

# REFUGEE CHILDREN IN LONDON

REPORTING ON THE PREPARATION OF SUPPORT  
BY CHARITIES FOR CHILDREN FROM UKRAINE

Written By: Eliza Hallard

March 2022



# INTRODUCTION

The Childhood Trust is London's child poverty charity, dedicated to alleviating the impact of poverty on children and young people living in the capital. Children growing up in poverty face multiple and complex challenges which can limit their development and negatively impact their personal well-being. London has the highest rate of child poverty in England, with 37% of children lacking an acceptable level of material resources and experiences relative to their peers. The Childhood Trust's work is focused on supporting the 700,000 plus children who are living in poverty in the city.

Refugees make up a large number of London's most disadvantaged and vulnerable children and young people. Children arriving in London who have fled war and persecution require a wide range of services, such as counselling and mental health support, food provision, housing support, language support, play and cultural activities, and special educational needs support.

In response to the anticipated arrival of children from Ukraine, this research report provides a snapshot of the services provided by charities in London to meet the needs of existing refugee children and young people. It also highlights the extensive preparations and planning being undertaken by charities to support Ukrainian children, as well documenting the additional funding requirements that the Trust's network of charities will need to be able to support Ukrainian children and young people who arrive in London.

# BACKGROUND

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24th 2022 has caused unprecedented turmoil and forced displacement, and has been regarded the worst humanitarian crisis Europe has faced in several decades [1]. Approx 3.7 million refugees have already fled into neighbouring European countries for protection, with the vast majority being women and children [2].

In contrast to EU states, where Ukrainians have visa-free, unrestricted access to essential services for at least a year [3], the UK Government has announced several immigration concessions for resettlement. To date, this includes the Ukrainian Family Scheme and the recently announced Homes for Ukraine programme [4]. Whilst the government's response has been deemed inhumane, slow, and inhibited by technocratic red tape [5], civic organisations and members of the public are eager and prepared to welcome refugees and support their resettlement into society. At the time of publication the UK Home Office has received 28,000 visa applications with only 2700 visas issued. Research has suggested that half (50%) of all Ukrainian refugees will settle in London, given the fact that the capital had the highest concentration of Ukrainians in the UK prior to the outbreak of war. The boroughs with the highest numbers of Ukrainians, and therefore the ones most likely to be affected are Newham, Ealing, Hounslow and Waltham Forest [6].

The Ukrainian conflict has triggered reflection at The Childhood Trust about the humanitarian crises and forced displacement. We wanted to better understand how charities in London are responding to these crises through support for refugee and asylum seeking children.

To explore this, a short mixed-methods study was conducted, utilising a survey and follow up interviews with some of the 150+ local projects we fund. The methodology and findings are discussed in the following subsections of this report. This study firstly addresses the complex challenges experienced by displaced children from a wide range of countries. It then explores the preparations being made by charities across London to expand their services to Ukrainian child refugees and their families, and highlights the financial assistance required by charities to effectively provide this in the forthcoming months.

---



## KEY FINDINGS

- Of the 21 charitable organisations supporting children in poverty in London that responded to the survey, on average 18% of their beneficiaries are refugees.
  - Refugee children from 28 different countries are supported by the organisations. The most common countries of origin are Afghanistan, Eritrea, Syria, Ethiopia, Somalia and Iran.
  - 53% of the charities have been engaging with their refugee children for over a year, with 26% supporting children for 3 years plus. Less than 6% have supported children for 3 months or less.
  - The biggest challenges facing refugee children in London are poverty, housing insecurity, mental health and language barriers.
  - 80% of the charities in the study are expecting to support refugee children from Ukraine this year, and 60% have already made plans to do so.
  - 100% of the charities that have made plans to support Ukrainian refugees will need additional funding, with 48% of this expected to come from Trusts and Foundations and 21% of charities expecting funding to come from public donations. Charities anticipate that Corporate philanthropy will provide more funding than the UK government - 8.5% from Corporate's versus 7.5% from UK Government.
-

## DEFINITIONS

**REFUGEE:** According to the UNHCR, a refugee is 'someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.' [7]

**ASYLUM SEEKER:** An asylum Seeker 'is a person who has left their country of origin and formally applied for asylum in another country but whose application has not yet been concluded.' [8]

In the UK, asylum seekers are recognised and granted refugee status following a successful claim.

