

May 2023

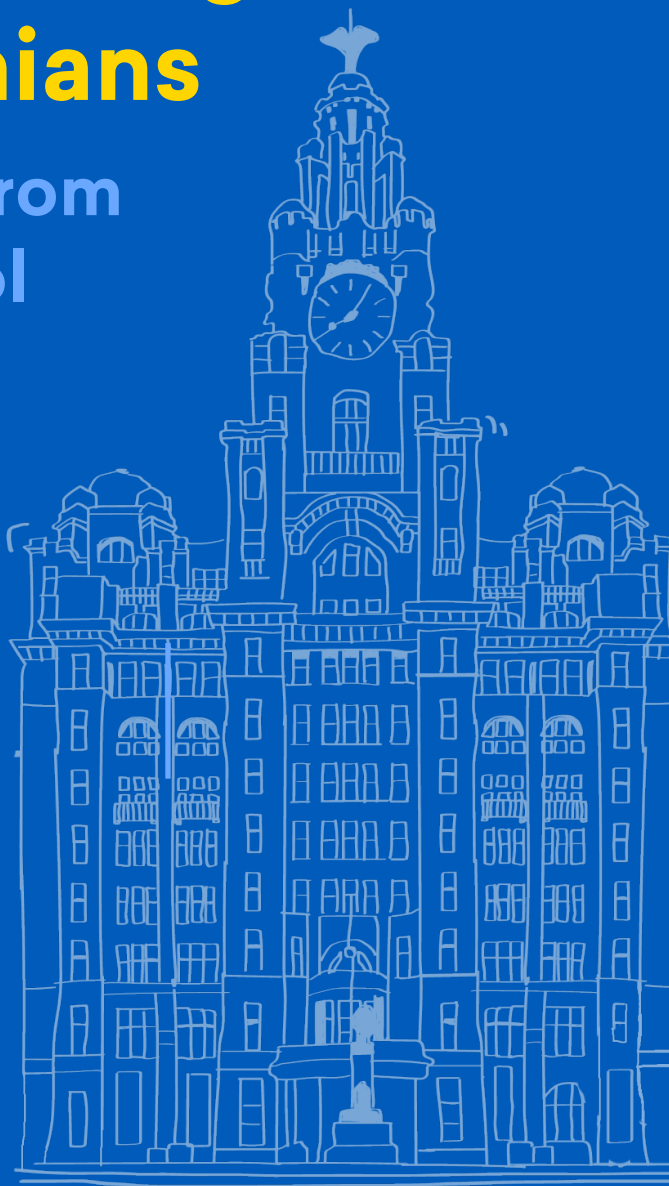
# Welcoming Ukrainians

## Stories from Liverpool

Ed Hodgson  
Tyron Surmon



**More in  
Common**



# Foreword

Earlier this year, More in Common published *Welcoming Ukrainians: The Hosts' Perspective*. Based on a survey of over 1,200 Homes for Ukraine hosts, the report showcased the inspiring, affirming and overwhelmingly positive experiences of those who opened up their homes to Ukrainian families fleeing Putin's barbaric invasion. Almost nine in ten hosts told us they were glad they had taken part in the scheme and a majority rated their relationship with their guest as being either a nine or ten out of ten. Their enthusiasm for the scheme is matched by support from the wider public as a whole, with significant majorities consistently backing the UK's role in providing sanctuary for Ukrainians.



As Liverpool hosts Eurovision 2023 on behalf of Ukraine, More in Common spoke to three Ukrainian refugees who live in and around the city – Luda, Alina and Yuliia – to document their stories of travelling to the UK, meeting and living with their hosts and exploring life in the country. While

these stories are inevitably coloured by their sadness and anger at having to leave their homeland and worries for those left behind, there is also no doubt that they have found the welcoming spirit of the UK, Liverpool and their hosts to be rays of hope, happiness and comfort. We are privileged to share their stories.

## Yuliia

When Yuliia arrived in Liverpool last year, she spoke only a few words of English and had almost no knowledge of the city that would become her new home.



Her sense of disorientation only grew in her first meeting with her host Sarah. "I heard this scouse accent, and I had no idea what she was talking about," she tells us. "It was, to be honest, the scariest moment in my life, even scarier than the war. She was speaking to me in the airport when she picked me up and I just thought, oh my god, I don't understand anything."

