical and verbal bullying were reported, with some children refusing to attend school as a result. For example, one participant mentioned that their child was bullied because of their accent and being from Ukraine. Another participant mentioned that their child was called homeless because they were from Ukraine.

Cultural Differences in Complaining: In Ukraine, children are not encouraged to complain to teachers, which contrasts with the UK where children are expected to report issues. This cultural difference can make it difficult for Ukrainian children to explain situations to teachers, especially with language barriers. For example, one participant mentioned that their child struggled to explain bullying incidents to teachers.

Teacher and School Responses: There were mixed responses from teachers and schools regarding bullying. Our participants reported that some teachers did not react to bullying, leading to school refusals and psychological distress for the children. For instance, one participant mentioned that the headteacher suggested that a Ukrainian child provoked the bullying, which was not addressed properly.





Talking to Children About the War

Disinformation and Lack of Information: School children in the UK are not always informed about the ongoing war in Ukraine, leading to misunderstandings and a lack of empathy. Participants stressed the importance of educating children about the reality of the war. For example, one participant mentioned that school children don't know that the war in Ukraine is ongoing, and nobody is helping them understand. A few Ukrainian children shared that their British schoolmates support Russia, which made them very upset. As a 17-year-old girl shares:

This happened, especially at school, because everyone has their own views on who attacked Ukraine and how, so sometimes I felt aggression, that not everything was so clear, but it did not lead to any physical conflicts, we only talked on negative notes.

One even received a comment from another pupil who said he wants Ukraine to lose and Russia to win. None of those cases were discussed further with teachers.

One of the stakeholders, a public official working with refugees, also mentioned that it is quite common:

With the Syrians and the Afghans, we don't take sides because you know, it's not a conflict to say Afghan against a certain country, you just came the conflict was within the country. But, in this situation with Ukrainians it's almost like people taking sides, so like is Ukraine on their right or is Russia right, because here I believe is also Russians that live and all of it, I guess the Ukrainian children may be facing that. When they go to school or other environment where you know maybe they feel like you know to prove themselves we are in the right, they feel their responsibility.

The re-traumatisation of children happens daily, both via news and via communication with relatives who stayed in Ukraine. Some experience the bereavement of their loved ones without being able to see them for the last time.

Cultural Sensitivity: Teachers and schools need to be more culturally sensitive and aware of the experiences of Ukrainian children. Participants suggested that schools should educate teachers and students about the war and the challenges faced by Ukrainian children.

How is Ukraine represented in the school curriculum?

There is not much information about Ukraine in the Geography and History curriculum. The UK school curriculum in History and Art still has a Moscow- and Russia-centric approach, lacking understanding of the diversity and colonial relations between Moscow and other regions that constituted Russia's empire and the USSR.⁶ Topics regarding the Russian revolution, for example, are Moscow-centric and in many cases do not cover Ukraine's independence in 1918 (similar to other regions which used to be part of the Russian empire). There are missed opportunities to engage with Ukraine from a decolonial perspective. The project team are working with other researchers at the University of Birmingham to develop resources to support teachers to embed a decolonial approach.

Some bilingual or Russian-speaking Ukrainian children take the Russian language GCSE exam to improve their opportunities for further education. However, some of the topics for reading or talking could be reconsidered in the curriculum. There is no option to take a GCSE or A-level exam in Ukrainian. Some Russian-speaking Ukrainians have had it suggested to them that they take a GCSE in Russian instead. This often causes distress as many Ukrainians are switching to Ukrainian because of the war.⁷ One of our research participants shared: "Now people who used to speak Russian are switching to the Ukrainian language in masse, because they believe that the Russian language is the language of the enemy, and they try to avoid the Russian language and try to communicate in Ukrainian".



⁶ Kuznetsova et al. Ibid.

⁷ Weaver, M. (2024) 'Why should I study Russian?' Ukraine lobbies UK to introduce Ukrainian GCSE. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/dec/27/ukrainian-gcse-ukraine-lobbies-uk>

Children's Well-being

Often children are missing the necessary support for mental health problems caused by the war and displacement. While being in a physically safe space in the UK, some children can be further traumatised as they have lost family members since leaving Ukraine and go through bereavement often without the opportunity to go back. The news from Ukraine and damage caused by the war might affect children's well-being on a daily basis. The family dynamics are also very disturbed. Since men from 18 to 60 years old are not allowed to leave the country, children are missing their fathers and other male relatives. In many cases, neither schools nor the NHS have met the children's needs for extra well-being support.





