

Aspen Lodge Stakeholder Meeting

Thursday, 6 February 2025, 2:00 pm – 3:30 pm

MS Teams Meeting

Service/Agency
KCC, UAS Children's Service
KCC, Deputy Chief Executives Department
Sholden Primary School
Deal Education Alliance for Learning Trust
Dover District Council
Deal Town Rangers

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
<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 the use of incentivised funding, average transfer took approx. 6 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>Stakeholder Meetings ahead of opening will be held quarterly – the first meeting was held in October; the next meetings will be held in April and 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. This has worked well in other centres. Membership of the Stakeholder Meetings will also evolve over time and become more operational.</p> <p>Approx. 500 homes in the neighbouring areas received a letter regarding Aspen Lodge in July 2024. A KCC representative commented that now 6 months on from this initial letter, it would be beneficial to write again to residents to provide further updates. It is expected a further letter will be sent out by end-February 2025.</p>

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 LAs 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.

NOTE: *At the first Stakeholder meeting held in October 2024, it was stated that Aspen Lodge would have a maximum capacity for 22 beds. However, following further progress on building works and surveys, this capacity has reduced to a maximum of 18 beds, as described above.*

Building Works

Aspen Lodge has existing C2 use and located close to local shops. The site has an existing courtyard area and parking. It is expected that building works will be completed July 2025.

A KCC representation shared a presentation, outlining the works completed to date, which includes: asbestos removal, demolition of rear conservatory due to condition and maintenance issues, commenced mechanical and electric work. Kent Fire and Rescue Service will carry out a visit during building works and then will conduct a formal inspection.

A KCC representative provided some further details on security measures, highlighting the following:

- Security personnel will be on-site 24/7
- Security will be present to protect against unauthorised access to the centre, not because of the children themselves
- Gates are located at site entrance, which are locked and managed by security personnel.
- Bedroom windows are fitted with restrictors for safety
- Windows overlooking other residences/neighbouring properties will be frosted or have a film installed over them to prevent visibility in/out of the centre.
- External CCTV covers the whole site – the only internal CCTV is at the entrance, monitored in the reception area.
- Exits have detection points.
- There is no sleep in shifts – overnight staff work waking shifts.
- External areas of the site have timer lights – these will turn off at a suitable time to avoid disturbance.

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. KCC is also happy to facilitate visits to existing centres, to provide a better idea of what the centres are like, ahead of Aspen Lodge opening.

Management of The Centre

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 has begun and will continue over the coming months. A KCC representative encouraged Stakeholders to share adverts for jobs at Aspen Lodge with the community.

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, Türkiye, Iraq, Sudan, Albania, Eritrea, Syria and Vietnam.

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.

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.

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.

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.

Where centres have outdoor space, this is utilised as much as possible. The focus is on giving children choice – the centre offers space where they can be alone and reflect, and also communal space where they can engage in activities together. Staff will also accompany children at off-site activities, e.g. swimming, rock climbing, etc.

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.

Children first go to Dover for immigration purposes. 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 very vulnerable, and it may be that a foster placement is more appropriate for them. Social Workers and staff at the Reception Centres are very aware of the risks of exploitation to UAS children and are trained in working with vulnerable children to keep them and the community safe.

Recruitment to existing centres has brought in many new members of staff, with a strong range of skills and experience. KCC also has staff who have been with the service for 10 years or more. Having a mixture of new and existing staff at the centres is positive. Aspen Lodge will have a Registered Manager, with experience of managing Children's Homes.

A Sholden Primary School representative confirmed that they had no concerns to raise and that staff on site have

been helpful and have communicated well with them – they also shared that their preliminary numbers for next year are looking good. A KCC representative commented that this is positive news, noting that, at another new centre located next to a primary school, some parents initially reported they would remove their children from the school due to its proximity to the reception centre – however, this did not materialise in any significant way. KCC representatives encouraged Sholden Primary School representatives to contact KCC should any issues or concerns arise.

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 (unsupervised). 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.

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.

Stakeholder Questions

A KCC representative stated that the central Reception Centre Enquiries mailbox continues to run, so that residents and member enquiries can be responded to. To date, there have been 15 individual enquiries regarding Aspen Lodge. The main themes of these enquiries include lack of consultation prior to purchase; disagreement with money being used for UAS children generally; concerns about UAS children in the community (safety and ASB worries); distribution of letters and proximity to the local Primary School; proximity to busy road (safety concerns). These themes are not dissimilar to those raised in relation to other centres.

The last enquiry relating to Aspen Lodge was received and responded to in October 2024. It was noted that the enquiries have been quiet for some time but that, as discussed, a further letter may help to remind people about the plans for Aspen Lodge and where they can go to raise concerns or queries.

A KCC representative explained that KCC's reception 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.

The KCC representative stated that, given the name Aspen Lodge already relates to a species of tree and noting that there may be some local/historical significance to the name, it was unlikely KCC will consider changing the name. A Dover District Council representative agreed to make some enquiries as to whether there is any local/historical significance to the current name.

A Deal Education Alliance for Learning Trust representative shared that a gentleman passing by Aspen Lodge asked him if teenage boys would be moving into Aspen Lodge and queried how ages would be verified. A KCC representative commented that this question has been raised before and is included in the FAQ webpage. 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.

A Dover District Council representative commented that she has been involved in the opening of Olea Grove (Children's Home for UAS children in Ash) in 2024 and reported that the home is working well and the community has been welcoming – it is hoped that this will be the same experience for Aspen Lodge. The Dover District Council representative also noted that, through their work (in the Asylum and Resettlement Team), they potentially have skilled and experience candidates who themselves have been granted asylum in the UK and could be a positive addition to the staff teams at Aspen Lodge.

A Deal Town Rangers representative commented that there are potentially some positive opportunities for children at Aspen Lodge to engage in 1-2 sessions per week and welcomed the opportunity to explore this further. A KCC representative agreed and noted that links with community activities and organisations will develop over time but that the centre will take a quiet and gradual approach to opening.