

Pine Fields (formerly The Limes) Stakeholder Meeting

Monday, 15 July 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
DBC, Councillor
KCC, Prevent
Kent Police
Kent Equality Cohesion Council

Kent County Council (KCC) - Dartford Borough Council (DBC) - Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UAS Children)

Welcome and Introductions
<p>Introductions were made and an overview of the agenda was provided. It was stated that there will opportunity throughout for questions to be asked and also an item at the end dedicated to stakeholder questions.</p> <p>A KCC representative advised that the names of Reception Centres have been changed to better reflect their purpose as temporary homes for unaccompanied children arriving across the world. The centres will be named after trees, which symbolise protection and connection across history and cultures. The centres are named after particular trees from the home-countries of UAS children. For The Limes, this will now be known as Pine Fields. The Afghan Pine is the national tree of Afghanistan, valued for its strength and ability to thrive in challenging environments.</p>
Overview
<p>For new and existing attendees, a KCC representative provided an overview of key information. KCC must comply with the High Court ruling to look after all UAS children arriving to Kent. KCC's existing accommodation is not sufficient, even though the majority of children move on to the care of other local authorities. New accommodation and services to UAS children are funded by central government, not through KCC reserves or Kent taxpayers.</p> <p>It is regrettable that KCC had not been able to share plans for Reception Centres ahead of time – this was due to the necessity to comply with the urgency of the court ruling, and the need to identify suitable accommodation for children who continue to arrive to Kent at pace, which meant that it has not been possible for KCC to consult with residents in ways it might normally, and would prefer to do.</p> <p>Generally, 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. A KCC representative advised that our experience of running our two current reception centres has shown that these children present very minimal risk to local communities.</p> <p>Pine Fields will be registered with Ofsted to provide supported accommodation for a maximum of 50 children aged 16-17-years-old.</p> <p>The centre will have dedicated KCC staff and security on site 24/7, 365 days a year – there will be no point when children will be unsupervised at the home. Security will be present to protect against unauthorised access to the centre, not because of the children themselves.</p> <p>Reception Centres are a temporary home for children as almost all UAS children who come into Kent are referred</p>

on the Home Office's National Transfer Scheme (NTS), which has a mandated timeframe for NTS moves to take place within 10 working days. Some may move earlier than 10 days, other may move a few days later. As this is a temporary home, UAS children are not enrolled into local schools and their education takes place largely on-site, with some supervised education and activities in the community. Education includes English language, law and society and providing opportunities to contribute to society.

Children at Pine Fields will be able to leave the centre independently and unsupervised for short periods of time – this takes place with the agreement of staff and understanding of where they will be and what time they will return. A child's age and circumstances will be taken into consideration in agreeing this.

KCC is mindful of the vulnerability of UAS children and the risk of them being exploited or to go missing. Robust protocols are in place if children do not return home at the agreed time – staff take all possible steps to locate them and, if required, will contact Kent Police for assistance. These protocols have been in place in our existing centres and work well – these protocols will be mirrored in Pine Fields and all new centres.

Before children arrive at Pine Fields, they will be met with by experienced social workers who assesses the risks described, to inform the plans around them once they are in the home. Staff at the Reception Centre and the children's allocated social workers are experienced in working with vulnerable children and responsible for implementing plans to keep children safe at the centre and in the local community.

A DBC Councillor representative queried if all children placed at Pine Fields would be from Afghanistan and noted that some children stay in Kent for longer than 10 working days.

A KCC representative stated that the nations many UAS children are from include: Sudan, Iran, Syria and Afghanistan but UAS children – including those placed at Pine Fields – could be from many other countries.

In terms of the 10 working days for NTS transfers, a KCC representative explained that the timeframe is mandated by central government and some children do transfer quicker and others may take longer than the 10 working days – KCC has been open about the challenges with the NTS and works closely with the Home Office and DfE to improve this and work with other Local Authorities to ensure timely moves.

Building Works

A KCC representative shared photographs of the works taken place at Pine Fields, which are due to complete September. Works have included: roofing works; fire-retardant works; new wiring and heating pipes; enclosed staircase; bedrooms; installing new doors and ceiling panels; and installed kitchen for children to learn to cook.

A KCC representative also noted that Ofsted had visited existing Reception Centres in May, to view the work being undertaken to bring those to the same standards and had spoken very positively about KCC's work in that regard.

A KCC representative stated that, ahead of the centre fully opening for children to arrive, stakeholders will be invited to tour Pine Fields, to give them the opportunity to meet staff and view the facilities. The visit would likely take place first week of September – an invite will be sent in due course. A Kent Equality Cohesion Council representative noted that it is important for stakeholders, particularly Councillors, to see the centre and support the messaging to the community.

A DBC Councillor representative raised that residents have been concerned about privacy due to their windows facing the Reception Centre. A KCC representative stated that they would need to investigate this, and, if there are windows where this issue is identified, a privacy film can be placed over the windows that still allows light in. KCC representatives agreed that both privacy of residents and children at the Centre is important.

Management of The Centre

A KCC representative stated that Pine Fields has an appointed Operations Manager, who is responsible for the day-to-day running of the centre. There are Reception Centre Managers for day and night, so there will always be a manager on site, as well as staff teams of Reception Centre Workers working directly with children. KCC's application to register Pine Fields with Ofsted is progressing as planned.