**“I heard this scouse accent and I had no idea what she was talking about. It was, to be honest, the scariest moment in my life, even scarier than the war. My host was speaking to me in the airport when she picked me up and I just thought, oh my god, I don't understand anything.”**

Yet, over the past year, Yuliia has picked up English to reach a near-fluent level and Sarah has become one of the most important people in her life: "She's the greatest person that I've ever met," she says with admiration. Sarah is a nurse, and Yuliia has found her support – both practical and emotional – vital as she adjusts to life in the UK. "She asks me all the time, 'Are you okay?' Of course, I know every British person

answers, 'Yes, I'm okay'. But she knows when I'm not, even if I say yes. And then she just says, 'You need a hug.' And I say 'Yes, please.' And she doesn't ask me for more because she knows that maybe I don't want to answer. She just hugs me and that's it."

**"I'm still surprised when I see the people without proper clothes - in summer dresses and heels - but in the winter. It's cold, but not for them. Why? I think they have something in their blood. It's like a gene"**

In Liverpool, Yuliia has thrown herself into the city's vibrant migrant community. As well as her scouse friends, Yuliia has made friends with people from China, Poland and Switzerland, and she loves hearing about their experiences from across the world. She speaks highly of the city, particularly its music scene, saying, "Liverpool's amazing. I love it. I don't know why. I just love it. I like just walking on the street and listening to the music. There are so many creative people here. They all sing so well." Although she still can't understand how British people are so comfortable walking in the cold in summer clothes.

The decision to host Eurovision in Liverpool this month has made her feel especially welcome in the city. "Because of Eurovision, we have lots of Ukrainian symbols and flags in Liverpool. And I feel like Ukraine is close to me. And in the city

**"Liverpool's amazing. I love it. I don't know why. I just love it. I like just walking on the street and listening to the music. There are so many creative people here"**

people are friendly and, even if they don't know a lot about you or about Ukraine, they're friendly." Seeing locals wearing Ukrainian flags as badges and pins has been especially moving. "I stopped one woman and asked her why she was wearing this tiny thing. And she said, 'Because I support Ukraine, why are you asking?' And I said, 'Because I'm Ukrainian and I'm surprised that you want to support me.' And she started crying. I did not expect that response and I just hugged her."

Despite how much she enjoys her new life in Liverpool, Yuliia aches to be with her family back in Ukraine. Every morning, she receives a message from her mother: "I'm still alive. We are okay." That her communication with her mother is often reduced to these exchanges is a source of sadness for Yuliia, but getting that daily reassurance matters to her. Being so far away and unable to help directly weighs heavily on her, and she sends money home to help them buy essential supplies. "I miss my home. I want to be back home, but I understand that I need to be here, I need to be here to help my parents if they need it," she says, her voice tinged with sadness.



**My mornings start with a message from my mum. 'I'm still alive. We are okay.' It's not a normal message to receive from a mum. But we spoke about it and I asked her, please, please just message me that you are okay, because I'm worried a lot.**

Despite the warm welcome Liverpool has provided, it's that uncertainty that defines Yuliia's life in the UK. "I think the question about the future is the hardest question for a

Ukrainian. Especially because we have no idea what's next, or what to expect. And I'm just trying to focus on the present and trying to live in this moment and do my best, what I can do for the future." For now, that means continuing her job as a sales assistant at Zara, as well as finding opportunities to get back into the work as a voice actor and personal trainer that she had in Ukraine.

But Yuliia takes heart from the fact that she knows that, whatever the future holds, she'll have the support of her host Sarah, her new friends in Liverpool, and the music that fills the city's streets to help her through it.

## Luda

Luda remembers her first day in the UK like it was yesterday. After a month of planning, she and a friend had flown to England to live with her host family, the Nicolases, in Southport. Speaking little English and devastated at having to leave her family behind, emotions were high. “It was very late when we arrived in the UK. When we came into the host family’s house, I wanted to cry because everywhere I looked, I saw hearts in the blue and yellow colours of the Ukrainian flag. And I felt this support. I felt very welcome because these people wanted me to feel as supported as possible.”



“It was very late when we arrived in the UK. And when we came into the host family’s house, I wanted to cry because everywhere I looked, I saw hearts in the blue and yellow colours of the Ukrainian flag. And I felt this support. I felt very welcome because these people wanted me to feel as supported as possible

It’s a support that has continued throughout her year in England. She told us how it had in turn prompted her to reassess her own values and to be kinder to others. “I’m still very impressed by your kindness, your generosity, politeness, and just how heart-warming people can be despite the fact that you are a stranger to them,” she says



about her experiences with English people. “And it’s given me the opportunity to assess my own values, and to change my mentality to be kinder to people. And I think I have changed because when you explore another culture, you develop yourself.”



**I'm still very impressed by your kindness, your generosity, politeness, and just how heart-warming people can be despite the fact that you are a stranger to them.**

A year later, Luda describes these hosts as her “UK family”. She’s been on holidays with them to the Lake District and Devon, and at home they have enjoyed sharing Ukrainian and British dishes with each other. Luda has cooked borscht, holubtsi and varenyky for her hosts and they’ve introduced her to English breakfasts, jacket potatoes and fish and chips, although she admits that she doesn’t particularly enjoy shepherd’s pie.

