

16th July 2024

Dear Resident,

Re: Aspen Lodge

We are writing to share KCC's plans for the new use of Aspen Lodge.

In July 2023, the High Court ruled Kent County Council (KCC) must take "every possible step" to increase its capacity to accommodate and look after all unaccompanied asylum-seeking (UAS) children arriving in the county until they can be transferred to the safe care of another UK Local Authority under the National Transfer Scheme (NTS). KCC must comply with the Court ruling.

KCC does not currently have sufficient placements in Kent to look after all UAS children arriving in the county, even though significant numbers are transferred to the care of other local authorities. Therefore, KCC must identify new accommodation at pace.

KCC used Central Government funding, agreed specifically for the acquisition and management of property to accommodate UAS children, to acquire Aspen Lodge for the following reasons:

- Its layout is already configured to provide homely accommodation for children, as is required by Ofsted regulations.
- It is located in an area where children can develop early skills to help them integrate and contribute positively to UK society.
- Its layout and location is similar to KCC's existing reception centres for UAS children, which have successfully provided temporary accommodation for UAS children for many years.

It is regrettable KCC was unable to share plans for Aspen Lodge with you before now. The necessity to comply with the Court ruling and accommodate all UAS children who continue to arrive to Kent, means it is not possible for KCC to consult with residents in ways it would normally and prefer to do.

A home for children

UAS children are extremely appreciative of the accommodation and support they receive from KCC and are eager to learn about, integrate and contribute positively to UK society.

KCC's experience of running existing reception centres has shown UAS children present extremely minimal risk to local communities.

Aspen Lodge is currently an empty building with no existing use. The intention is to register with Ofsted as a children's home for a maximum of 22 UAS children, aged under 16.

Aspen Lodge will have dedicated KCC staff and security on site 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Security will be present to protect against unauthorised access to the site, not because of the children themselves.

Aspen Lodge will be a temporary home for children, whilst they await transfer to the care of other local authorities under the National Transfer Scheme (NTS). The required timescale for a transfer, set by Central Government, is 10 working days.

As it will be a temporary home, children will not enrol in local schools. Instead KCC staff will deliver education and activity at the home and supervised activity in the community. This will include English

language lessons and guidance on English law and society, giving children the best and earliest opportunity to contribute towards their community, wherever that may be in the UK.

UAS children in the care of KCC are not in detention, they have the same rights to the same level of care as any other child in KCC's care, including access to services and amenities in the local community.

Children will be able to independently leave the home for short periods of time, with the agreement of staff about where they will be and when they will return. This will depend on the child's age and individual circumstances.

Robust protocols, already successfully used at KCC's existing reception centres, will be in place at Aspen Lodge. Skilled and experienced social workers meet newly arriving children to assess their needs before they are placed in reception centres. Both social workers and staff at reception centres are trained and experienced in working with vulnerable children and are responsible for keeping children safe at the home and in the community.

Work to the property

We recently commenced some early enabling works at Aspen Lodge and you will start to see increased activity at the site. We anticipate improvement works to the property will complete April 2025.

Further Questions and Information

KCC is committed to working with the local community and partners as these plans develop.

We will keep you updated and will write to you again when we have more information to share. KCC will meet with your local councillors and other community leaders, through which they can represent your questions regarding Aspen Lodge.

In the meantime, if you do have questions, please contact us at reception.enquiries@kent.gov.uk or visit our website, which has answers to some of the most frequently asked questions about our reception centres:

<https://www.kent.gov.uk/education-and-children/protecting-children/reception-centres-for-unaccompanied-asylum-seeking-children>

Kind regards,

UASC Reception Centre Enquiries Team