Staff are very keen to start working with children and will start their inductions before the centre opens. Whilst recruitment has been successful, there are still some vacancies which are being advertised – details of these will be shared with stakeholders, as Pine Fields serves as a good local employer for the community.

In response to a question from a DBC councillor, a KCC representative stated the salary grading for roles within the reception centres are consistent with the salary gradings for similar roles across the County's Children's Services. e.g. roles supporting and caring for UK citizen children. There will be a mixture of staff appointed from within Kent, some within the Dartford area, and some outside of Kent. Vacancies have been advertised on KCC's website where all KCC jobs are posted.

Ahead of opening, KCC will be working through its mobilisation period to get security arrangements, catering, and cleaners in place.

KCC has started work to engage with Dartford and Gravesend Muslim Association and Kent Equality Cohesion Council to explore wider religious and cultural links for children.

KCC is working with Kent Police's Safer Kent programme, who are currently running a cricket programme with UAS children in Folkestone, to explore how similar programmes might be delivered/made accessible for children at Pine Fields.

A KCC representative noted that the UN Refugee Agency visited KCC's existing Reception Centre in Ashford in May and stated: *"Evident from our visit that the centre is being run to a very high standard with professional and dedicated staff. The general atmosphere of the centre was warm and welcoming, and it was clear the children felt safe and well cared for. We noted there was a wide range of activities for the children, with a focus on learning skills to transition into the community. They were afforded with freedom of movement both in the centre and community...which is likely to have many positive impacts on their mental wellbeing"*.

A Kent Police representative queried if KCC has linked in with the Protecting Vulnerable People strand of Kent Police for the handover and seamless reporting of missing children. A KCC representative confirmed that KCC is linked in with Kent Police's Missing Children and Exploitation Teams (MCET) particularly with the work at Dover. When children arrive, assessments are undertaken to identify risks and needs of children, which inform decisions about where they can be safely placed and to put in place robust safety plans. As part of this work, where there are specific concerns for a child, KCC proactively shares information with Kent Police so that, if a child goes missing, Kent Police already have key information to help locate the child.

A DBC Councillor representative queried if another letter could be sent to residents ahead of the centre opening, to provide further updates and reassurances. A KCC representative acknowledged that the last letter to Dartford residents was sent 14 June 2024 and that all letters are published alongside FAQs on Kent.gov.uk. KCC will continue to write to residents ahead of the centre opening if there is new and specific information to share. In addition to this, residents and stakeholders are able to contact KCC via a centralised enquiries mailbox if they have queries or concerns. Links to the FAQ and letters on Kent.gov.uk will be shared with the DBC Councillor representative.

Stakeholder Questions

A KCC representative provided an overview of the enquiries received to date. There have been 68 enquiries, all have been responded to. Of these 64, 46 have been raised by 4 individual residents. Whilst there have been a total of 68 enquiries, this does not reflect the amount of correspondence and there has been lots of engagement with particular residents to answer questions.

The main building-related themes of enquiries have included:

- Privacy
- Traffic and delivery management along Brent Lane
- Contractor parking
- Noise from site and start time of works
- Smell caused by roofing works
- Lighting issues

- Removal of trees

The main UAS children related themes of enquiries have included:

- Concerns about risk to the community
- Proximity to the local primary school
- Concerns about potential increase of ASB

A number of those issues were addressed in the last Stakeholder Meeting. Since then, a KCC representative met with Dartford Primary and Leigh Academy to provide reassurance that the Reception Centre will not impact them as a school or the children attending.

As Reception Centres open, it is anticipated that we may see an increase in enquiries. Stakeholders are encouraged to promote the use of the FAQ webpage and central mailbox. As the centre opens, we will be transitioning away from the centralised mailbox to local points of contact for residents to contact the Reception Centre directly and speak to the management team. There will be a contact number and email address for Pine Fields.

KCC's experience over the years is that the majority of enquiries are resolved positively and successfully at a local level. This may involve the resident meeting in-person with the team at the Reception Centre. However, if the issue cannot be resolved locally, these will be taken through KCC's formal complaints procedure.

A KCC representative explained that this is the second Stakeholder Meeting held for Pine Fields. Once the site is open, these meetings will be more frequent and chaired by the centre's Operations Manager. The Stakeholder Visit to Pine Fields will be an opportunity to meet the Centre management team.

A Kent Police representative stated that they would welcome the opportunity to build relationships with Pine Fields. They offered to meet with the boys, share their UK Law Guide (with assistance from interpreters) and provide some positive engagement with the police, particularly to help break down the barriers and build trust with police.

A KCC Prevent representative noted that training will be delivered to this site and that a DBC Community Safety representative will also be attending. A Kent Police representative agreed to link Pine Fields in with the local beat officer.

A DBC Councillor representative queried if ward Councillors would be informed of any problems when children are being accommodated at Pine Fields. A KCC representative confirmed that ward Councillors would continue to be invited to the Stakeholder Meetings and will be informed of any updates by the Centre management team – Councillors will also be welcome to raise and concerns or queries from residents at these meetings.

AOB

None raised.