Recommendations

Access to Schools: Local authorities should consider putting in place a temporary learning programme for children from abroad who are on waiting lists. This programme would help them and their parents/guardians prepare for education in the UK, including language support and navigation of the UK curriculum.

Bullying and Discrimination: Anti-bullying and discrimination policies should be translated into the languages of migrant and displaced communities, including Ukrainian, and disseminated together with the resources so parents/guardians and children understand them better and know how to report bullying and discriminatory behaviours.

Talking to Children About the War: It is important for teachers and support staff to talk to children (all children in the school, not just Ukrainian children) about the war for several reasons. Firstly, it will combat misinformation which is widely spread in social media. Secondly, it 'will help children process difficult emotions that may arise' and such conversations will 'encourage compassionate views towards others.'⁸

Such conversations can take place within the curriculum while discussing Ukraine-related history or geography aspects (for example, geopolitics and the new wars). There is also space within pastoral support and extra-curricular activities. Ane Lemche, a psychologist and child counsellor at Save the Children, recommends these five tips to help: 1) 'Make time and listen', 2. 'Tailor the conversation to the child', 3) 'Validate their feelings', 4) Reassure them, and 5) Give them a practical way to help.⁹

Add Ukraine to the curriculum map: It is important for teachers to be aware about sensitivities around some topics related to Ukraine-Russia relations, and the need to address them (in particular, in history, geography and art). We invite the Royal Geographical Society and Royal Historic Society to initiate discussions around this issue. The project team is developing resources that are tailored to the curriculum and will deliver these through online CPD training that would provide a de-colonial view of the history of the Russian empire and the USSR, and articulate Ukraine and other countries' fight for independence.

Ofqual should re-establish GCSE and A-level exams in Ukrainian language.

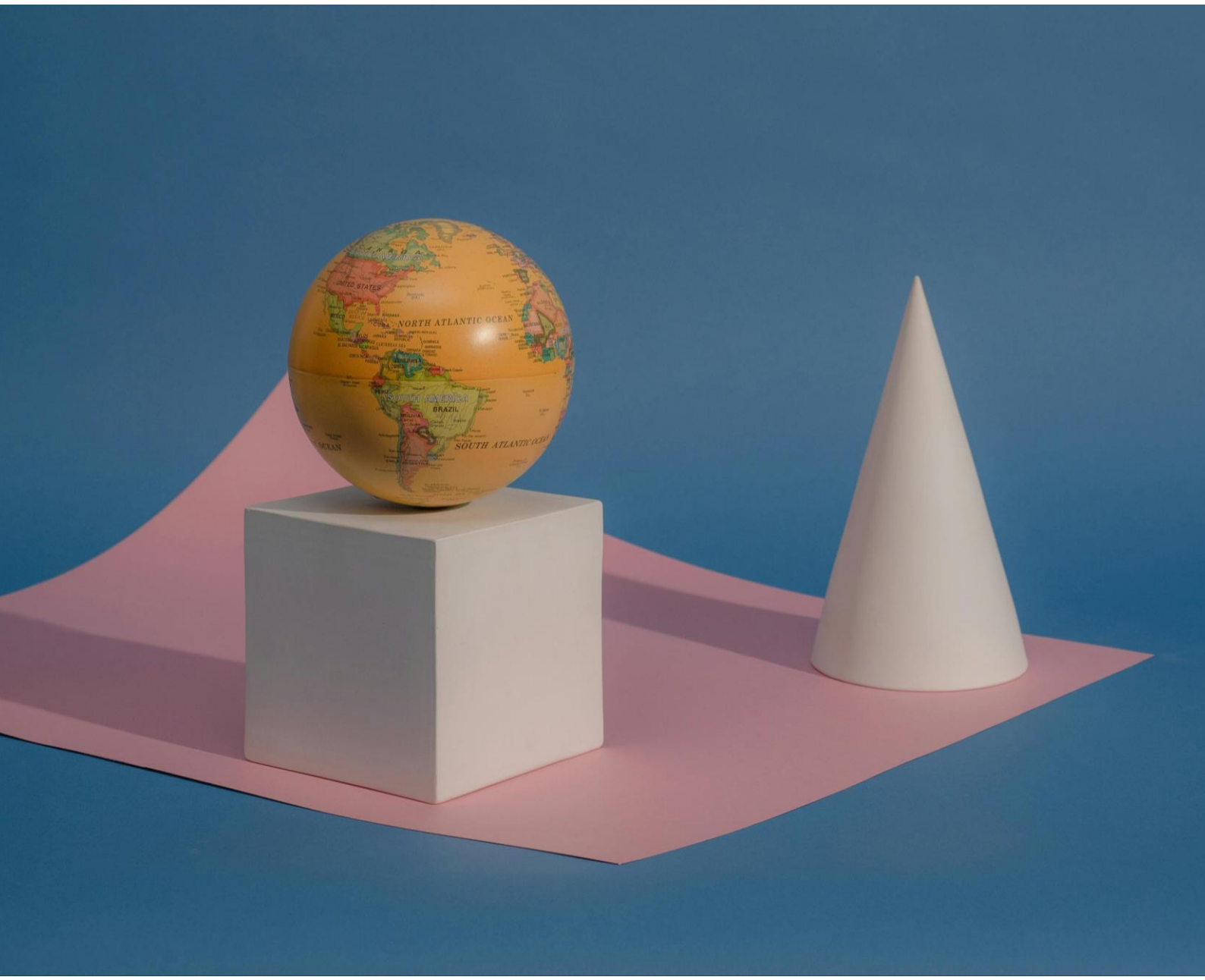
⁸ Racine, N., Mori, C. & Madigan, S. (2022) How to talk to children about the invasion of Ukraine, and why those conversations are important. *The Conversation*.

