

**Aspen Lodge Stakeholder Meeting**  
**Wednesday, 30 October 2024, 10:30 am – 12:00 pm**  
**MS Teams Meeting**

<b>Agencies and Services in Attendees</b>
KCC, UAS Children’s Service
KCC, Deputy Chief Executives Department
KCC, Prevent
Kent Police
Dover District Council (DDC)
Sholden Primary School
Hornbeam Primary School

Kent County Council (KCC) – Dover District Council (DDC) – Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UAS Children)

<b>Welcome and Introductions</b>
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.
<b>Legal Context</b>
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.
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.
A KCC representative confirmed that Aspen Lodge will provide accommodation to under 16-year-olds as an Ofsted-registered Children’s Home. As an Ofsted-registered provision, it will need to meet the regulation standards 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. KCC remains committed to moving children swiftly and safely to their more permanent homes across the UK.
Aspen Lodge – and all other Reception Centres – will be funded by Central Government, not by KCC taxpayers or from KCC reserves.
The necessity to comply with the court ruling and provide accommodation for UAS children at pace has meant that it has not been possible to consult with residents in the way KCC would prefer to do.
It was explained that public meetings will not be taking place, as per advice given by Kent Police around safety concerns. Therefore, these Stakeholder Meetings have been organised as an opportunity to bring together a number of professionals and elected representatives to share information and answer questions from the community. A centralised mailbox and Frequently Asked Question (FAQ) site have been set up to allow enquiries

from members of the public to be answered in a timely way.

Approx. 500 homes in the neighbouring areas received a letter regarding Aspen Lodge on 16 July 2024. This was the earliest date that KCC could share the information publicly. It is anticipated that the building will be ready by Summer 2025, however, this may be subject to change. As the building becomes ready to open, the membership and frequency of the Stakeholder Meetings will change so that these may have a more operational focus.

The first Stakeholder Meeting for Aspen Lodge has a focus on briefing our statutory partners, local schools, and councillors. Over time, KCC will look to link in with wider community contacts and bring them into the membership.

Alongside letters and Stakeholder Meetings, KCC has a webpage of information and maintains a central enquiries mailbox. The webpage contains FAQs, published letters to residents and minutes of Stakeholder Meetings. The enquiries mailbox is in place to receive and respond to enquiries across all new opening centres – once centres open, enquiries and concerns can be raised directly with centres (via email or telephone).

Reception Centres are temporary homes for children whilst they wait to be transferred to permanent placements in other LAs via the NTS (as described above). Reception Centres are not immigration processing centres. Immigration processing is undertaken by the Home Office prior to coming into KCC's care. KCC is not involved in processing or asylum claims.

Aspen Lodge had been identified as a suitable site for UAS Children as the internal spaces and layout of the building are appropriate for providing homely accommodation for children and is also located in an area similar to existing centres that have operated for many years.

Aspen Lodge will be registered with Ofsted to provide temporary accommodation for a maximum of 22 children under 16 years old. A KCC representative noted that it is important that KCC has the right balance of Supported Accommodation and Children's Home provision to ensure that it can accommodate all UAS children who arrive to Kent. Children's Homes have smaller capacity, so larger buildings are more suited for Supported Accommodation.

### **Building Works**

A KCC representative confirmed that KCC has taken possession of the building and security are currently on site. A contractor has been appointed through KCC's procurement framework and works are expected to start soon, with building designs being finalised. No planning application is required. The old conservatory at the end of the building will be removed.

The building requires total refurbishment and will follow a similar format to other Reception Centres, including similar furniture, etc. The Home Office have provided positive feedback on KCC's existing refurbished centres. Within the building, there will be office space, communal spaces for children and staff, as well as bedrooms. The centre operates with staff on site 24/7.

As Sholden Primary School is next to the building, KCC and contractors will work to ensure that deliveries to site are outside of the school drop-off/pick-up times. Project Managers will visit and speak to Sholden Primary School directly. It was raised that there are deliveries at 11:45 am at Hornbeam and this may affect the access for Aspen Lodge if deliveries occur at that time.

A KCC representative advised that they would continue to provide updates on the progress of works, including before and after photos, at the Stakeholder Group meetings. At the moment, the design for the building provides 19 beds. It is expected that works will complete in May 2025. Surveys have been completed.

A KCC representative stated that, ahead of the centre fully opening for children to arrive, stakeholders will be invited to tour Aspen Lodge, to give them the opportunity to meet staff and view the facilities.

In reference to a query regarding windows, a KCC representative confirmed that work will be done to ensure privacy on both sides. A Sholden Primary School representative noted that their main concern will be the

windows/areas overlooking the playground. A KCC representative confirmed that they would work with the school to ensure privacy is in place – in other sites, privacy film is placed on the windows to still allow light to come into the centre and blinds/curtains are installed.

### **Management of The Centre**

As with all Reception Centres, Aspen Lodge 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. A dynamic risk assessment is in place with Kent Police and Prevent, to ensure security levels are appropriate.

UAS children are separated from family and have experienced an extremely challenging journey to get to the UK. Children come from countries in open conflict or where there are human rights violations. The most common countries of origin for UAS children are Afghanistan, Iran, Türkiye, Iraq, Sudan, Albania, Eritrea, Syria and Vietnam. The typical demographic for UAS children is male, 12-17 years old.