In recent months, she’s been able to settle into a routine and is becoming a greater part of the community. She’s now living with a new host, Marion, who has introduced her to local churches. On the weekends, she sings in St Marie’s Church choir and attends St Patrick’s Church. She told us how much it meant to her to be so welcomed into the congregation and about the special bond she has developed with the Parish Priest, Father John. “He really likes me and recognises me every time I come to Mass. And every time he sees me he tells me, ‘I pray for your family, for all Ukrainian soldiers, and for this situation. You are protected by God. You are very welcome to come here.’”

During the week, Luda works at a local nursery, and told us that speaking to younger children has helped develop her confidence in her own English skills. “I don't feel any language barrier with them because they're little. They speak simply. Sometimes they can make remarks like ‘you pronounce this the wrong way’ - and I find this very cute. I really love chatting with them.”

**“I don't feel any language barrier with them because they're little. They speak simply. Sometimes they can make remarks like ‘you pronounce this the wrong way’ - and I find this very cute. I really love chatting with them”**

Though the children are too young to understand much about the war in Ukraine, some of them are curious. “Sometimes they ask me about my mummy or daddy. And I tell them that I miss my family and I need to go back, I need to get on an aeroplane and fly home.”

Helping young people runs in her blood; her mother also works as a teacher at a primary school in Ivano-Frankivsk, Western Ukraine. She has a 10-year-old brother at the school and a 20-year-old brother who is at university

**“My mum spends a lot of time in shelters when there are sirens, which is very tiring and stressful, and she gets depressed often”**

working part-time as a security guard with the military. Her father works at an oil refinery in central Ukraine, a vital part of the country's infrastructure. “Sometimes there are missiles 15 kilometres away from his workplace. But he can't stop

working because we have a very tough economic situation. I don't want to complain because people live in worse conditions. So thank God my family is okay. They're not safe but they're okay. They work to distract themselves from the bad news."

“**I don't want to complain because people live in worse conditions. So thank God my family is okay. They're not safe but they're okay. They work to distract themselves from the bad news.**

A trip back home for Christmas this December exposed Luda to the new reality of life in war-torn Ukraine. It made her realise that it will be a long time before she is able to return and live a normal life there, and only made her determined to find a stable life for herself in England in the meantime.

Luda also wishes her mother would move to England with her – she is currently spending a lot of her time in air raid shelters, “which is very tiring and stressful. And she often gets depressed because this is generally a very bad situation.” But that would require finding a new sponsor, which she says is harder now and her mother speaks no English whatsoever so finding a job would be difficult. For now, Luda at least hopes that she can encourage her mum to come and visit her as a tourist, to see the life that she has made for herself in England.

Luda is particularly excited at the moment because she and a friend won tickets to the Eurovision semi-finals. She is

looking forward to the music and the competition but, more than anything else, she is excited to see Liverpool hosting the event on behalf of Ukraine. “I know that Liverpool and the UK will be very dedicated to Ukraine because they’ve done so much for Ukraine already. And I know how much they support my country.”

In the longer term, Luda wants to become more rooted in British communities. “I’m ready to build international friendships because I like exploring different cultures. I want to travel. I want to carry on learning English and other languages. And in the UK it’s possible.” So far, the language barrier has stopped her from pursuing her dream career yet, as her English improves, she’d like to go back to working as a music teacher and a wedding host like she was in Ukraine.

“**Above everything, I just want to express my great gratitude to all English people, to the Government and to British society for everything that you’ve done for us, both for Ukrainian refugees and generally for my country.**”

Luda has a lot of positive things to say about her time in the UK but, “above everything, I just want to express my great gratitude to all English people, to the Government and to British society for everything that you’ve done for us, both for Ukrainian refugees and generally for my country. I really appreciate it, and I give thanks to God every day for these amazing things, for this caring. And if you want to carry on helping Ukrainian people, please don’t hesitate. We are very thankful for everything.”

## Alina

Unlike Yuliia and Luda, Alina arrived in the UK with a good grasp of English. Because of this, she spent the weeks before coming to England helping friends in Ukraine to find sponsors, communicate with potential host families and navigate the Homes for Ukraine visa scheme.



“I've been dreaming of being around this many interesting cool people from every country, every continent. ... And I'm not talking about people who have pity on me. But friends to spend time with and interesting people to have fun with. Because yes, we've been through all this and we are still going through this awful situation. But it doesn't mean that we have to just bury ourselves. I try to focus every day and if something funny is happening, I will be laughing so sincerely. I can laugh up until I start crying.”

