

Guy Blackman On Developing WAVUS to Support Ukrainian Families

When the war in Ukraine displaced Ukrainian families, Guy Blackman and the Wendover and Villages community recognised the urgent need to provide support. This realisation led to the formation of Wendover And Villages Ukrainian Support (WAVUS), a grassroots initiative designed to offer support to Ukrainian families arriving in the UK.

The Beginning: Guy, along with Andrew as Chairman and Richard as Treasurer, spearheaded the initiative to formalise what many in their community were already doing on a smaller scale. Their primary goal was simple: to create a support network for Ukrainian families.

"We wanted to bring together the families we knew were sponsoring Ukrainians and provide a common place for them to meet," Guy recalls. Initially, WAVUS hosted gatherings in church halls, offering cups of tea, coffee, and homemade cakes. However, the layout and environment of the halls prompted them to rethink their approach.

Finding the Right Venue: The turning point came with the discovery of Tres Corazones, a local tapas venue in Wendover that provided a warm and inviting atmosphere. This change marked the beginning of more engaging and enjoyable gatherings. Tres offered a space where families could meet, share experiences, and build friendships over good food and wine.

"We've done quite a few things now, and we've got quite a good group," says Guy. "Everyone enjoys the camaraderie, the banter, and the friendship."

Building a Community: WAVUS quickly became more than just a support group. It evolved into a vibrant community where families could find solace and companionship. Regular gatherings brought together a core group of about a dozen people, out of a larger circle of 25. These meetings provided a much-needed break from the challenges of daily life and helped build strong, lasting connections.

One of WAVUS's key initiatives was providing conversational English lessons. These sessions, held in small groups, focused on conversational English language skills, enabling participants to engage in everyday conversations. Guy emphasised the importance of making these lessons enjoyable and relevant, often with topics being chosen by the group.

Fundraising and Financial Assistance: Running such an initiative requires funding, and WAVUS rises to the challenge through regular fundraising efforts. They organise events, donations and submit funding applications to cover the costs of English lessons and social

activities. "We get through about £1,500 every three months," Guy explains. "Our English lessons cost around £100-£130 per night, and we also fund trips and activities to ensure everyone can participate."

These efforts ensured that no family felt excluded due to financial constraints. WAVUS even provided specific items, like bicycles and kitchen equipment, to help families settle in and pursue their interests.

Overcoming Challenges: Guy noted that integration varied among families. While younger individuals and children often adapted quickly, forming friendships and engaging in school activities, adults faced more significant challenges. Balancing ties to Ukraine with the desire to build a new life in the UK created internal conflicts for many.

"We've seen amazing resilience," Guy observes. "Some have integrated well, finding jobs and making friends, while others remain undecided or wish to return to Ukraine."

Mental Health and Wellbeing: Understanding the emotional toll of displacement, WAVUS also focused on mental health and wellbeing activities. They organised creative sessions like cup decorating, candle making, and art classes, providing a therapeutic outlet for stress and anxiety.

Looking Ahead: As WAVUS continues to grow, Guy and his team remain committed to adapting to the evolving needs of their community. They actively seek feedback to ensure their efforts are aligned with the desires of the families they support. Future plans include exploring additional support avenues, such as legal advice sessions, to further aid Ukrainian families in their journey.

Conclusion: Guy Blackman's journey with WAVUS is a testament to the power of community and compassion. Through their dedicated efforts, WAVUS has become a beacon of hope and support for Ukrainian families, helping them navigate the challenges of displacement and build a new life in the UK. Guy's story is one of resilience, empathy, and the enduring spirit of community.