⁹Jahans, J. (2022) Five tips from a psychologist and child counsellor. *Save the Children*.



Support Displaced Children's Well-being: Schools need to provide better well-being support to help children cope with their experiences and ensure a trauma-informed approach even if a child arrived in the UK a few years ago. It would also be beneficial to provide information to parents (preferably in Ukrainian) about free phone lines for mental health support for children and adults.

Provide a Voice to Ukrainian Parents/Guardians: It would be beneficial for schools to invite parents to join Parent-Teacher Associations and informal social media groups of parents. Better inclusion will help family integration and provide more opportunities for expressing their voices.





Resources for educators

How to talk to children about war and trauma

Barlow, A. (2022) Ukraine, children and schools. Primary History Article. *Historical Association*. <https://www.history.org.uk/publications/resource/10372/ukraine-children-and-schools>

Jahans, J. (2022) Five tips from a psychologist and child counsellor. *Save the Children*. <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/blogs/2022/how-to-talk-to-children-about-war>

Racine, N., Mori, C. & Madigan, S. (2022) How to talk to children about the invasion of Ukraine, and why those conversations are important. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/how-to-talk-to-children-about-the-invasion-of-ukraine-and-why-those-conversations-are-important-177983>

Supporting new arrivals from areas of conflict – a trauma informed approach. eLearning for school staff. <https://www.eani.org.uk/school-management/intercultural-education-service-ies/asylum-seeker-and-refugee-asr-support-team-0>

Mental health and behaviour in schools. Department for Education (2018) https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/625ee6148fa8f54a8bb65ba9/Mental_health_and_behaviour_in_schools.pdf

UK Trauma Council (2021) Traumatic bereavement: a guide for schools and colleges to help children and young people who are struggling. <https://uktraumacouncil.org/resources/traumatic-bereavement-for-school-communities?cn-reloaded=1>

Supporting refugees in schools

Ukraine resource booklet for schools. <https://www.eani.org.uk/school-management/intercultural-education-service-ies/asylum-seeker-and-refugee-asr-support-team-0>

Recommendations for sustainable provision in schools, for children who are refugees. (2023) The Bell Foundation. <https://www.bell-foundation.org.uk/app/uploads/2023/03/Refugee-Recomendations-flyer-FV.pdf>

Supporting refugee students in schools. Free training. Refugee Education UK <https://training.reuk.org/>

How to Support Transitions to Further Education for Refugee Young People in the UK. UNICEF. <https://www.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Advice-for-Schools.pdf>



Martin-Denham, S. (2023) What works? – Supporting Ukrainian refugees children in school. Manual. University of Sunderland. Sunderland.