In KCC's experience, 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. 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. 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.

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.

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 as well as an Independent Living programme to support their understanding of 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.

The education programme is supplemented by activities such as arts, music, sports, etc and this is where the links with the community and local organisations is important.

A KCC representative explained that all children will be registered with a GP in order to access primary health care. Concerns have previously been raised in relation to the potential impact on local GP services. NHS colleagues have advised that they are working with GP surgeries where Reception Centres are located to ensure that demand is distributed evenly across practices. A KCC representative also noted that work is being undertaken with Kent and Medway NHS and NHS England to improve the process of registration and reduce the impact of this on GP surgeries. Staff at the Reception Centres staff use good professional judgement regarding children's health needs e.g. accessing over the counter medication/pharmacy advice before GP consultation, where possible. This question has been raised previously and is included in the FAQs published.

KCC focuses on delivering a structure programme of activities so that they are occupied and stimulated through a variety of activities. As part of the programme, staff take children to off-site activities, as well as utilising the outdoor recreation space at the centre.

A KCC representative advised that its experience of running its two existing reception centres has shown that these children present very minimal risk to local communities.

There have been concerns where some Reception Centres are located close to schools. There is very little interaction with children at the Reception Centre and those in the school(s). Stakeholder engagement and meetings include the schools, to keep them informed and to ensure there is good communication with the service. A framework of operators is in place to transport children from Dover to reception centres, similar to that used for home to school transport. KCC will make every effort to avoid busy traffic periods, such as the school run.

KCC is aware and mindful of the vulnerability risk of exploitation, missing and trafficking. The first 48 hours from arrival at Dover are when children are particularly vulnerable. Children first go to Kent Intake Unit (KIU) at Dover (Home Office Immigration facility). KCC Social Workers are based at KIU. Social Workers meet with children and undertake an assessment of their needs and risks. This assessment informs the plans put in place to care for that child, including matching them to appropriate accommodation provision.

Social Workers and staff at the Reception Centres are very aware of the risks of exploitation to UAS children and are trained in working with vulnerable children to keep them and the community safe.

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 Aspen Lodge and all new centres.

Like all children, UAS children have the right to access services and amenities in the local community. Therefore, there will be times when children are allowed off-site, unsupervised, with the agreement of staff about where they will be and when they will return. This could be at different times of the day and will depend on the child's age and individual circumstances and with risk assessments in place to ensure this is appropriate and safely managed.

A KCC representative explained that children arriving to the Reception Centres are given a full orientation to show them what is on offer in the local community. As part of the Ofsted registration, a location assessment is required which includes input from partners, etc and considers concerns within the local area, e.g. areas we would not want children to go to, etc. The location assessment directly informs the orientation given to children.

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 Prevent representative commented on the examples of misinformation that is often shared, particularly via social media, regarding asylum seekers. Prevent works closely with Area Education Officers and their teams and have Prevent Education Officers who are able to support schools directly to raise awareness for staff. A Hornbeam Primary School representative acknowledged the prevent training that has been provided to staff at the school queried if there are any training/opportunities that Prevent can offer to parents/carers in the local area. A Prevent representative stated that it would be best to start with providing training to school staff.

In response to a Hornbeam Primary School representative, a KCC representative confirmed that the removal of the conservatory at Aspen Lodge would provide more room outside (on-site) for children to play. In response to the concerns about children at Aspen Lodge accessing local play areas, a KCC representative stated that this would form part of the location assessment, which is part of the Ofsted registration requirements. All Reception Centres are different, with some having larger green space and others with a more limited outside area – staff adapt the programme of activity based on the facilities available and this is informed by the location assessment.

A KCC representative noted that stakeholders may be approached with questions regarding Aspen Lodge and encouraged them to utilise the FAQ webpage and signpost to the central enquiries mailbox. Work is being done to look into producing short videos, to help communicate key messages and share these videos with stakeholders (as well as publishing online).

A KCC representative confirmed that Stakeholder Meetings will be held quarterly ahead of opening. Once opened, the meetings will become more frequently (monthly) and have a more operational focus, chaired by the Registered Manager. Stakeholders were encouraged to reach out to the team (via the enquiries mailbox) if they have any questions to raise outside of the meetings.

### **Stakeholder Questions**

A KCC representative stated that the central Reception Centre Enquiries mailbox continues to run, so that residents

and member enquiries can be responded to. To date, there have been 15 individual enquiries regarding Aspen Lodge. The main themes of these enquiries include lack of consultation prior to purchase; disagreement with money being used for UAS children generally; concerns about UAS children in the community (safety and ASB worries); distribution of letters and proximity to the local Primary School; proximity to busy road (safety concerns). A KCC representative stressed that KCC's experience of running existing reception centres has shown that these children present very minimal risk to local communities and are appreciative of the support offered to them.

KCC has also received some enquiries relating to volunteering and employment opportunities. KCC has been recruiting to the centres since January 2024 and will be advertising for Aspen Lodge soon – KCC is keen to be a local employer for the community.

All enquiries have been responded to. Stakeholders are encouraged to promote the use of the FAQ webpage and central mailbox. It is anticipated that enquiries regarding Aspen Lodge may remain quiet until it gets closer to the centre opening.

The next meeting for Aspen Lodge will be scheduled for approx. late-January 2025.