

Acacia Court (formerly Kiln Court) Stakeholder Meeting

Friday, 28 June 2024, 10:00 am – 11:30 am

MS Teams Meeting

Agencies and Services in Attendees
KCC, UAS Children's Service
KCC, Deputy Chief Executives Department
KCC, Councillor
KCC, Prevent
Kent Police
MCET, Kent Police
Kent and Medway NHS
Swale Borough Council
Faversham Town Council
Bysing Wood School
The Abbey School
The Howard Academy (THA) Trust

Kent County Council (KCC) – Swale Borough Council (SBC) – 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 Kiln Court, this will now be known as Acacia Court. Acacia trees populate the landscapes of Sudan, are highly resilient and capable of growing and flourishing in UK climates.</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.</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>Acacia Court was an empty building with no existing use – it will now be registered with Ofsted to provide supported accommodation for a maximum of 32 children aged 16-17-years-old. The nearby Osbourne building will</p>

not be used as a Reception Centre for UAS children as it is not suitable for this purpose.

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. The security presence is necessary to ensure the integrity of the site, to keep children and staff safe.

Reception Centres are a temporary home for children as almost all UAS children who come into Kent are referred 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 Acacia Court 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 Acacia Court and all new centres.

Before children arrive at Acacia Court, they will be met with by a Social Worker who assesses the risks described, to inform the plans around them once they are in the home. Staff at the Reception Centre are experienced in working with vulnerable children.

Building Works

A KCC representative shared photographs of the works taken place at Acacia Court. Works have included: redecorating throughout and new carpet installation; installation of commercial kitchen (currently being tested); kitchen for children to learn to cook; significant external tidying and improvement works. A 'soft handover' to the UAS Children's Service started this week, allowing the service staff to come into the building whilst testing is being completed – the final handover will be the beginning of July 2024. A mobilisation plan is in place to hand over to caterers, cleaning services and the Facilities Management contractor (Skanska).

A KCC Prevent representative commented that the works undertaken are impressive and thanked the team for their hard work. A KCC representative noted that the building, whilst empty, had been the target of vandalism and other nuisance and commented that it is positive the building is now occupied and being put to good use. 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, a small group of stakeholders can be taken round the site, to meet staff and view the facilities. An invite to stakeholders will follow this meeting.

Management of The Centre

A KCC representative stated that Acacia Court 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 Acacia Court with Ofsted is progressing as planned.

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

KCC has started work to engage with Sittingbourne Islamic Cultural Centre as the closest Islamic place of worship for children at Acacia Court and is also engaging with 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 Acacia Court.

KCC is beginning conversations with West Faversham Community Centre about how children can access services available there and is also engaging with individuals who made enquiries regarding volunteer opportunities at the centre.

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 Faversham Town Council representative noted that there had been opposition from a group of residents, who had raised a number of questions, one of which is in relation staffing in terms of the level of qualifications staff at the Centre required, the amount they are paid, and the suggestion that they are being recruited from outside of the area. A KCC representative acknowledged that the resident group had contacted KCC with a series of questions, which have been responded to – this included the questions about staffing. The salary grading of staff in the UAS Children's Service is consistent with the same type of staff across the county, i.e. roles similar or the same to these in other parts of Children's Services, e.g. those looking after UK citizen children. There will be a mixture of staff appointed from within Kent, some within the Faversham area, and some outside of Kent. However, KCC has not conducted an international recruitment campaign. Vacancies have been advertised on KCC's website where all KCC jobs are posted. A KCC representative stated if there are potential candidates in Faversham who meet the skill and experience requirement, the service would be keen to receive their applications.

A Kent Police representative queried how children at Acacia Court would access health services. A KCC representative explained that all UAS children are looked after children to the Local Authority and are entitled to the same rights as all children – therefore, they would be registered with a GP to access primary health care. However, 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.

A Kent and Medway NHS representative stated that work has been undertaken to contact GP surgeries in Faversham about Acacia Court and the children at the Reception Centre will be allocated on the 'fair share scheme', which allows them to be allocated out to other practices. UAS children will be permanently registered with an NHS practice so that are registered to access primary health care in their onward placements after their time in Kent. Kent and Medway NHS will monitor this closely with the GP practices, meeting them regularly to address any concerns. 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.

A Faversham Town Council/THA Trust representative noted that the closest Mosque to Faversham is Canterbury Mosque and the chairman for the Mosque lives in Faversham. A Bysing Wood Primary School representative provided details of another Mosque that may be helpful to engage with.

A KCC representative thanked stakeholders for their recommendations for religious group links and noted that, through the work with the Kent Equality Cohesion Council, they are working on how those religious groups could engage directly with children at the Reception Centres.

Stakeholder Questions

A KCC representative provided the details of enquiries received via the UASC Reception Centre central mailbox to date: 15 enquires total, 11 directly from residents. Of those, 3 enquiries were from residents asking about volunteer opportunities, which have been responded to and will be taken forward once managers are in post. The remaining 8 were regarding distribution of the initial letter to residents, the use of the site as a Reception Centre and concerns about community safety.

One enquiry was from a residents group following a meeting at West Faversham Community Centre on 24 May 2024. This was responded to, with many of the questions raised answered through the published FAQs.

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 Acacia Court. It is anticipated that the vast majority of concerns will be successfully resolved by the Reception Centre team. However, if the issue is not resolved locally, these will be taken through KCC's formal complaints procedure.

A Faversham Town Council representative noted responses previously given regarding Osbourne Court, security concerns, etc and asked about the security and lighting along the footpath that leads from Bysing Wood School to Wildish Road – they suggested that improving lighting here would benefit both the local community and UAS children. A KCC representative stated that this would be something for the relevant KCC department to resolve but also noted that there would need to be a clearly made distinction that the lighting didn't need improving as a result of Acacia Court being used as a temporary home for UAS children.

A Bysing Wood Primary School representative raised that families in some of the properties which back onto the centre had raised concerns that they can see into the centre (and therefore can be seen from the centre). A KCC representative stated that they would need to investigate this, as this should not be the case in any of the bedrooms at the centre but may be in the meeting room spaces. However, if there are windows where this issue is identified, a privacy film can be placed over the windows that still allows light in.

A KCC representative noted that, as stated to individual stakeholders in other discussions, the UAS children are not in a detention centre and will be able to access Faversham independently. Nevertheless, KCC is mindful of the vulnerability of UAS children, and concerns raised by residents through the enquires received. So KCC staff will work closely with children and stakeholders to support this.

AOB

A KCC representative explained that this is the second Stakeholder Meeting held for Acacia Court. Once the site is open, these meetings will be more frequent and chaired by the centre's Operations Manager.