<https://sure.sunderland.ac.uk/id/eprint/16764/1/Ukraine%20Training%20Pack.pdf>
[trainings developed for teachers and children]

Welcoming new arrivals to the UK into schools. [10 key points for a whole-school approach and ethos] Kingston and Richmond

<https://kr.afcinfo.org.uk/pages/community-information/information-and-advice/education-and-education-services/welcoming-new-arrivals-to-the-uk-into-schools>

Information resources for schools about Ukrainian history¹⁰

An overview on Ukrainian history from a Ukrainian perspective:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rGN0NXhaeWE>. University of Birmingham.

Chernyshova, N. (2024) Teaching Soviet History from the Borderlands: A Case Study of Belarus and Ukraine. *Royal Historical Society*.

<https://blog.royalhistsoc.org/2024/01/30/teaching-soviet-history-from-the-borderlands-a-case-study-of-belarus-and-ukraine/>

Literary representations of Holodomor. Storymap.

<https://storymaps.com/stories/61f9c0b8cd8b4fe9b8df84ebc6a1cfd5>

The Internet Encyclopedia of Ukraine. Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies.

<https://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/default.asp>

The Ukrainian Canadian Research and Documentation Centre.

http://www.ucrdc.org/About_Us.html

Resources for parents & guardians about how to apply to school places and the UK education system

How do families arriving from Ukraine apply for a school place and childcare? / Як родинам, що приїжджають з України, подавати заяви на отримання місць у школі та допомоги з оплати послуг з догляду за дитиною?

<https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2022/04/how-do-families-arriving-from-ukraine-apply-for-a-school-place-and-childcare-як-родинам-що-приїжджа/>

¹⁰ The University of Birmingham is developing more resources for schools about including Ukraine into history and geography lessons. Contact Drs Natasha Rulyova n.e.rulyova@bham.ac.uk and Isobel Palmer i.m.j.palmer@bham.ac.uk for more information



Посібник з Англійської Системи Освіти. *Refugee Education UK*

https://www.reuk.org/files/ugd/3c7d1c_5c9d35d0703a47b8b9a54eadf752a5fe.pdf

Про англійську систему освіти: Початкові школи Посібник для батьків дітей, які володіють англійською як другою мовою (EAL). [Guidance for parents of students who use EAL: About the English education system. Primary School] The Bell

Foundation. <https://www.bell-foundation.org.uk/app/uploads/2022/03/Guide-for-Parents-Primary-Schools-UA.pdf>

Про англійську систему освіти: Середні школи [Guidance for parents of students who use EAL: About the English education system. Secondary School] The Bell Foundation. <https://www.bell-foundation.org.uk/app/uploads/2022/03/Guide-for-Parents-Secondary-Schools-UA.pdf>

Free resources to learn English. Webinars about access to education in the UK. *Refugee Education UK*. <https://www.reuk.org/welcome>

If you are in Scotland

Про систему освіти в Шотландії. [Guidance for parents of students who use EAL: About the Scottish education system] <https://www.bell-foundation.org.uk/resources/guidance/parental-involvement/guidance-for-parents-scottish-education-system/>



Enquire factsheet: Supporting refugee and asylum-seeking families in school. This factsheet explains the right of refugee and asylum-seeking families to support if their child needs extra help at school or nursery after arriving in Scotland.

<https://enquire.org.uk/enquire-resources/supporting-refugee-and-asylum-seeking-families-in-school/>

If you are in Northern Ireland

Буклет «Захист дитини в освіті» <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/child-protection-education>

Буклет «Гарна поведінка в школі» <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/good-behaviour-school-leaflet-parents>

Access to Higher Education in the UK (in Ukrainian), University of Birmingham.

<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/gees/research/projects/futures-of-ukraine/futures-of-ukraine-youth-mobility-and-post-war-reconstruction>

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