

Aspen Lodge Stakeholder Meeting

Wednesday, 30 April 2025, 10:00 am – 11:30 am

MS Teams Meeting

Service/Agency
KCC, UAS Children's Service
KCC, Deputy Chief Executives Department
Kent Police, Child Centred Policing Team
Dover District Council
Sholden Parish Council

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

Welcome and Introductions
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.
Overview and 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>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. In 2024, with Central Government incentivised funding to local authorities, average transfer took approx. 7 working days.</p> <p>Aspen Lodge – and all other Reception Centres – will be funded by Central Government, not by KCC taxpayers or from KCC reserves. Aspen Lodge is one of 9 centres across Kent, 7 of which are currently open, registered with Ofsted and operating well in their communities.</p> <p>A KCC representative stated that it is regrettable that KCC was not able to share plans regarding Aspen Lodge in full ahead of time. However, 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.</p> <p>KCC has acknowledged that there have been some requests (across all new centre openings) for public meetings to be held and KCC carefully considers these requests. Whilst it is understandable that communities have concerns and questions, KCC is also responsible for ensuring the safety of those attending such meetings. Unfortunately, experience shows that such meetings can become the target of activist groups who seek to cause disruption and harm through filmed footage and potentially targeting individuals in attendance. 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.</p> <p>Approx. 500 homes in the neighbouring areas received a letter regarding Aspen Lodge in July 2024 – this was the earliest opportunity that this information could be shared with residents. Following the last meeting in February, a second letter was sent to residents to update them on progress of the building and remind residents of key information and points of contact for queries.</p> <p>Stakeholder Meetings ahead of opening will be held quarterly – the first meeting was held in October; the second in February – after today's meeting, the next will be held in July. Once the centre has opened, Stakeholder Meetings will move to monthly and will be handed over to the centre's Registered Manager to chair.</p>

This has worked well in other centres. Membership of the Stakeholder Meetings will also evolve over time and become more operational.

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. The FAQ site also has a link to a page for published letters and minutes of Stakeholder Meetings. Once centres have opened, residents and partners can contact them directly via email, telephone or by visiting the centre and asking to speak to staff.

Reception Centres are temporary homes for children whilst they wait to be transferred to permanent placements in other local authorities via the NTS. 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 approving 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 18 children under 16 years of age. 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. Aspen Lodge will be registered with Ofsted as a children's home. As an Ofsted-registered home, Aspen Lodge will be held to the same high standards as all children's homes across the UK.

In response to a Kent Police representative, a KCC representative confirmed that typically UAS children are male – female UAS children are a much smaller proportion. Whilst there is nothing in the Ofsted registration for Aspen Lodge (or any other centre) that specifies it should be used for male or females, because girls arrive in significantly smaller numbers, the service would consider a placement that is in the best interest of the child – e.g. a foster placement or supported accommodation from an external provider. Therefore, it is anticipated that Aspen Lodge will be used for boys.

Building Works

A KCC representative shared a presentation, outlining the works started or completed to date, which includes: removal of conservatories (not structurally sound); installation of white rock in bathrooms; plastering in bedrooms; mechanical and electrical works.

Kent Fire and Rescue will carry out a visit during the building works, followed by a formal inspection upon works completion.

Currently, works are expected to complete at end-July, for the building to be handed over to the service.

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.

A Sholden Parish Council representative noted that there is building works opposite in Vicarage Lane (proposed 100 house development), which will mean big lorry movements outside of Aspen Lodge. Another development was also noted, which currently has traffic light controls in place, impacting travel in the local area.

Management of The Centre

A KCC representative stated that Security will be present to protect against unauthorised access to the centre, not because of the children themselves. Staff will be on-site 24/7, all through the year – there will be no time when children are unsupervised at the home.

KCC expects to use Aspen Lodge throughout the year. However, occupancy rates will vary with winter months being quieter in terms of arrivals and busier periods expected throughout spring and summer. Therefore, the local community will see Aspen Lodge being busier during the spring/summer months.

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, Sudan, Eritrea and Syria.

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. With support of interpreters, staff provide a welcome and orientation to the centre and local area. 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.

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.

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. 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 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. 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.

A KCC representative noted that services for UAS children is a challenging area, particularly given the negative reports and portrayal of asylum seekers in the media, which often seek to deliberately mislead the public. Even when reports are factual, the act of one individual does not and should not be used to represent a whole group. KCC's experience has shown that UAS children present very minimal risk to local communities.

However, KCC fully recognises the vulnerability of UAS children in terms of trafficking, exploitation and going missing. KCC uses all information available to assess the risk of children. KCC Social Workers meet with children at Dover 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 – for example, it may be that a child is assessed to be especially vulnerable, and it may be that a foster placement is more appropriate for them.