Having studied in Poland, Alina had experience living away from home before arriving in Liverpool. That has made moving to the UK easier for her than it has been for some of her friends. “I can't say that I've had many challenges because it's not my first time moving abroad. So I think I adapted quite well. Moving to England helped me to overcome lots of fears. This new challenge has helped me to be at my best. Of course it was hard. I was sad. I was crying every day in the beginning because I sometimes couldn't understand what was going on. I couldn't believe that at

home there were explosions and bombings and everything.”

So that she had some distraction from what was happening at home, she set herself the challenge of making as many new friends

**“Moving to England helped me to overcome lots of fears. This new challenge has helped me to be at my best”**

as possible in Liverpool. “I overcame my social phobia, for example. I wanted so badly to have friends of my own, not to be dependent on the host family, not to just ask them to take me places with them, but to have my own people. So I started bachata dancing. I’m in this dancing community now and I have lots of friends there. I attend speaking clubs, a book club, and I have people from church. And I have many of these people among my closest friends.”

**“I’m trying to get out of my comfort zone as often as I can. So I’m dancing as I told you, and I do have hopes and plans in terms of this, because trying to improve my dancing gives me so much joy. It gives me so much motivation. I have purpose in life”**

Alina speaks highly of the Homes for Ukraine scheme. “I think it’s a great opportunity. And we are very thankful because I think this is probably the best scheme that’s been created in the world.” The flexibility of the scheme allowed Alina to secure a job in England before she even moved here.

She is working in advertising, for the sister company of an agency she worked for in Ukraine. In fact, moving to England has provided new career opportunities for her because the

advertising work she does in Liverpool is different to what she was doing in Kyiv.

**“We are very thankful because I think this is probably the best scheme that's been created in the world.**

She also praises other elements of the scheme. On an emotional level, she told us that “living with families helped us to adapt. They brought us into this country's culture and helped us in whatever possible way. It's very good because if we just were given shelters, we wouldn't be as safe, or as at peace. It would be more stressful.”

Looking to the future, Alina thinks the Homes for Ukraine scheme will be massively beneficial to Ukraine's economy after the war - she's excited by the prospect of Ukrainians returning home with a new ability to speak English, allowing them to secure better jobs and establish a future for Ukraine in international business circles, with links between Ukraine and the UK at the heart of it.

**“Living with families helped us to adapt. They brought us into this country's culture and helped us in whatever possible way. It's very good because if we just were given shelters, we wouldn't be as safe, or as at peace.**

Her experiences of flat hunting in Liverpool have made her nervous for other Ukrainians as their agreements with host families come to an end. Like many people, she has been exhausted by the competitiveness of the rental market and has worried about becoming homeless after she leaves her current host family. The council has offered to find her

another host family but tells us that her priority is to support herself now, and she feels ready to do it.

**BB This process of renting a flat is just extremely difficult. Extremely difficult. Even if you meet all the criteria, it's so hard. And you're facing this fear of being basically homeless.**

That's why finding a flat in Liverpool has become something of a personal mission for Alina. "My hopes and dreams are to find a flat. That's a very good dream. I think that if I could find a flat, I could help my mum to get a visa and then she could come and visit me."

In the short term, Alina is excited about Eurovision taking over the city: "When Liverpool won, I was so happy. We were with the family downstairs watching the news about Liverpool and we got up and we started jumping and shouting and we were happy." Seeing Ukrainian flags, symbols and other imagery around the city in recent weeks has only fuelled her excitement further. "They're doing so much, everything is branded. So everywhere you can see these Ukrainian flags and Eurovision logos. Then there will be weeks of entertainment with different concerts and Ukrainian little plays at local theatres."

As the Eurovision final takes place on Saturday night, Ukrainians living in Liverpool will be celebrating the journeys they have made over the last year and the support of the Liverpoolians who have welcomed them. The concert will of course be a moment to reflect on the ongoing atrocities of the war, but the music, excitement and



entertainment will also be a chance to reflect on the enduring partnership between Britain and Ukraine.

As Alina, Yuliia and Luda's stories show, the support that Liverpool will show for Ukraine by hosting the contest is a powerfully uplifting moment for the refugees who have made the city their temporary home.

## About More in Common

More in Common is a think tank, founded in 2016, to tackle polarisation and division across Western societies, with teams in the UK, US, Germany, France and Poland. We take our name from Jo Cox's maiden speech in Parliament and hope to honour her memory and legacy through our work.

## Homes for Ukraine

If you are interested in finding out about how to become a host under the Homes for Ukraine scheme, all information can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/register-interest-homes-ukraine>



