

Minister Roderic O’Gorman  
Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth,  
Leinster House,  
Kildare Street,  
Dublin 2.

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23 March 2022

Dear Minister O’ Gorman,

I write to raise concerns, on behalf of the Irish Association of Social Workers (IASW) about placing Ukrainian refugees with host families across Ireland, without adequate background checks being undertaken. The compassionate, swift response of the Irish Government to the crisis in Ukraine is to be commended, as is the generosity of thousands of Irish families who have pledged accommodation. Social workers have been concerned however, that anyone would offer accommodation and support, including those who may pose risks, particularly for women and children.

We note that the presence of a parent has been cited as a protective factor in the host family arrangement and that some commentators have suggested that Garda Vetting is therefore considered unnecessary. As lead profession in child and adult safeguarding in Ireland, IASW is clear that such a perspective does not adhere to best adult/child protection practice based on the following:

- Lone female and female headed households with children are identified as potentially **high-risk refugee groups, at risk of exploitation** and preventative measures must be used whenever possible. We know there are **established trends of female and child exploitation of refugees** and emerging reports of similar cases from our social work colleagues in European countries bordering Ukraine have been shared.
- In many cases, host families are not simply providing accommodation, they are also **the primary support for a mother and her children, offering childcare support**, as a mother attends a doctor/counsellor/job interview etc. It is unrealistic to assume that a mother who does not have informal supports, could establish herself in Ireland without childcare assistance from her host family in many cases.
- In cases where the host family do not provide direct childcare, **access to children through shared living spaces/bathrooms, in homes where children may be sleeping in different bedrooms to their mother**, highlights the need for staged vetting and child safeguarding support.

- A mother, arriving in a new country, with limited resources and supports, with possible language barriers, may well be vulnerable herself and may perceive **her placement in the home, facilitated by the State, as evidence that the hosts are considered safe to support children.**
- All female refugees in unvetted households remain potentially at risk of sexual exploitation with **one such case already reported in the Irish context.**

Social workers are skilled in managing various kinds of emergency placements which maximize both safety and the need for expediency and among other safeguarding measures. While we are somewhat reassured by more recent media reports that those who will be hosting refugees – specifically those hosting children or a vulnerable adult – will be subject to prioritised Garda checks, we advise that the following steps are taken as a matter of urgency:

- All host families should be requested to sign a **declaration regarding any criminal history, pending a commitment to full vetting.** This process is long used in the placement of children in relative foster placements and provides a basic safety measure which does not delay placement.
- While vetting is individual to the organisation who requested it, for expediency, any evidence of participation in vetted activities, along with a letter from the organisation confirming it only accepts fully vetted members is also helpful.
- Host families should be encouraged to complete free, already accessible **Children First Training** and **Child Safeguarding Statements** could be easily adapted for Host Families.
- All Ukrainian families and individuals should be provided with **clear information about their rights and clear information about available supports should any incidents of abuse occur.** People should be provided with clear information about their host families, including the vetting process used.
- Any support *organisations* involved in providing accommodation and/or related services should be advised of their obligations under **Children First** to have **child safeguarding statements** and appropriate procedures in place.
- **Schools and other childcare facilities** involved (as some of the main public services that will be provided to children in this situation) should be provided with relevant **information and support**, as should the parents of these children be provided with information regarding services provided and opportunities for parents to link with relevant services.

IASW believe that the host family scheme would also be significantly strengthened by using available social work safeguarding expertise. We have seen through the pandemic for example, how creative solutions can be found, with political will and leadership, to overcome complex challenges. We are available to meet with you to discuss the above concerns and most importantly, support the solutions that will continue to ensure that as a State, we are doing all possible, to support the safety of men, women and children fleeing war.

In the meantime, many thanks for your own leadership, which has shown compassion and sensitivity to the needs of refugees in this time of crisis.

Kind Regards.



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**Vivian Geiran**  
**Chair of IASW**  
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*CC. Michele Clarke, Chief Social Worker, Dept. of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.*

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