KCC works closely with Kent Police and other partners to ensure the safety of all children and the community and well-established protocols in place at existing centres will be replicated at Aspen Lodge.

Like all children, UAS children have the right to access services and amenities in the local community. Therefore, there will be times when children want to leave the centre independently. This is done with the agreement of staff about where they will be and when they will return. This will depend on the child's individual circumstances and with risk assessments in place to ensure this is appropriate and safely managed. In KCC's existing centres, this is working well. Should a child not return by the agreed time, staff will take all possible steps to locate them and, if this is unsuccessful, they will report the child as missing to Kent Police and work with them to undertake the necessary child protection steps.

A KCC representative stated that, ultimately, strong communities make it difficult for those intending to harm children to operate. It is hoped the community at Aspen Lodge will provide a sense of belonging and support.

Children may arrive without evidence of their age – upon arrival in Dover, the Home Office undertake immigration checks and will robustly consider any differences in presentation, information available to them and their claimed age. If the Home Office determine someone is 18 or older, they will not refer them to KCC. In the rare circumstances that there are questions raised about the age of someone in KCC's care, experienced Social Workers complete an age assessment in accordance with case law and best practice.

If this assessment concludes that they are 18 or over, they are immediately moved into Home Office accommodation for adults. Such instances are acted upon robustly and quickly, as KCC would consider this a significant potential safeguarding concern.

In response to a Kent Police representative, a KCC representative confirmed that some children may have phones and others may not. In the event of heightened concerns, KCC will pre-emptively report concerns to Missing and Child Exploitation Team (MCET) with details of the child, including photo, phone number, etc – this so that, if the child does go missing, MCET already have the information available to them. KCC will, with the support of interpreters, help children to make contact with their family to confirm that they have arrived safely.

In response to a Kent Police representative, a KCC representative confirmed that children have access to Wi-Fi at the centres – this Wi-Fi has parental controls. Children use tablets for the education programme, so that they can complete self-learning outside of the lessons taught by the Higher Learning Teaching Assistant.

KCC is keen to offer benefits to the local community through establishing Aspen Lodge as a Reception Centre, through being a local employer, and to support the integration of Aspen Lodge into the community. Recruitment is progressing well. However, a number of vacancies remain and will be advertised shortly. A KCC representative encouraged Stakeholders to share adverts for jobs at Aspen Lodge with the community.

Ahead of the opening of the centre, recruited staff will have a full training and induction programme in July. Staff recruited so far represent a mix of skills and experience, some internal to KCC and some new – all staff joining Aspen Lodge are very enthusiastic about supporting UAS children. Alongside this, KCC is working on mobilising catering, security, and cleaning services.

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"*.

Stakeholder Questions

Following the initial letter in July 2024 and the Stakeholder Meeting held in February 2025, it was agreed to send another letter to residents to provide further updates and key information, as well as reminding residents about the contact details to raise enquiries, etc. This letter was sent 3 March 2025.

Prior to the letter dated 3 March 2025, KCC received a total of 15 enquiries. The themes of these enquiries included: lack of consultation prior to purchase; disagreement with money being used for UAS children generally; concerns about UAS children in the community (risk of anti-social behaviour); distribution of letters and proximity to the local Primary School; proximity to busy road (safety concerns). Since the letter dated 3 March 2025, KCC received a further 5 enquiries regarding: staff parking concerns, particularly concerning Vicarage Lane; contact from the Parish Council (who have since been added into the membership); and repairs to the single-track road.

All enquiries have received a timely response, with no further escalations of concerns at this time. Regarding the repairs to the single-track road, KCC is liaising with the Public Rights of Way (PROW) Team.

A KCC representative suggested sending another letter to residents in July, ahead of opening – again, to re-share the key updates and messaging and points of contact. KCC will contact members of the Stakeholder Group to confirm when the first children are accommodated at Aspen Lodge. Attendees agreed that a further letter to residents would be helpful.

At the last meeting, KCC discussed that, across other centres are named after trees, giving some commonality in name across the network of centres. Trees symbolise protection and connection across history and cultures and existing centres have been named after particular trees from the home-countries of UAS children or trees that have been grown at the particular site. At the last meeting, KCC noted that given that there may be some local historical

significance to the name, KCC is not going to be changing the name.

Dover District Council and Kent Police representatives commented on the positive relationships that have been formed with Olea Grove, in Ash, and welcomed the opportunity to build the same relationships with Aspen Lodge. A KCC representative welcomed their continued involvement with the centres and comments that what is achieved with children in a short period of time has a long and lasting impact.