

The Limes Stakeholder Meeting

Thursday, 22 February 2024, 11:30 am – 1:00 pm

MS Teams Meeting

Agencies and Services in Attendees
KCC, UAS Children's Service
KCC, Deputy Chief Executives Department
KCC, Prevent
KCC, Councillor
KCC, Public Health
DBC, Leader of Council and Councillors
DBC, Housing and Public Protection
Kent Police
Kent and Medway NHS
Dartford Primary Academy

Kent County Council (KCC) - Dartford Borough Council (DBC) - Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UAS Children)

Welcome and Introductions
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.
Legal Context
A KCC representative stated that KCC has undertaken the development of The Limes out of necessity to comply with the High Court ruling which made 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. The Limes – and all other Reception Centres – will be funded by Central Government, not from KCC resource.
A KCC representative noted the point regarding the 2 existing centres and stated that The Limes is one of a number of centres and provision that KCC are looking to bring online for UAS children, in order to comply with the High Court ruling and KCC is doing everything it can to meet these requirements.
A DBC Councillor representative raised a query in relation to the change of covenant for The Limes, questioning the legality of works proceeding. A KCC representative explained that no work undertaken to date is in breach of the existing covenant and KCC is working with NHS Property services to amend the covenant at The Limes for the intended purpose for accommodation for UAS Children. This is going through the change process – it was tested whether or not the covenant could be changed, and it was concluded that this could and therefore this is being taken through the relevant processes. The covenant amendments will be in place and fully ratified before the site becomes operational. It was clarified that nothing unlawful or which breaches the covenant in terms of work currently being undertaken at the site.
A DBC Councillor representative raised concerns that residents have not been informed on this issue. A KCC representative stated that questions raised by residents have been answered and noted the covenant is in the public domain and is going through the necessarily processes. The KCC representative offered to speak to the DBC Councillor representative about these concerns outside of the Stakeholder meeting.
There were no questions raised in relation to the legal context (high-court ruling).

Building Works

A KCC representative stated that refurbishment works at The Limes began in December 2023. The programme of works continues until an operational go-live timeframe of September 2024.

KCC representatives shared a presentation on-screen which detailed the designated spaces within The Limes, e.g. dedicated staff areas, communal areas, bedrooms, wet rooms and toilet facilities. There is a garden space, which is being tidied up. There are on-going discussions with contractors about retaining the car park. A new vehicle gate will be installed, managed by security personnel. A rear driveway with gate has been proposed for delivery and maintenance works use - i.e. not an area for children at the centre (with the exception of emergency exit area). It was explained that fencing towards the front is proposed to be moved back to provide more security to neighbouring residents. There will be push-bars on the gates for emergency exit routes, but these will be fitted with alerts to staff if the gates are opened.

The presentation provided a list of scheduled refurbishment works taking place over the coming months and JJ noted that there is consideration around how this is shared with local residents.

A DBC Councillor representative queried if there is potential for issues concerning noise, particularly in the garden area during the summer, when it could be expected that as many as 49 children are in the garden. A KCC representative explained that The Limes will be operated in a similar way to existing centres where there is an expectation around being respectful to neighbours. It was noted the space in the garden is limited. AS suggested that the levels of noise would not be dissimilar to break/lunch-time noise from schools.

In response to a Dartford Primary Academy representative, KCC confirmed that ages of children at The Limes will be 16-17 year olds.

In response to a Dartford Primary Academy representative, it was confirmed the existing fence lines and the new fence lines to be installed will act as the second-line fencing and that there will be (as with existing centres) 2 security personnel on site at all times; one monitoring CCTV; and one on patrol, managing the gates – it was confirmed that this would be subject to regular review and risk assessment. External CCTV will cover all areas and KCC has engaged with Kent Police on the design of security measures. KCC confirmed that the staffing ratios will be 1 member of staff to 6 children, during the day, and 1 member of staff to 10 children, during the night. Daytime hours are 8:00 am – 10:00 pm. Nighttime hours are 10:00 pm – 8:00 am. This ratio has been used successfully in existing centres for many years.

In response to a DBC representative, KCC confirmed there is no plan to extend buildings and that all works will be internal or external maintenance (roof work) – there will be no change to the external appearance. KCC confirmed it is using LABC Building Control and offered to share the Building Regulation Application.

