

Braethorpe Stakeholder Meeting

Tuesday, 26 March 2024, 3:30 pm – 5:00 pm

MS Teams Meeting

Agencies and Services in Attendees
KCC, UAS Children's Service
KCC, Deputy Chief Executives Department
KCC, Councillor
Kent Police
ABC, Councillor
ABC, Community Safety

Kent County Council (KCC) – Ashford Borough Council (ABC) – Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UAS Children)

Welcome and Introductions
Introductions were made and an overview of the agenda was provided (circulated with invites). It was stated that there will opportunity throughout for questions to be asked and also an item at the end dedicated to stakeholder questions.
Legal Context
<p>A KCC representative stated that, in July 2023, a High Court Ruling was issued, which made it clear that KCC must take every possible step to increase capacity across the county to look after and accommodate all UAS children arriving in Kent. KCC must comply with the ruling, using all legal means to establish provision to do so. The existing Reception Centres in Kent are not enough to provide sufficient accommodation.</p> <p>Referral to KCC for arrivals of UAS children will escalate as the weather improves throughout the year, and so KCC must work at pace to bring new accommodation into operation. KCC's statutory responsibilities under the Children Act 1989 to care for UAS children are clear – however, it has been recognised that this cannot fall to Kent alone and requires a national response including, sufficient funding from central government and an effective National Transfer Scheme (NTS). The High Court ruling stated that KCC and the Home Office must work together to ensure that KCC has the resources required to meet its statutory responsibilities. The Reception Centres and services for UAS children are funded directly by central government and not KCC or Kent taxpayers.</p>
Building Works
<p>A KCC representative provided an overview of the Braethorpe building, noting the areas intended for bedrooms and communal areas (dining), and staff areas. A planning application has been submitted to build a walkthrough between the two buildings. The site is surrounded by mature trees, some Tree Protection Orders (TPOs), and has a large garden. Bedrooms are fitted with restrictors as standard and CCTV is in place around the building. A change of use application has been submitted. The programme of works is on track and the planning application is due to be heard at Committee in June.</p> <p>A KCC representative explained that security staff, as well as KCC centre staff, are on-site 24/7 and stated, in response to a query, that security is in place to keep the children safe. A KCC Councillor representative queried if it is possible to 'soften' the appearance of the security fencing. KCC representatives explained that the fencing was agreed with the service and that all centres have a security considerations assessment to ensure that safety and security measures – such as the fencing, security staff, CCTV and intercom, etc – are in place. Aesthetics of the security fencing can be reviewed.</p>
Management of The Centre
A KCC representative explained that Braethorpe will be registered with Ofsted as a Children's Home and will need to meet the regulatory standards for Children's Homes and be subject to regular inspections. Children will be accommodated on a temporary basis, pending transfer on the National Transfer Scheme. The mandated timeframe for NTS transfers is 10 working days – however, some transfers take less days and some take longer. There is an on-going legal process, which includes the NTS. KCC remains committed to moving children swiftly and safely to their

more permanent homes across the UK. KCC works closely with the Home Office and advocates for children if there are delays with their moves.

UAS Children are children in care of KCC and have an allocated Social Worker who leads on their plan for care, as well as an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) to ensure the plan is satisfactorily completed. Social Workers will visit children at the centre.

Staff and managers at the Centre will ensure that children's basic needs are met and will deliver a structured programme of activities and education. As the children are only in Kent for a short period of time, they are not enrolled in schools and their education is delivered on-site. This is largely based around English language and UK law and society, with the focus being on supporting them to recovery from their journey to the UK and begin the process of resettling.

There is an outdoor recreation area at Braethorpe, but staff will also take children off-site for activities such as bowling, swimming, etc, with the intention to keep children engaged and stimulated. In terms of taking a trauma-informed approach, children tell staff that they like to be kept busy. Some schools who are engaged with existing centres host exchange days, for UAS children to join their Sixth Form students for sports, etc. It was noted that enquiries to date suggest concerns that large numbers of children will be wandering the community with nothing to do, potentially causing problems. This will not be the case – staff at Braethorpe are committed to delivering a programme that keeps children engaged.

A KCC Councillor representative queried how the UAS children could be integrated into activities and facilities locally, e.g. access to the Stour Centre, Sk8side, etc. Whilst transport may be an issue, this could be looked into further if there are activities further away – the Stour Centre is walkable from the site. An ABC representative agreed that there are a number of opportunities to explore in terms of local activities and facilities they could be part of, including Stour Centre (at a potentially reduced rate). There are good links with youth work providers.

A KCC representative explained that this is the first Stakeholder Meeting for Braethorpe, and these will take place quarterly until the site is operational, at which point the membership will change and the frequency will increase. The chair would become the Registered Children's Home Manager and operational staff will attend, with invitees covering local organisations and partner representatives. This will be a useful forum to explore the offer from local providers in the community. For this meeting, some local schools were invited, but no representatives came forward to attend. AKCC representative will follow-up with the schools separately.

It was explained that, when KCC is able to share news about a site, a letter is sent to residents in the immediately neighbouring areas. There has been feedback from all sites around some roads not receiving the letters. If anyone does request a copy of letters to residents, KCC is able to provide this and they are made available on our dedicated Reception Centre FAQ pages on the KCC website. On the advice of Kent Police, it was agreed to not hold public meetings. Therefore, the Stakeholder Meetings have been arranged to facilitate the link and feedback to communities.

Following today's meeting, there will likely be a further letter to update residents. The letter will be shared with the members of the Stakeholder Group prior to be sent, along with a record of the meeting. Frequently Asked Questions are available online, and these are being updated. For members of the Stakeholder Group, KCC is looking to offer an 'open day' to view Braethorpe prior to it becoming operational.

A KCC representative stated that another question that has been asked by residents is around why KCC did not consult with residents – responses to these questions have stated that KCC apologises for not being able to share this information sooner and references the necessity to comply with the court order and with urgency. Therefore, it has not been possible to consult with residents in the way KCC would normally like to do. The on-going legal discussions between KCC and central government also means there is limited information that can be shared.

Stakeholder Questions

A KCC Councillor representative stated that the majority of questions from residents have been around taking care of the appearance of the link building (Edwardian structure); ensuring trees are retained (it was noted one tree needs to be removed – not a TPO tree); assurances that residents won't experience parking issues along their residential streets; and fencing appearance.

In response to staff parking, a KCC representative stated that the on-site car park should be sufficient for staff and visitors to park without needing to seek space outside of the property. Braethorpe is a 10-bed property and will operate on a ratio of 1 member of staff to 4 children during the day, and 1 member of staff to 7 children during the night.

An ABC Councillor representative stated that some residents have raised concerns about age and gender of UAS children at Braethorpe, with concerns that there will be older teenage boys causing issues. A KCC representative stated that there is a robust process in place around age assessments. When a child arrives, the Home Office will take a view on the child's claimed age. If the Home Office determine their age to be 18+, they will not refer them to KCC. If there is an age claim issue, a robust process is followed whereby Social Workers undertake a full age assessment and, if determined to be 18 or over, would be immediately removed from KCC accommodation and referred to the Home Office.

A KCC representative stated that Braethorpe is for children aged 16 or under. Typically, the demographic of UAS children is male, and approx. 15 to 17 years old. Whilst Braethorpe is not designated for males only, if an under 16 female arrived, it is likely they would be placed in foster care. There are small numbers of female UAS children, but, if there were larger numbers of female arrivals, KCC would need to consider options to either designate whole sites or areas of buildings to girls.

An ABC presentative noted that they have no concerns from a community safety point of view and work with Kent Police and Prevent if there is any community tension.