



Gideon, Carolyn and Mary (Photo: Jacob Smith)

## Suburb Homes for Ukrainians

MARGARET HARRIS

When Russia invaded Ukraine in February, it precipitated the move of millions of Ukrainians (mostly women and children) fleeing the destruction. The 'Homes for Ukraine' scheme allowed people and organisations (dubbed 'sponsors') to bring Ukrainians to the UK for a period of up to three years. Some Ukrainians found homes here in the Suburb and I recently went to meet two of them, with their hosts, to see how they are getting on.

Mary is 26 years old, has a degree in management and was an Operations Manager in the oil industry before she left Kyiv. She worries about her parents who are still in Ukraine but who wanted her to leave the country if she

could. She is looking for a job so that she can feel more settled and eventually move into her own flat. Meanwhile she is going to English language classes and using her time to volunteer at a local foodbank and at a local hub which is a meeting point and information centre for Ukrainians refugees.

Gideon, her host, says that he never forgets that his own grandparents came to this country as refugees and when news about the Ukraine situation started filtering through, he and his wife Carolyn decided that they wanted to do something to help in their turn. They were introduced to Mary by a local couple and they then met Mary on a zoom call. Once Mary had Gideon and Carolyn as a sponsor, she was able to obtain a visa. Gideon and Carolyn registered with the Government's 'Homes for Ukraine' Scheme. Barnet Council came to approve the accommodation and the family situation and the three of them have been together since July.

They have all found a way to adapt and live harmoniously under one roof. At first, Carolyn introduced Mary to the locality

and how to get around London on public transport. But Mary is resourceful and through social media, she has tapped into groups and networks which support Ukrainians and disseminate helpful information. She feels well supported now and her English is excellent. She is looking forward to being able to get a 'proper job' here so that she can feel more settled and, eventually, move into her own flat.

Another Suburb host, Danielle, also mentions her own family history when we meet. Her parents were stateless refugees and only survived thanks to the generosity and courage of people who took them in. So when one of her husband's long-standing employees told him that she had a friend who needed to leave Ukraine, the family were keen to help. Danielle says that the small inconvenience to English host families is nothing in comparison with what is being suffered by people in Ukraine.

Living with Danielle and her husband now is Olga, who is a Member of the Ukraine Parliament, along with her two daughters aged 10 and 13. Tragically, Olga's

husband was killed by a Russian bomb in March while he was engaged in helping to evacuate civilians and deliver humanitarian aid. Olga decided then that it was time to get her daughters to safety. Both girls were offered free places at private schools in this area and have settled down well to a new way of life.

As a Member of the Ukraine Parliament, Olga attends parliamentary sessions electronically, something she says they all got used to during the pandemic. Olga is not looking for employment here as she has her salary as a Member of Parliament, but her main need now is for independent accommodation in the area so that her girls do not have to move schools yet again. She is concerned to keep their lives as stable as possible after all they have been through.

Both Mary and Olga are very aware that the Government's 'Homes for Ukraine' scheme is officially only for a six month period. In due course, guests will need to find employment and accommodation here as there is currently no sign of an end to the turbulent situation in Ukraine. Meanwhile, both hosts and guests are very reliant on Whatsapp groups for information and contacts.

When asked how Suburb residents might help, Olga shared her anxiety about the survival of people in Ukraine in the coming winter. Ukrainians have been deprived of their homes and, in many cases, they lack heating, lighting and water supplies.

The Ukrainian guests are very appreciative of the welcome they have had in this country. Mary summed it up, "I want to say that I'm really grateful for the support that British people have provided, especially all the sponsor families and volunteer organisations."

*Those who would like to help can consult internet sources under 'donate to Ukraine'. One local organisation is: 'Drive Aid to Ukraine' that aims to deliver aid directly to Ukraine's borders and onward to conflict zones.*

*People interested in hosting Ukrainian guests can consult internet sources under 'Homes for Ukraine'.*

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Olga and her two daughters, Vlada and Lera