In response to a DBC representative, a KCC representative confirmed there are on-going conversations with the Hospital regarding their own development plans, including easements and access to power which will need to come through The Limes. It was confirmed these developments would not impact residents, e.g. new access routes, etc.

Management of The Centre

A KCC representative confirmed that, alongside the schedule of refurbishment works, KCC is recruiting staff for all centres and working with professional partners to ensure that services that are needed are going into centres. As stated previously, there will be KCC staff and security staff on-site 24/7, all throughout the year. There will be no time where children will be on-site without staff.

A KCC representative stated that UAS children are looked after children, in the care of the Local Authority (LA). Therefore, the LA has the same responsibility to UAS children as it does to all looked after children. Reception Centres will be registered with Ofsted. The Limes, due to the age cohort, will be registered as supported accommodation. Therefore, it must operate to regulatory standards and be subject to regular inspections by Ofsted. The Limes will be managed in a similar way to existing centres, one of which is in a similar area to The Limes and is operating very well.

It was explained that it is expected that children at The Limes will be there for a short period of time – this is because they would be expected to transfer to another local authority (LA) via the National Transfer Scheme (NTS). The NTS allows LAs to transfer the responsibility and care of UAS children to other LAs and this is something that Kent has engaged in for years and will continue to do so. When a child first arrives in the UK, they are met by Social Workers who undertake an assessment of their risks and needs and, at the same time, refer them to the NTS.

There is a mandated timescale of 10 working days for NTS transfers to take place. Whilst not every child does transfer within this timeframe, many do, and every effort is made by all agencies involved to move children on swiftly and safely.

As they will be at the Reception Centres temporarily, the children are not enrolled at local education settings. Their education takes place on-site at the centre, as will the majority of the services and support they receive. Organised activities take place, with staff, outside of the centre and there is a structured programme of activities (both on-site and off-site). As with all children, KCC wants UAS children to be engaged and stimulated. Managers and staff are dedicated to ensuring their basic needs are met. Even though the children are with KCC temporarily, we want to ensure that they go onto their next LA in the best way possible and KCC has a duty to ensure this happens.

UAS children are extremely grateful for the accommodation and support they receive and are eager to learn and contribute and KCC is committed to support them.

A DBC Councillor representative queried that, given there is a recognised need for 24/7 security to be in place, why the NTS transfers have a 10 working day timeframe and why this could not happen sooner, i.e. 10 calendar days. A KCC representative clarified that the 24/7 security and staffing refers to how the centres operate and that the NTS transfer timeframe is stipulated by the Home Office in the national protocol.

In response to a DBC Councillor representative, a KCC representative advised that children at the Reception Centre are taken for activities such as bowling, swimming, sports, etc. With current centres, there are links with local schools where UAS children can go into the school, to meet pupils, which is a positive opportunity for children from different parts of the world to learn about each other's lives – it was noted the feedback from schools engaged in this offer has been highly positive.

A DBC Councillor representative queried information provided in one of the letters to local residents, which suggested there was a time during each evening where children were allowed to leave the centre, un-supervised, and would need to self-return. The letter suggests there are protocols in place to report children as missing if they have not return by 10:00 pm. A KCC representative stated that there are activities, organised and supervised by staff that take place in the evening – some off-site, some on-site. If a child leaves the centre independently in the evening, e.g. to go to the shop after dinner, this is always done in discussion and agreement with staff, including an agreed return time. This could be at different times of day, but children are asked to return by early evening. It was noted that staff are acutely aware of the particular vulnerabilities of UAS children.

A KCC representative explained at existing reception centres there are protocols to ensure staff know where children are and how to respond if a child did not return to the centre as agreed, which have worked well for many years and will be in place at The Limes. If, after taking all available steps, staff cannot locate a child, then they will contact Kent Police to report them missing. The reference to 10:00pm in the letter relates to the operating shifts of the centre, not a cut-off point for contacting Kent Police.

A Dartford Primary Academy representative raised safeguarding concerns about the potential for UAS children to be out in the community and choosing to congregate outside the primary school – and the potential for there to be contact/engagement between primary school children and UAS children through the school fence.

