

Connors House Stakeholder Meeting
Thursday, 30 January 2025, 2:00 pm – 3:30 pm
MS Teams Meeting

Service/Agency
KCC, UAS Children’s Service
KCC, Deputy Chief Executives Department
CCC, Councillor
Canterbury City Council
Prince of Wales Youth Club
Canterbury Salvation Army

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>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>Connors House – and all other Reception Centres – will be funded by Central Government, not by KCC taxpayers or from KCC reserves. Connors House 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 Connors House 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 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.</p>

A subsequent letter was sent on 15 October 2024, to the nearest neighbouring areas (approx. 200 homes) regarding the schedule of building works expected to take place. A KCC representative suggested it would be timely to send another letter and asked the Stakeholder Meeting to consider this.

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.

Connors House 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.

Connors House will be registered with Ofsted to provide temporary accommodation for a maximum of 44 children aged 16-17 years. 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. Connors House will be registered with Ofsted to provide supported accommodation for a maximum of 44 children aged 16-17 years. As an Ofsted-registered accommodation, Connors House will be held to the same high standards as all supported accommodation across the UK.

A CCC Councillor representative commented that they were keen for the Salvation Army to be invited into this group because of their work on anti-trafficking and tackling modern slavery, etc – and suggested a public meeting with a focus on protection and tackling gangs/trafficking would be suitable. A KCC representative commented that, whilst KCC welcomes collaboration with other organisations and would be happy to work with the Salvation Army, the position on public meetings remains the same, particularly as this needs to be held consistently across all areas. However, the KCC representative welcomed the opportunity to meet with partners and stakeholders separately in person.

A CCC representative agreed with the comments around concerns of community tensions and noted that there needs to be an emphasis on reassurance and cohesion in the community, taking the children at Connors House on board and supporting the protection of them, particularly given their vulnerabilities. The CCC representative suggested that a further letter to residents could reinforce some of these messages to reassure them and to highlight the need to protect UAS children, without creating fear in the community.

A CCC Councillor representative agreed with this suggestion and noted that keeping local people informed and reassured is helpful and agreed with the position regarding not holding public meetings.

A KCC representative agreed with the suggestion of a further letter to residents, noting that it has been 6 months since the original letter and now timely to provide an update. The KCC representative also noted the context of the local area and the community potentially feeling 'done to' again – KCC is keen to offer benefits to the local community through establishing Connors House as a Reception Centre, through being a local employer.

Building Works

Connors House is located close to local shops and amenities and is on a bus route. It is expected that building works will be completed August 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, upgraded cabling in road, front fencing works, 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
- 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 Security will be present to protect against unauthorised access to the centre, not because of the children themselves and advised that KCC's experience of running existing reception centres has shown that UAS children present very minimal risk to local communities.

A CCC Councillor representative queried if the existing showers have been retained. A KCC representative stated that, across centres, if there are rooms with en suite bathrooms, effort is made to try to keep those. Some centres do not have any, some have them throughout. In centres with no en suite bathroom, there are shared (private cubicle) shower and toilet facilities.

A CCC Councillor representative queried what outdoor recreational space is available at Connors House, noting it's importance to provide an area for exercise/sport. A KCC representative confirmed that there is grass courtyard area. A KCC representative stated that, once the UAS Children's Service teams are on-site, they will be able to install equipment into the courtyard for children to use.

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

Regarding CCTV being in place at Ofsted-registered supported accommodation, a KCC representative noted that, wherever CCTV is used, KCC needs to be to be very clear on the rationale and extent of its use. CCTV footage at the centre would not be able to link elsewhere.

Regarding security and the emphasis on the opportunities for Connors House to be a local employer, a CCC Councillor recommended a local security firm. However, it was noted that such services/contracts would need to go through a fair and transparent process. A KCC representative stated that there will be opportunities to develop links with the local community and business as an employer and through supply chains – but this may take time to establish and will need to be considered within a balance of value for money and supporting local enterprise.

Management of The Centre

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.

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.

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 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.

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. A KCC representative noted that they would appreciate local knowledge from stakeholders regarding any local areas that we would not want any children to go, so that this can feed into the location assessment and orientation for children.

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. As stated before, 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.

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 Connors House.

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.

A Prince of Wales Youth Club representative queried what incidents have occurred and community tensions have been like for other centres. A KCC representative explained whilst there has been leafleting and peaceful protest as well as interest from wider far-right groups/commentators, other centres have opened peacefully and are operating well.

A KCC representative confirmed the other centres had not experienced any large scale or persistent unlawful behaviour, even through events of August 2024. Tensions continue to be closely monitored and managed well by KCC staff, Kent Police, and stakeholders.

A KCC representative confirmed that, as part of the Ofsted registration, a location assessment is required which includes input from partners, etc and considers concerns within the local area, including any evidence of potential community tensions.

A CCC Councillor representative commented that there is a good team representing Barton ward and noted a specific resident's association, who they will speak to. They commented that regular communication with the community is important.

A KCC representative acknowledged the potential concerns from communities, particularly in the context of other public services being cut. However, they noted the emphasis from the High Court ruling, which made it clear that it was not right for children to be put into hotels, that KCC has a statutory responsibility under the Children Act 1989 to care for all UAS children and that there needed to be a national response – Central Government has funded the response to this, including KCC's receptions centres.

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 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.

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 Connors House and where they can go to raise concerns or queries.

A KCC representative asked for stakeholders' guidance on the significance of Connor's House's name. because other centres are named after trees, which symbolise the service's ethos of protection and connection, and either grew in the children's home-countries or grew on site.

A CCC Councillor representative confirmed that the building was named after a WWII RAF veteran, Stanely Connors. It was highlighted that the area has a strong historical connection as a military area. A KCC representative acknowledged the information and how KCC would not want to change the name given its significance., A KCC representative suggested there may also be an opportunity to install a plaque (or similar) to further ensure the recognition of Stanley Connors.