## METHODOLOGY

A mixed methods design has been utilised within this study through collecting and analysing quantitative and qualitative data. A survey questionnaire was sent out to 80 charities working with children and young people in London, where a mixture of open and closed questions were asked to better understand their current support for refugee children, and anticipated plans for assisting Ukrainian refugees. There were 21 responses within the 1 week timeframe allowed. Follow up phone Interviews were also undertaken with 3 of the charities involved in the survey.

---

# CHALLENGES AND SUPPORT FOR REFUGEE CHILDREN

According to the United Nations, by mid-2021 there were 135,912 refugees and 83,489 pending asylum cases in the UK [9], and London has long provided a home to many of those seeking refuge from around the world. Whilst the majority of refugees in London have applied through the asylum process (precise figure is unknown), approximately 1088 have been resettled by Local Authorities and Community Groups through the Resettlement and Community Sponsorship Scheme [8]. Of note to this study, there are a further 1,600 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) in the city [8], who have often endured significant horrors and require specialist welfare support and therapy.

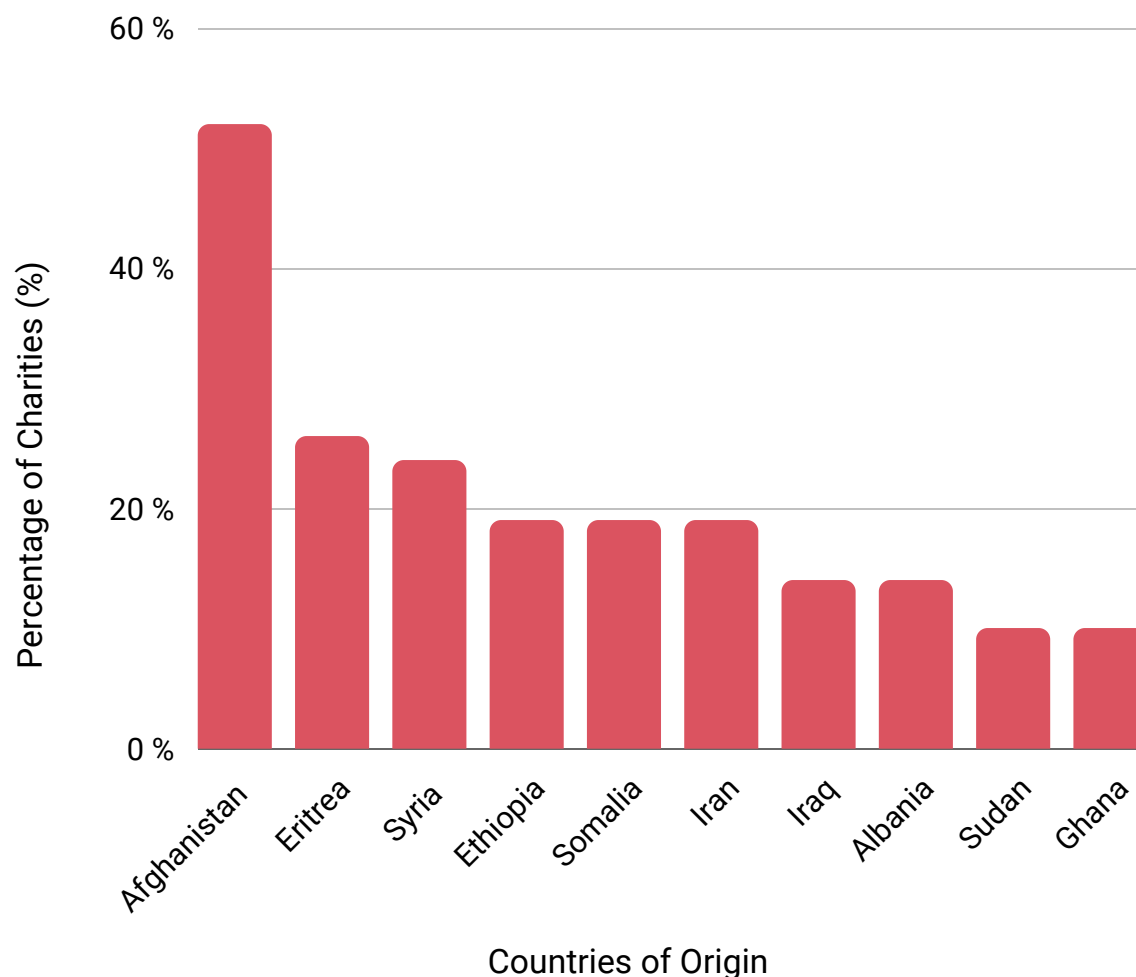
**The findings from this study provide a snapshot of the current situation in London:**