In response to the Dartford Primary Academy representative, a KCC representative queried what the perceived safeguarding risk from UAS children would be and commented that the Reception Centre is not a detention centre and noted that UAS children have a right to access the community off-site, as well as noting their vulnerabilities. The Dartford Primary Academy representative explained she is raising this in terms of understanding potential safeguarding risk, noting their significant proportion of vulnerable students – if there are UAS children congregating outside of the school, and they questioned how this would be dealt with.

A KCC representative suggested a meeting with Dartford Primary Academy outside of the Stakeholder meeting to discuss their concerns but confirmed that the school would be able to make contact with the Reception Centre if they had immediate concerns of this nature. It was noted that one of the existing centres is also in close proximity to a primary school but there has yet to be any situations where UAS children are gathering outside the school.

A Kent Police representative confirmed that they are working with KCC's UAS Children's Service regarding the protocols for any reports of missing children to ensure that these are dealt with in the most efficient way. The Kent Police representative has worked with the service for the existing centres to ensure these processes are in place and this has worked well. They also commented, in relation to the perceived safeguarding risks posed by UAS children in the community, that he agrees with the comments given by KCC representatives and reassured that there are communication lines in place between agencies to address concerns if they do arise – however, there is no expectation that there would be any up-turn in ASB or other crime in the community by UAS children. The Kent Police representative emphasised that UAS children are the most extremely vulnerable children in society.

A DBC Councillor representative also supported the comments made by KCC representatives and stated that it was important that the discussions around The Limes does not become flavoured with an inaccurate view of vulnerable children, deserving of care and support. The DBC Councillor representative suggested that some of this has been born out of the journey to date, with the meeting held on 9 February 2024 indicating various pieces of information, e.g. building plans, would not be able to be shared because concerns for the safety of UAS children. Thus, these same concerns are reflected in those times where they are un-supervised in the community in the evening.

A KCC representative queried if there were limitations in the information provided, in part, because the Home Office have not been able to be part of these meetings. Another KCC representative clarified that this is a local meeting to share information, answer questions from community representatives and partners, and discuss how the centre will operate in the community and noted also that there is still on-going litigation.

A KCC representative agreed with the concerns raised about the vulnerability of UAS children and stated that KCC is working hard with Prevent and Kent Police to mitigate risks and threats to them as much as possible. They also stated it is an ask of the Stakeholder Group, as local and service leaders, to influence the community and drive forward the messages discussed today so that all children can be kept safe.

A KCC representative stated that KCC is trying to be as transparent as possible. Whilst there is some information that cannot be shared, KCC want to support and equip community leaders to help lead the conversations. It was recognised that this meeting is the first conversation in this journey and KCC is committed to ensuring the centre works well in the community and to unlock barriers to this.

Stakeholder Questions

A DBC Councillor representative commented that residents are getting increasingly frustrated and disillusioned and stated that residents were told they would have meetings with relevant officers, but these have now become these Stakeholder Meetings and also stated there have been no minutes from the meeting held on 9 February 2024, which would allow Councillors to share them with residents.

A KCC representative clarified that KCC has said to residents that it would look to identify representatives for the community and partners to be part of a stakeholder meeting, where those representatives (such as the District Borough Councillors) are able to represent the concerns of residents. There was not an offer to hold a public meeting, and this has been determined based on advice from Kent Police. It was noted that the central mailbox has been set up to allow residents to contact the service with their concerns or enquiries and the majority have been responded to. However, where some enquiries have been sent in quick succession from individual residents, efforts are made to collate these into a fuller single response. The DBC Councillor representative stated that the 10 working days for a response from the central mailbox is not acceptable.

Several comments were made regarding the agreement that a public meeting would not be appropriate, though recognising that there needs to be a robust feedback loop to residents to keep them informed. The KCC Councillor representative stated that she remains willing to meeting with residents noted that this was discussed with the Cabinet Member for Integrated Children's Services but agreed that the advice from Kent Police should be followed. There were suggestions of alternative ways to hold meetings, but it was recognised that these have in other areas not resolved some of the significant concerns that led to Kent Police's advice.

