

Volunteering Story: The Language Café

The Language Café is a service set up by the Resettlement Team at Orkney Islands Council as part of the Resettlement Schemes project and is dedicated to helping Ukrainian refugees improve their English language skills.

The Language Café currently has 8 volunteers who give their time every Saturday to run the informal two-hour session. Meetings are held at the Orkney Youth Café which is the perfect place for creating a relaxed atmosphere with enough space to break out into smaller groups, as well as space for children to play while their parents are learning.



Photo: Some of the Language Café volunteers and service users.

The Language Café marked its one-year anniversary in May and has grown from supporting 4 or 5 individuals to being regularly attended by around 60% of the Ukrainian refugees residing in Orkney.

“We are grateful to each volunteer, they complement each other, share their knowledge with us and sincerely want us to become more confident and always believe in ourselves!”

- Service user

Volunteers work on a rota basis, with at least 2 volunteers attending each meeting and supporting around 6 to 8 Ukrainians each week. Service users have varying levels of language skills, with some needing support with basic skills whilst others are looking to expand their vocabulary and learn different ways of saying the same thing i.e. thinking about how simple or detailed, they want to be in their communication. Having at least two volunteers in attendance each week means that the group can often be split into two smaller groups to match the levels of needs. The Ukrainians attending the sessions commented on how well the volunteers complement each other and how beneficial that is for their learning.




VOLUNTEERS' WEEK

40th Anniversary

The Language Café has also been a great place for the Ukrainian refugees to get to know each other better, and many have formed new friendships outwith the meetings. Attending the meetings has also been a great way to find out more about the life and culture in Orkney, with discussions about the differences between Orcadian and Ukrainian cultures often being explored as topics of conversation as part of their learning.


In addition to the English language skills, those attending the meetings have said that they also benefit from the care and support of the volunteers, who provide a safe and nurturing environment for the refugees to feel comfortable to share details of their traumatic experiences and be offered emotional support. The continuity of the volunteers has also helped to create that feeling of safety.



A Facebook Messenger group connects the group of volunteers with those attending the Language Café and provides a space to communicate outwith the meetings on such things as homework or to let the volunteers know who can make it each week, etc. One of the Ukrainian refugees commented on how beneficial the platform was for keeping in touch with everyone and how lovely it was to receive the heartwarming messages sent from the volunteers in advance of each meeting.

Other comments that those attending the meetings said about the volunteers, included, how valuable it was to feel that the volunteers were genuinely interested in them and their experiences; how welcoming they were – “always waiting for us with a smile and kindness in their eyes”.

They also commented on how happy the volunteers were to celebrate every improvement, and how beneficial that is in helping to boost confidence and morale, whilst also appreciating that it can take time to get the results they may be looking for, giving that encouragement not to give up.



In celebrating and recognising volunteers for Volunteers' Week 2024, Nataliia Kuzmina, Project Manager (Resettlement Schemes), said, “On behalf of Orkney Islands Council and Ukrainians in Orkney, I would like to express our deepest gratitude and appreciation to the Language Café volunteers. The work and support you provide to displaced Ukrainians is invaluable. You created a safe and welcoming space where the refugees not only improve their English language skills but also heal their wounds and regain confidence. You made this initiative a success. Thank you for your continuous support.”



#VolunteersWeekScot