In total, the **21** charities currently support **34,765** children a year, of which **2,127** are refugees. Of the organisations that engage with displaced children, on average **18%** of their beneficiaries are refugees. Notably, there are disparities of engagement between the projects due to the varied nature of service provision. 3 of the charities are not suitable for providing support, whereas in 6 of the charities, more than **25%** of their beneficiaries are refugees.

The charities care for children from **28 different states**, and reflecting the current socio-political climate, the most common countries of origin are those experiencing conflict and civil unrest. Graph 1 illustrates the proportions of charities in the study that are supporting refugee children from the top 10 countries. Interestingly, these findings capture the recent destruction and displacement caused by the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 [10], which official government sources are yet publish.

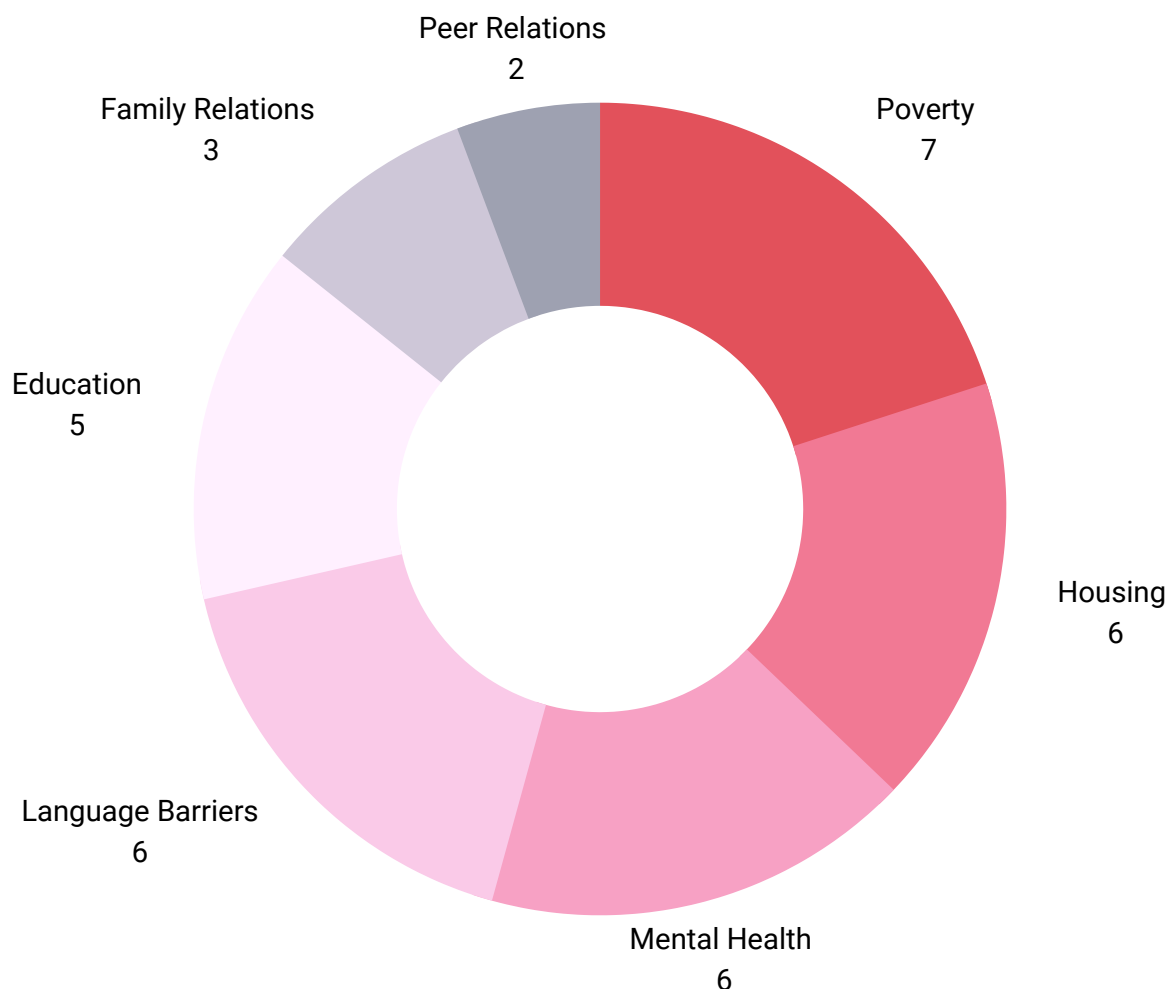
---

**Graph 1: Charities providing support to refugees from the top 10 countries of origin**



The findings from this study highlight the most pressing challenges experienced by refugee children in London. Graph 2 demonstrates this, with the larger proportions denoting greater importance, as ranked on a 1-8 scale by the charities in the study (8 being most important).

**53%** of the charities have been engaging with refugee beneficiaries for over a year and **26%** for more than **3** years (with less than **6%** supporting for **3** months or less), suggesting the challenges faced by refugee children are complex, structurally embedded, and difficult to overcome.

**Graph 2: Challenges Facing Refugee Children**

Average rankings across the charities, 1-8 scale (least to most important)

The UK government has created a hostile environment for families and children going through the asylum process, which aggravates pre-existing livelihood precarities. Whilst accommodation is provided by the Home Office upon arrival, cash supports are minimal, and asylum seekers are unable to work or claim for benefits [11].

Once refugee status has been acquired, asylum seekers have just 28 days to find a new home, employment, or set up a Universal Credit claim [12]. This timeframe is unrealistic, and creates a crisis situation in which refugee families and children face destitution.