The KCC Councillor representative also raised that many children from Leigh Academy walk past The Limes and suggested that security at The Limes should be made aware, where there could potential be some trouble between children. A KCC representative noted that representatives for Leigh Academy were invited to this meeting but were unable to attend but agreed that there would need to be on-going liaison with both schools.

In reference to the point raised about minutes, KCC reassured those present that there would be a record of today's meeting.

A KCC representative stated that there are packages of support that can be developed with stakeholders, as has been developed in Napier. There is learning to take from this.

A KCC representative recognised the comments raised by DBC Councillor representatives in terms of residents feeling like they are not being heard and assured that KCC is committed to working with the local community. The enquiries coming directly to the central mailbox are responded to in good time. Whilst it may not be possible to reach agreement on particular issues, KCC is still committed to ensuring there is a feedback loop. KCC representatives agreed to take away to consider how current updates can be shared with residents, including the schedule of works that was shared in the presentation to immediate residents.

A DBC Councillor representative suggested having something available online for residents to refer to for more information. A KCC representative advised there is already an FAQ site and there needs to be further consideration to adapted this so that it can contact more generic information that is relevant across all centres, and more specific information for particularly centres and communities.

A DBC Councillor representative stated that residents main concern has been the age of the children, with people feeling that 16/17 males are 'young men'. A KCC representative explained that, under UK law, 16/17 year olds are children and how the response to other centres, for children aged under 16, has still be negative. The KCC representative confirmed that engagement for The Limes has followed a similar pattern to the other centres: letters to residents, which are shared with the local MP, County Councillor(s), and District Councillors. In these letters, KCC advises it will convene a meeting of stakeholders, which includes community representatives.

A DBC Councillor representative asked if a visit for Councillors can be arranged to one of the existing centres and The Limes and asked for a copy of a list of activities that could also be shared with residents. A KCC representative advised that Councillors would be welcome to visit Millbank and there is on-going correspondence regarding an agreed date for this. Regarding a visit to The Limes, it was advised that this would take place closer to when the site will be operational to allow Councillors to see it in a more functional state. It was clarified that the visits would only be for Councillors, not residents. The KCC representative agreed that, as part of the visit to Millbank, they can be shown an example activity planner. AS stated that he needed to consider if and how the activity planner could be shared with residents.

A DBC Councillor representative requested that a copy of the building works schedule is shared and a KCC representative confirmed that KCC officers would consider how best to share this with residents and assured DBC Councillors that they would be included in any and all communication going to residents.

Whilst the DBC Councillor representatives agreed with the advice on not holding a public meeting, they felt that the main issue has been the lack of information – and with this, suggested that people are likely to fill in the gaps themselves. A DBC Councillor representative commented, in reference to the distribution of letters, that KCC had delivered 197 letters to houses near The Limes, which they then copied and delivered to 470 houses – they stated that it cannot be only those living closest to The Limes considered as most affected. A KCC representative acknowledged this point and recognised that it is difficult to get the right radius for distribution. It was noted that the first letter had been delivered at pace and was hand-delivered by a KCC officer; the second letter was delivered by courier to those properties in the immediate vicinity that would be more likely to see and hear what is going on at the site. The KCC representative stated that the distribution needs to be proportionate and this is why a central mailbox and FAQ webpage has been set up.

A DBC Councillor representative suggested incorporating stories from UAS children who have now reach adulthood to capture some of their own experiences, to help personalise the difference that the centres and services make to

them. A KCC representative agreed this is a valid point and some former Reception Centre residents have returned to the centres to talk to children about their experiences but also noted that it would need careful consideration around consent of individual and any concerns about publicising their identity.

A DBC Councillor representative asked if there would be something that could be shared with residents around the operational procedures, to give more understanding of how the centre operates. A KCC representative stated that moving forward and as the centre becomes operational, the intention is for the stakeholder meetings to be chaired by the centre's operations manager and include local professionals, partners and community leaders to maintain a feedback loop on how the centre is operating within the community. The meetings can also bring in new members, such as charities who can contribute to the services provided on site.

Agreed Actions

Ref.	Action
TL-001	KCC to consider communication to residents (including District Councillors) to cover updates on schedule of building works and other updates.
TL-002	KCC to consider how the FAQ site can be adapted to incorporate more site and community-specific information.
TL-003	KCC to consider if/how information such as the activity planner can be shared with residents.