

Connors House Stakeholder Meeting

Tuesday, 29 April 2025, 9:00 am – 10:30 am

MS Teams Meeting

Service/Agency
KCC, UAS Children's Service
KCC, Deputy Chief Executives Department
CCC, Councillor
KCC, Prevent
Canterbury City Council
Canterbury City Council

Kent County Council (KCC) – Canterbury City Council (CCC) – 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
<p>Connors House is one of 9 centres across Kent, 7 of which are currently open, registered with Ofsted and operating well in their communities. Connors House is on track to open in August 2025. Connors House – and all other Reception Centres – will be funded by Central Government, not by KCC taxpayers or from KCC reserves.</p> <p>Stakeholder Meetings ahead of opening will be held quarterly – the first meeting was held in October; the second in January 2025 – after today's meeting, the next will be held in July 2025. Once the centre has opened, Stakeholder Meetings will move to monthly and will be handed over to the centre's Operations Manager to chair. This has worked well in other centres. Membership of the Stakeholder Meetings will also evolve over time and become more operational.</p> <p>Approx. 600 homes in the neighbouring areas received a letter regarding Connors House on 30 July 2024. This was the earliest date that KCC could share the information publicly. Following this, a further letter was sent to approx. 200 homes more closely located to Connors House, to provide an update specifically on the building schedule.</p> <p>At the last meeting held in January 2025, it was agreed to send a further letter to update them on progress of the building and remind residents of key information and points of contact for queries – this letter was delivered to residents on 24 February 2025. In April, residents in Craddock Road and Chaucer Road which border Connors House received further letters regarding specific works such as fence installation, UKPN upgrades and hedge trimming.</p> <p>KCC continues to operate a centralised mailbox and Frequently Asked Question (FAQ) site 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.</p>
Building Works
<p>A KCC representation shared a presentation, outlining the works started or completed to date for the total refurbishment and renovation, including new floors laid, etc. An application to UKPN for the meter to be upgraded has been submitted – it is in the hands of UKPN to respond to this request.</p> <p>A KCC representative shared that they recently visited the site and were very impressed with how well it has developed and how well the layout lends itself to work as a reception centre.</p>

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

A CCC Councillor representative confirmed that they would provide updates for their Councillor colleagues and reported that no concerns have been raised to her by residents so far.

A CCC Councillor representative shared that they are a trustee of KRAN and raised a query regarding part of the Illegal Migration Act 2023 which meant people who arrive via small boat do not have access to the process to become a citizen. A KCC representative commented that they would need to respond outside of the meeting to provide more detail, but it was understood the majority of the Illegal Migration Act 2023, including the ban on processing asylum claims, had been repealed by Central Government.

Reception Centres are temporary homes for children whilst they wait to be transferred to permanent placements in other local authorities via the NTS – through this, KCC is fulfilling its statutory responsibilities under the Children Act 1989, which is separate to immigration legislation and policy.

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. A KCC representative noted, there are still unaccompanied children arriving in Kent who need safe homes before they move elsewhere across the UK.

Management of The Centre

Connors House will be registered with Ofsted to provide temporary accommodation for a maximum of 44 children aged 16-17 years. 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 the use of Central Government incentivised funding to local authorities, average transfer took approx. 7 working days.

KCC works closely with the DfE and Home Office to drive the NTS and encourage local authorities to take children, resulting in a positive response from local authorities coming forward with placement offers in advance of their turn on the rota.

KCC expects to use Connors House 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 Connors House being busier during the spring/summer months.

Ofsted visited other Reception Centres, including during the registration and inspection period and their feedback has been positive. Connors House will be held to the same high standard as other reception centres.

KCC is keen to offer benefits to the local community through establishing Connors House as a Reception Centre, through being a local employer, and to support the integration of Connors House 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 Connors House with the community – following the meeting in January, KCC is linked in with colleagues at Canterbury City Council and the Kent Recruitment Bureau to help promote the adverts locally.

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 Connors House are very enthusiastic about supporting UAS children. Alongside this, KCC is working on mobilising catering, security, and cleaning services.

Stakeholder Questions

A KCC representative stated that the central Reception Centre Enquiries mailbox continues to run, so enquiries prior to the centre opening are responded to. Following the initial letter in July 2024, there have been 3 individual enquiries – these related to: removal of an oak tree; volunteer opportunities; and queries raised by a guardian at Connors House at the time.

Following the further letter to residents dated 24 February 2025, only 2 additional contacts were received regarding. One enquiry was a request for the footpath at Connors House to be jet-washed post-works (KCC has confirmed the pathway will be washed). The second contact was comments from a resident who stated: *I am glad that KCC is providing such accommodation to meet the needs of this vulnerable group. I am also pleased to see that support will be provided for them during this uncertain period of their lives. I hope that the local community will be supportive and understanding.*

All enquiries have received a timely response, with no further escalations of concerns at this time.

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. Attendees agreed that a further letter to residents would be helpful. KCC will contact members of the Stakeholder Group to confirm once the first children are accommodated at Connors House – a KCC representative noted that it is intended that Connor House (as with other new centres) will have a gradual, phased opening over a period of time.

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, members of the Stakeholder Meeting shared information regarding the historical context of the current name and, therefore, it is confirmed that KCC is not going to be changing the name.

A CCC Councillor representative commented on the significant military history in the local area, noting the MOD housing and volunteer force a short distance from Connors House, as well as WWII trenches in nearby woodlands. A KCC representative noted that Operations Managers in other centres have been able to build positive relationships with local community groups through the Stakeholder Forums and it may be that the Operations Manager for Connors House could make links with the MOD for some potential joint working opportunities. A KCC representative noted children are encouraged to celebrate their own heritage as well as learn about and connect with the local community

A Prevent representative commented that they have not seen any evidence of community tension in the local area as a result of the communication from KCC with residents and also shared that the Prevent team will deliver training sessions to new staff at Connors House as part of their induction training.