**Two of the charities involved in the study shed light on some of the challenges children experience when arriving in London:**

- Children often arrive with only have the clothes and footwear they stand up in, which are unsuitable for the seasonal weather.
- Children experience a significant culture shock **“they feel foreign, they feel alien”** (Interviewee 1)
- Difficulties with navigating the system and digital exclusion, especially if children don’t speak English and have no internet access to complete online applications.
- Families are provided with accommodation which is often too small and lacks basic amenities such as bedding, resulting in overcrowding and substandard living conditions.
- Children that have fled from conflict zones commonly experience Post Traumatic Stress Disorder: **“children struggle to fall asleep or stay asleep, struggle with nightmares, struggle to function as normal human beings. Being in a heightened state of stress all the time affects children’s development”** (interviewee 1)
- Language barriers, alienation and difficulties with accessing education amalgamate and create a situation where children struggle to form peer relations and progress in school.

**The support offered by The Childhood Trust's partner charities is extensive, and includes the following services:**

- **Provision of basic amenities** - clothing, bedding, food, toiletries, toys.
  - **Housing assistance** - helping families navigate the private rental market, providing information about tenants’ rights and helping protect against exploitation and discrimination.
  - **Education** – English lessons, helping children register for school places, supplementary tutoring, Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) support, employment training programmes, sports and leisure activities.
  - **Accessing welfare and health services** – technical assistance with online applications, registration with GPs and dentists, Universal Credit claims.
  - **Mental Health Services** – Psychotherapy & counselling including long term one to one support for refugees experiencing poor mental health (PTSD, depression, anxiety, loneliness, low self-esteem).
-

# EXPANDING SUPPORT FOR UKRAINIAN REFUGEES

The findings provide valuable insight into the preparedness of London's youth sector charities to extend their support services to Ukrainian refugee children. Notably, as the conflict is unfolding and there is ambiguity surrounding the resettlement programmes, there is uncertainty regarding the number of Ukrainian refugees that will require support, and the likely pathways they will take.

