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Dear Convener

Ukraine Resettlement – MS Victoria

Further to my letter of 12 January, I write to update you on disembarkation plans for MS Ambition and MS Victoria.

While MS Ambition and MS Victoria have been well received by Ukrainians fleeing Russia's illegal war, the Scottish Government viewed the ships as short-term accommodation that would play a temporary part of Scotland's overall humanitarian response.

As a result of a joint strategy led by Glasgow City Council over three months, with support from the Ukrainian Consul and third sector, I am pleased to report the orderly and safe disembarkation of all guests on-board MS Ambition is now complete and therefore slightly ahead of schedule.

To share lessons and inform disembarkation plans for MS Victoria, I convened a meeting with the Leaders of Glasgow City Council and City of Edinburgh Council on 22 March, which was also attended by COSLA's Community Wellbeing Spokesperson.

There are around 1,125 people currently on-board MS Victoria and I do not underestimate the logistical challenges ahead as we work in partnership to disembark MS Victoria in sensitive, trauma-informed and person-centred manner.

At this meeting, I therefore agreed to City of Edinburgh Council's request for a four-week extension for MS Victoria to help maximise matching opportunities and longer-term placements, thereby minimising numbers requiring alternative short-term accommodation.

In doing so arrangements for MS Victoria now align to 'leave outside the rules' arrangements already granted to the MS Victoria crew by the UK Government. I should note the UK Minister for Immigration has been clear these concessions cannot be extended.

Today guests on-board MS Victoria will receive translated information explaining the ship will therefore depart on 11 July. This information also makes explicitly clear that everyone will be offered alternative accommodation and support.

As was the case with MS Ambition, matching teams will be on-board to provide assistance and will minimise the inevitable disruption by helping guests successfully transition to new accommodation. This short extension beyond the end of the school term should also help reduce impact of relocation on children in primary and secondary education.

With active disembarkation taking place between now and the ship's departure on 11 July, I am reassured the City of Edinburgh Council has already put in place a partnership approach to matching with the Chief Executives of the Edinburgh and South East Scotland Region.

I have also agreed to redeploy Scottish Government teams who had been assisting Glasgow City Council to work alongside City of Edinburgh Council on-board MS Victoria. This will help ensure the best possible use of all social housing options beyond the region and promote matching to volunteers who responded to the recent national campaign for hosts.

On a day-to-day basis, the Scottish Government will therefore work very closely with the City of Edinburgh Council to support disembarkation operations, recognising housing supply challenges in the city means guests may need to consider accommodation beyond the central belt.

My officials will also continue to work with the City of Edinburgh Council and encourage councils across Scotland to submit applications to the £50 million Ukraine Longer-Term Resettlement Fund. More than 750 homes have been approved since the fund opened to applications, with over 400 of these already complete.

Wherever possible, matching teams will seek to sustain and promote employment, continuing to ensure employability advice and support is given to all those disembarking MS Victoria. While Scotland's response has been humanitarian, I am pleased by a recent report from the Office of the Chief Economic Adviser (www.gov.scot/publications/ukrainian-displaced-people-economic-impact-of-migration-discussion-paper/pages/executive-summary) showing the economic contribution displaced Ukrainians have made.

Finally, following my appearance at Committee on 9 February I provided a written update on all interventions identified as part of the review of the scheme. As part of Intervention 13 ('Modular Housing'), I explained my officials were working with councils and an international humanitarian response specialist to scope a potential 'short-term modular pilot'.

While feedback from partners and local communities has been positive, after careful examination I have concluded a pilot would not represent value for money when compared to continuing to make use of more traditional short-term accommodation, such as hotels or self-catering apartments.

I am thankful to our partners including Angus Council, Dumfries and Galloway Council, Falkirk Council and Palladium for their work to scope the proposed pilot, and assure you that learning accumulated during this process will help inform next steps.

I hope you have found this information useful. I provide a copy of this letter to the Social Justice and Social Security Committee for awareness.



NEIL GRAY



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