

The Limes Stakeholder Meeting with Political Representatives
Friday 9 February 2024 (12:00)
Microsoft Teams

Minutes

Present: Roger Gough (Leader of Kent County Council), Peter Oakford (Deputy Leader of Kent County Council and Deputy Cabinet Member for Finance, Corporate and Traded Services), Gareth Johnson (Member of Parliament for Dartford), Jeremy Kite (Leader of Dartford Borough Council), Penny Cole (KCC Member, Dartford East), Rosanna Currans (Dartford Borough Councillor, Brent Ward), Peter Whapshott (Dartford Borough Councillor, Brent Ward), Kent County Council and Dartford Borough Council Representatives.

Apologies: Sue Chandler (Cabinet Member for Integrated Children's Services)

Welcome and Introductions

Apologies from Sue Chandler.

Legal Context

Roger Gough outlined the High Court judgment last year which has meant that it is necessary for KCC to take every possible step to increase its capacity and adopt all legal means to avoid the future use of hotels. This means opening up as many reception centres as reasonably possible.

In January 2024 there were 159 UASC referrals, which is very high for the time of year. Only 56 of these were placed via the National Transfer Scheme (NTS), meaning Kent is taking the brunt of the pressure.

Communications

Roger Gough stated that a central email address and FAQ web page has been setup for the purpose of answering the questions of impacted residents and other stakeholders.

Building Works

Roger Gough stated that enabling works at the Limes started in December 2023 and that it is expected that the site will come into use from September 2024. Our legal advisers are currently preparing an amendment to the covenant on the building aligned to KCC intended use. Efforts have been made to minimise noise and disruption to local residents.

Management of the Centre

Roger Gough stated that the building will be registered with Ofsted and have staff and security on site 24/7. The expectation is that children and young people will only be housed here for short periods of time, with an aim of a maximum of 10 days under the NTS, albeit it is acknowledged that these timescales are not being met at present.

Further questions and discussions

Gareth Johnson stated that choosing The Limes was not a necessity and does not believe it to be a suitable location. Residents have expressed that communication has been poor, and that it made its way into the Dartford Messenger before any letters went to residents. This led to rumours and false information being spread. The plans for the site have not been shared with adjacent residents who are concerned about what different parts of the site will be used for. There is considerable anger from residents as a result. Gareth urged that better communication and engagement with residents throughout the process is needed.

Roger Gough confirmed that because the legal ruling stated that 'all possible steps' must be taken and all avenues considered, if a site such as The Limes was not considered, there is a risk that KCC could be seen as not complying with the court order by discarding a site which has the correct planning designation.

Gareth Johnson responded that had KCC engaged with him and Dartford Borough Council as soon as the court ruling was made, they may have been able to identify an alternative and more suitable site.

Roger Gough followed up to say that identifying an alternative site is unlikely to have resulted in KCC being able to discard using The Limes since as far as the court is concerned, it is a KCC owned vacant site that meets the requirements.

A KCC representative stated that KCC has responded to a number of enquiries that have come from residents in the area but is happy to explore ways in which communications can be improved as the works move forward.

Jeremy Kite stated that because there has no planning application, residents haven't been presented with the same level of information that they would for a new development. There has been an overall lack of engagement with stakeholders. Millbank has a capacity of 30, yet The Limes has been identified as having a capacity of 49 which is significantly higher. Where did this number come from? How is it possible that a covenant can be changed? Why was this not sufficient as a defence to the courts to not use the building?

Rosanna Currans stated that the previous site only had around 20 elderly residents. How is the capacity being increased without construction works to expand, which would surely require planning?

A KCC representative responded that the number of beds correlates to the number of room/ spaces in the facility, which is 49 bedrooms in total. There are also further communal areas. No further construction to expand the building is being carried out. All works and maintenance at the site are contained within the current footprint of the building. The covenant was known by the Home Office. Legal advice indicated early on that the covenant could be amended if needed so it would not be a defence to the court as a reason not to progress with The Limes.

A KCC representative clarified that Millbank has capacity for 50 children, not 30. The stakeholder meeting proposed for 22 February will include Kent Police, the local NHS, local schools, Dartford Borough Council officers, and the local Dartford councillors will also be invited to represent the voice of residents.

Roger Gough provided reassurances that Kent had experience opening sites in residential areas before and aimed to be as sensitive to residents concerns as possible.

Peter Oakford was involved in the opening of a former elderly care home in Folkestone in 2005. There was strong opposition from local residents at the time but once the facility opened, there wasn't a single complaint raised by local residents or schools. There was robust security in place to ensure nobody was getting onto the site who shouldn't be there.

Roger Gough stated that advice from Kent Police and within KCC had been given to limit open forms of consultation such as public meetings due to the risk of individual officers being targeted with abuse, particularly from far-right extremist groups, as has happened in the past.

A KCC representative stated that there is a risk of openly sharing detailed plans and schematics of the site. Jeremy Kite stated objection to this argument as it is important for adjacent residents to know what will be on the other side of their boundaries, such as a gathering area, music studio etc. Roger Gough recognised that residents have a legitimate interest in what different parts of the site will be used and will refer to colleagues within infrastructure as to whether any further details can be shared.

A KCC representative stated that the Secretary of State for Health has the discretion to change the covenant. This will be re-circulated to those who may have missed it in the previous circulation.

Gareth Johnson stated that Livingston Hospital shares boundaries with The Limes, and the hospital needs to know what the area nearest to their boundary will be used for, particularly if there is a risk of noise that could be disruptive to patients undergoing serious treatment.

A KCC representative stated that there will be a structured programme in place for residents throughout the week, similar to Millbank. This will include activities such as English language lessons. There will be times when the children can independently leave the centre for short periods of time, for example, to go to a local shop or park. It will only be allowed with the agreement of staff about where they will be and when they will return.

Rosanna Currans asked whether local councillors could come and visit the site. There are concerns about the windows for example, which could allow for residents to climb out at night.

It was confirmed that all windows will be fitted with restrictors. It was agreed that officers would seek to arrange for a small number of Councillors to visit Millbank and once the works on site are at an appropriate stage that Councillors would be invited to visit the Limes.

Jeremy Kite thanked everyone for their time but expressed desire that there is better communication and engagement going forward.

Roger Gough stated that he had taken all the feedback on board and will ensure steps are taken to improve communications between now and the site's opening. Thanked everyone for their time and a useful session.