It is of continuing concern that the UK's hostile environment remains, and the UK's resettlement schemes are inadequate for meeting the complex needs of families whose lives have been shattered by war. Ukrainian refugee children will encounter many of the same challenges as others who have fled from conflict zones across the world; a lack of basic amenities, culture shock, poor mental health, trauma and PTSD, alienation, and difficulty accessing essential services due to language barriers and digital exclusion.

Encouragingly, **80%** of the charities in the study are expecting to engage with refugee children from Ukraine this year, with **60%** of them having already made plans to do so. The following quotes illustrate established plans, ranging from emergency support upon arrival, care for victims of human trafficking, educational support, and assistance with accessing essential services:

***"We have reached out to Ukrainian support charities to ensure they know they can refer families to us when they start arriving and identify needs. We are increasing stocks of kit to provide as emergency bundles as and when families arrive."***

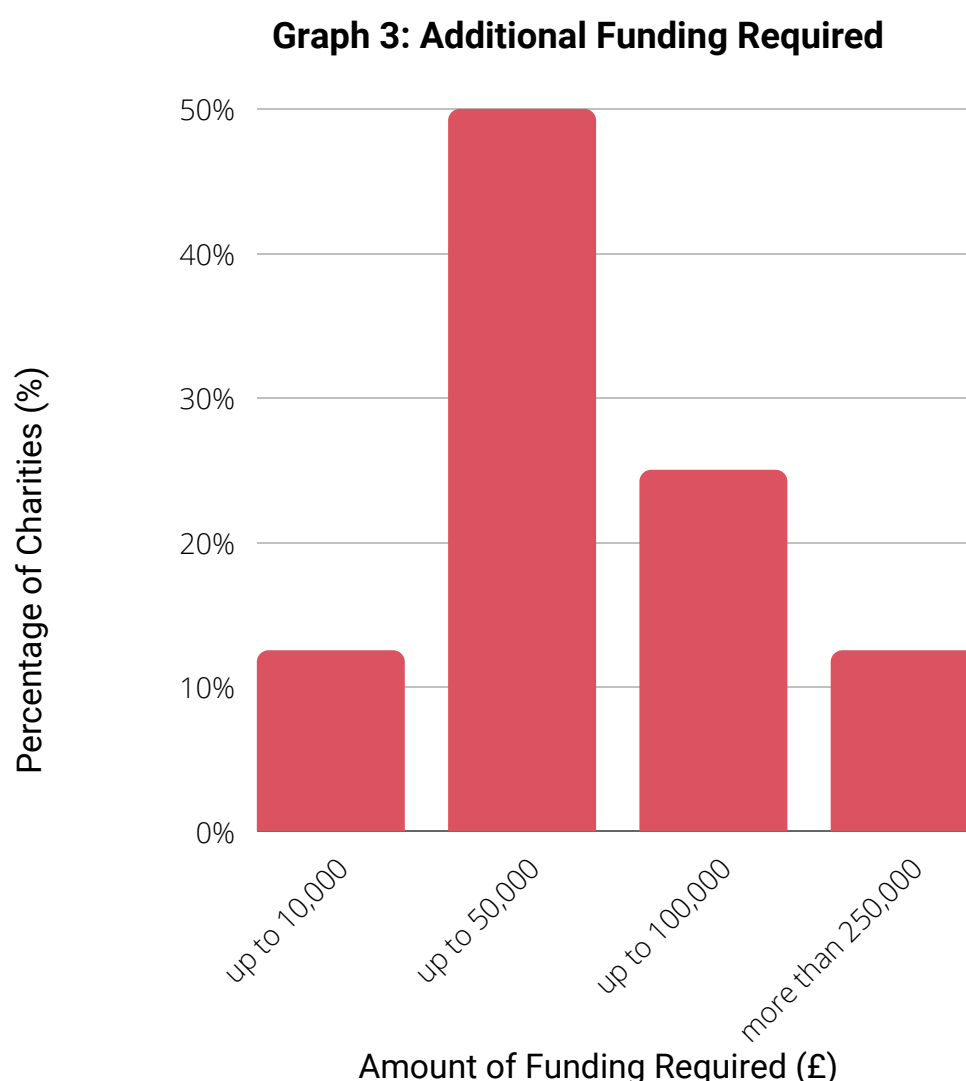
***"We work with children who have been trafficked and will apply the same procedures"***

