

A festival for Ukrainians - united by hope

Hilltops Ukrainian Support Community organised a grand festival for all Ukrainians living in Buckinghamshire. The festival was held on September 23, one of those sunny days that we don't often experience in autumn. About 330 Ukrainians and their families gathered for the outdoor event. The celebration lasted from noon to late evening.

The organisers did an amazing job and attracted many volunteers, both British and Ukrainian. The festival was held at Restore Hope. The charity kindly offered the use of their site that combines a small petting farm and event facilities in the picturesque corner of Latimer. Several different areas were provided for the guests: a covered dining area, a sports field for games and entertainment, a fenced ball court, an open-air tree-shaded park and, of course, a large barbecue fire pit.

Honorary guests at the event were the Housing and Homelessness Minister Felicity Buchan, Buckinghamshire Council Leader and Deputy Leader, and Dr Krish Kandiah, founder of Sanctuary Foundation and author. Just a month ago, on the day of Ukraine's independence, Minister Buchan announced a gift for all Ukrainians in Britain - the opportunity to join an advanced English language course. The government allocated more than £11 million to train and help ten thousand Ukrainians find employment. The language courses are part of the long-term project to support Ukrainians in Britain, which involves funding to the sum of about £150 million and includes, in particular, assistance to Ukrainians to find long-term housing. The Minister, Dr Kandiah and the representative of the Council talked with the guests, got acquainted with some Ukrainian traditions and saw how friendly, strong and cheerful Ukrainian people are and how much support they receive from the local residents.

The event was informal, but the minister had the opportunity to hear several stories and learn about the issues that most concern Ukrainians now. For example, six months ago the issue of housing was highly uncertain, but now more and more Ukrainians are finding an opportunity to privately rent houses and apartments. The next question is the uncertainty of the future - what awaits everyone when the visa period comes to an end? Most of Ukrainians have children; they have already settled in educational institutions and feel comfortable there. Almost all integrated into the British community since their arrival. Constant changes due to relocations can cause new stresses for people who have just recovered from the shock caused by war. In addition, there are no guarantees that in 2025, when the vast majority of Ukrainians will have come to the end of their three years here, the war will end and there may still be the fear that a missile or an enemy drone will fly into their city and home. There is no definite solution yet and there cannot be. But the problem remains.

However, enough about problems - everyone has them and even ministers are not all-powerful. This beautiful festival has not only brought everyone together, but also showed what amazing results Ukrainians can achieve when they support each other. The joint work of the volunteers demonstrated that the structure and order to which the British are accustomed, works perfectly together with the diligence of the Ukrainians. A perfect combination!

During the event, guests could walk through the flower garden and vegetable patch, feed the birds and animals, kids ran and played sports games together with the British volunteers. Guests could rest comfortably on the chairs, hiding from the sun under the trees, chat with representatives of the Ukrainian community who provided counselling and psychological support, and just spend time in pleasant conversation, getting to know new people. British



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volunteers were on duty in literally every zone and helped both children and adults: showed them where the facilities were and pointed out the drinks stations.

During lunch everyone was treated to an aromatic chicken soup with noodles and rolls cooked by Ukrainians. After lunch, children and adults continued to explore the area. Everyone could get advice on employment, finding housing, additional help and a psychological support session. Then everyone enjoyed ice cream, cold and hot drinks and just relaxed in the wonderful surroundings.

The evening continued not only with the most delicious barbecue cooked on a bonfire, but also with pleasant conversation and performances. Ukrainians prepared inspiring and supportive speeches, chatted with the locals and thanked them for their support at this difficult time. Although it was already dark outside, the evening continued to shine brighter than thousands of lamps. Ukrainians sang folk songs, danced together, the talented children with their silver voices sounded like bells announcing the peak of the festivity. Two hours of singing and dancing, delicious dinner, engaging conversations - at the table people forgot about their problems, about what worries them and did not stop smiling and laughing.

It actually offers hope - hope for all of us - that even war wounds and traumas can be healed with care and love. Those positive emotions allow us to hold on and stay happy. That's why it's so important to smile at someone else, offer help, lend a shoulder. As long as we are all together, we are invincible to any forces of evil, even those who play complex political and military games. This is such a simple thought, as if from a children's book. But who said that fairy tales do not come true?

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