***"Plans for trained volunteers to support families to gain access to housing, education and benefits"***

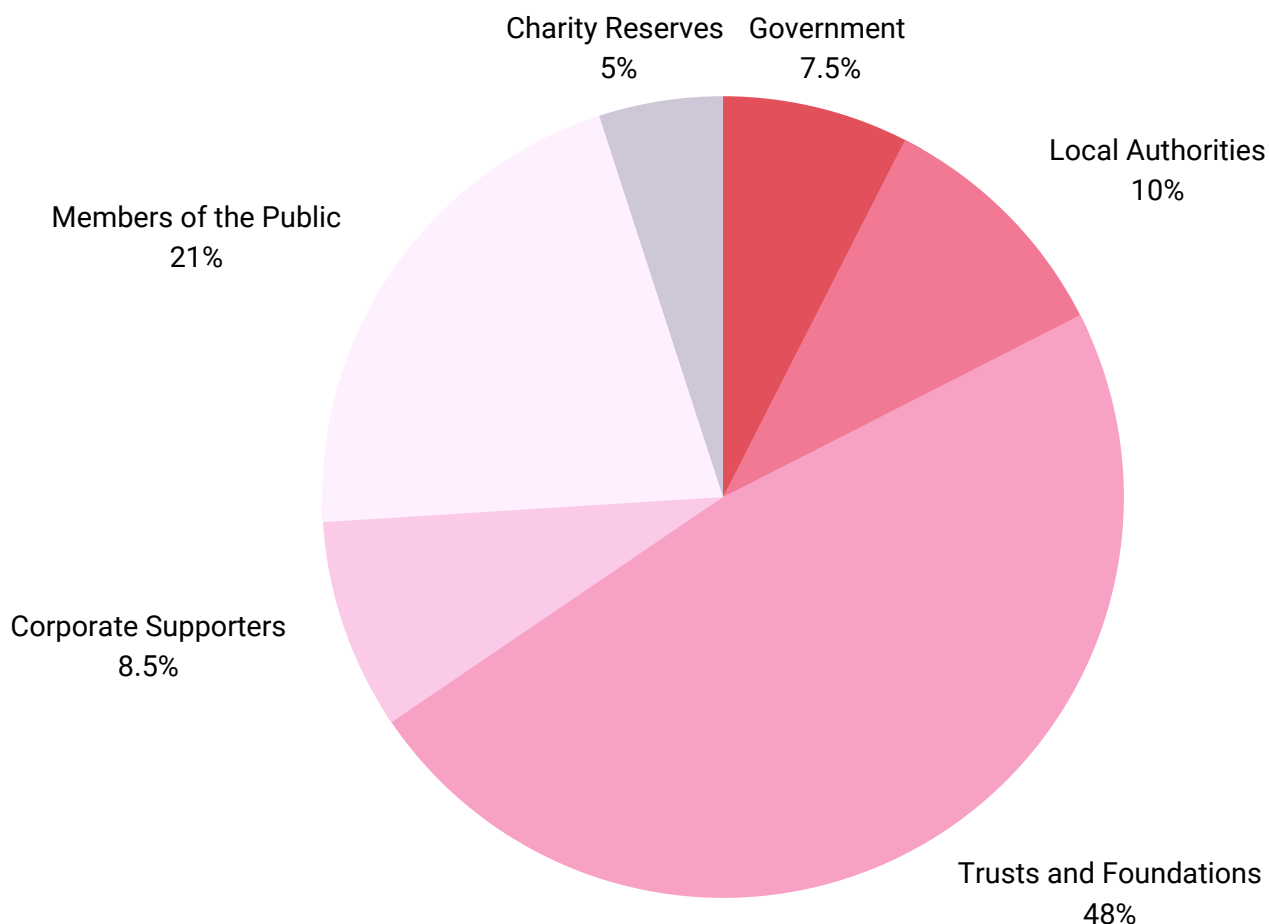
---

Whilst charities have established plans, there is a significant funding gap between the organisations' available funds and what is necessary to develop their services and meet the needs of Ukrainian refugees. For example, one of the charities in the study explained how women and children arriving from Ukraine will require intensive, long-term support to overcome their experiences of trauma. Due to the language barrier and need for cultural sensitivity, Ukrainian interpreters are crucial for effectively providing this support. They are in short supply in the UK, and training interpreters will add an additional financial burden on organisations that are already operating at full capacity.

**100%** of the charities in the study require extra financial support, with **50%** of them requiring up to **£50,000**, and **25%** up to **£100,000**, as shown in Graph 3. The breakdown of expected funding sources is outlined in Graph 4, with a disproportionate amount anticipated from Trusts and Foundations.



**Graph 4: Anticipated Funding Sources**



---

It is clear from our charity partners' responses that they are anticipating the need for additional funding to support incoming Ukrainian children. Many charities have struggled with income loss during the Covid-19 pandemic, whilst at the same time having to support disadvantaged children who have been disproportionately impacted by the lockdown measures. It will take a concerted effort from charities and funders alike to rise to the challenge of supporting children from Ukraine, who are likely to require intensive long term support to rebuild their shattered lives and resettle in London.

---



Pic 1: 'We have already won!' reads the message on a drawing by a child from a village in east Ukraine. Tanks, helicopters and soldiers are the most common subjects portrayed by Ukrainian children.

Many children displaced by the war have an urgent need to create and draw, according to mental health workers in Poland who are supporting children who have recently fled their homes. (Picture of art-work by Alessio Mamo)

## CONCLUSION

It is evident from this brief study that London currently has a significant population of refugee children who are experiencing a combination of deep-rooted challenges, such as poverty, housing insecurity, poor mental health, and language and educational barriers.

Whilst there are a network of charities across the city providing essential support services, their resources are stretched. The unfolding Ukrainian crisis and subsequent displacement of mostly women and children has prompted many charities across London to establish plans for assisting their resettlement.

Considering the current government schemes are inadequate for protecting the livelihoods of refugee children, the willingness and preparedness of third sector organisations is extremely encouraging. However, additional funding is vital for the charities to effectively extend their services.

Whilst The Childhood Trust is a major source of funding, those with the ability to financially support charities and refugee families need to rise to the challenge to ensure that the necessary support is delivered as and when children from the Ukraine arrive in London.

---



## REFERENCES

- [1] International Rescue Committee, Ukraine Crisis, 16 March 2022
  - [2] UNHCR, <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/briefing/2022/3/623da5894/month-since-start-war-quarter-ukraines-population-displaced.html> (25th March 2022)
  - [3] European Commission, Information for people fleeing the war in Ukraine, 16 March 2022
  - [4] Melanie Gower, House of Commons, Ukraine: UK immigration concessions, 11 March 2022
  - [5] Jamie Grierson, The Guardian, Refugee groups criticise gaps in UK's Ukraine response, 13 March 2022
  - [6] Ross Lydall, The Evening Standard, London set to welcome influx of Ukrainian refugees, 11 March 2022
  - [7] UNHCR, What is a refugee? [Accessed 16 March 2022]
  - [8] Mayor of London, FAQ About Refugees and People Seeking Asylum in London [Accessed 16 March 2022]
  - [9] UNHCR, Asylum in the UK Accessed 16 March 2022]
  - [10] Human Rights Watch, Afghanistan: Taliban Takeover Worsens Rights Crisis, 13 March 2022
  - [11] London Councils, Asylum, migration and refugees [Accessed 16 March 2022]
  - [12] The Refugee Council, Keys to the city: How the next Mayor of London can help end refugee homelessness, February 2021
-