

## Connors House Stakeholder Meeting

Tuesday, 22 October 2024, 9:30 am – 11:00 am

### MS Teams Meeting

Agencies and Services in Attendees
KCC, UAS Children's Service
KCC, Deputy Chief Executives Department
KCC, Councillor
KCC, Prevent
Kent Police
Canterbury City Council
CCC, Councillor

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 (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. On 15 October 2024, KCC representatives attended a CCC meeting to discuss Connors House.
Legal Context
<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>Referral to KCC for arrivals of UAS children will escalate as the weather improves throughout the year, and so KCC must work at pace to bring new accommodation into operation. KCC's statutory responsibilities under the Children Act 1989 to care for UAS children are clear – however, it has been recognised that this cannot fall to Kent alone and requires a national response including, sufficient funding from central government and an effective National Transfer Scheme (NTS). The High Court ruling stated that KCC and the Home Office must work together to ensure that KCC has the resources required to meet its statutory responsibilities. The Reception Centres and services for UAS children are funded directly by central government and not KCC or Kent taxpayers.</p> <p>A KCC representative confirmed that Connors House will provide accommodation to 16–17-year-olds as an Ofsted-registered Supported Accommodation. As an Ofsted-registered provision, it will need to meet the regulation standards and be subject to regular inspections. 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 – however, some transfers take less days and some take longer. KCC remains committed to moving children swiftly and safely to their more permanent homes across the UK.</p> <p>Connors House – and all other Reception Centres – will be funded by Central Government, not by KCC tax payers or from KCC reserves.</p> <p>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>It was explained that public meetings will not be taking place, as per advice given by Kent Police around safety concerns. 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. A centralised mailbox and Frequently Asked Question (FAQ) site have been set up to allow enquiries</p>

from members of the public to be answered in a timely way.

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. 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. It is anticipated that the building will be ready May/June 2025, however, this may be subject to change. As the building becomes ready to open, the membership and frequency of the Stakeholder Meetings will change so that these may have a more operational focus.

This first Stakeholder Meeting for Connors House has a focus on briefing our statutory partners, local schools, and councillors. Over time, KCC will look to link in with wider community contacts and bring them into the membership.

Alongside letters and Stakeholder Meetings, KCC has a webpage of information and maintains a central enquiries mailbox. The webpage contains FAQs, published letters to residents and minutes of Stakeholder Meetings. The enquiries mailbox is in place to receive and respond to enquiries across all new opening centres – once centres open, enquiries and concerns can be raised directly with centres (via email or telephone).

A CCC Councillor representative confirmed that they provided some contacts for organisations who would like to be involved. They commented that Canterbury is an inclusive city and there is already a good relationship with VCS, including KRAN. A KCC representative agreed and noted that engagement at this early stage has been positive.

Reception Centres are temporary homes for children whilst they wait to be transferred to permanent placements in other LAs via the NTS (as described above). 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 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. It was confirmed that KCC has a total of 9 sites – 3 will be/are registered as Children's Homes (1 is not due to open until Spring 2025), and the rest are Supported Accommodation. Children's Homes have smaller capacity, so larger buildings are more suited for Supported Accommodation.

In response to a CCC Councillor representative, a KCC representative clarified that the term 'temporary' is in reference to the length of stay for children, not the length of time the building is intended to be used as a Reception Centre – it is expected that the Reception Centre will be required for several years, based on information available.

In response to a CCC Councillor representative, a KCC representative confirmed the majority of UAS children are male. However, there are small numbers of female UAS children, and they are usually placed in foster care or, for those 16/17 years old, through independent providers of supported accommodation. However, if there were larger numbers of female arrivals, KCC would need to consider options within its accommodation – any changes in this regard would be communicated with stakeholders. A KCC representative confirmed that independent provider accommodation for girls is also funded directly by Central Government – all accommodation (internal and external), staffing (including social workers) for UAS children is funded by Central Government directly.

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.

A KCC Councillor representative queried what the long-term plans are for the building. A KCC representative stated

that it is difficult to provide a definitive answer to this as there would need to be a significant reduction in demand for KCC to need to reconsider the use of Reception Centre building. If reconsideration is needed, stakeholders (including Councillors and CCC) will be involved.

### **Building Works**

A KCC representative confirmed that building works started at Connors House on 14 October 2024, with surveys currently being undertaken. The building requires a total refurbishment and will follow a similar format to other Reception Centres, including similar furniture, etc. The Home Office have provided positive feedback on KCC's existing refurbished centres. Within the building, there will be office space, communal spaces for children and staff, as well as bedrooms. The centre operates with staff on site 24/7.

Expected completion date for the building works is end-of-June 2025, but this could change pending results of surveys, etc. One resident reported concerns regarding a tree. A tree survey is being undertaken.

In future Stakeholder Meetings, KCC will be able to present before and after photos so that stakeholders are able to see the progress of works. In response to a CCC Councillor representative, a KCC representative confirmed that the courtyard garden area will be retained.

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.

### **Management of The Centre**

As with all Reception Centres, Connors House will have dedicated KCC staff and security on site 24/7, 365 days a year – there will be no point when children will be unsupervised at the home. Security will be present to protect against unauthorised access to the centre, not because of the children themselves. A dynamic risk assessment is in place with Kent Police and Prevent, to ensure security levels are appropriate.

Children may arrive at any time of the day/night and processes are in place to receive and orientate them to the centre and community. 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. Social Workers will visit children at the centre.

UAS children are separated from family and have experienced an extremely challenging journey to get to the UK. 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.

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. KCC works closely with Kent Police and Community Safety to be part of 'community meetings' (meetings within the centre between staff, partners and children – particularly to help establish positive and trusting relationships with the Police).

The education programme is supplemented by activities such as arts, music, sports, etc and this is where the links with the community and local organisations is important.

There have been concerns where some Reception Centres are located close to schools. There is very little interaction with children at the Reception Centre and those in the school(s). Stakeholder engagement and meetings include the schools, to keep them informed and to ensure there is good communication with the service.

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. A KCC representative also noted that work is being undertaken with Kent and Medway NHS and NHS England to improve the process of registration and reduce the impact of this on GP surgeries. 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. This question has been raised previously and is included in the FAQs published.

A CCC Councillor representative highlighted contact details provided for the Prince of Wales Youth Club and also recommended contacting Kent County Cricket. A KCC representative confirmed receipt of the contact details for the Youth Club and confirmed they have already been in contact with Kent County Cricket through their work with existing centres and will be looking to replicate this offer elsewhere for other centres.

A CCC Councillor representative shared that concerns had been raised regarding the Reception Centre's proximity to the local children's play area (and residents had suggested KCC installing and monitoring CCTV) and also in relation to potential gang activity due to UAS children's vulnerability/risk of exploitation.

A KCC representative explained that children arriving to the Reception Centres are given a full orientation to show them what is on offer in the local community. This would cover what facilities are age-appropriate for them, which would not typically include a playground which is likely to be more suited for younger children. KCC focuses on delivering a structure programme of activities so that they are occupied and stimulated through a variety of activities. As part of the programme, staff take children to off-site activities, as well as utilising the outdoor recreation space at the centre.

KCC is aware and mindful of the vulnerability risk of exploitation, missing and trafficking. The first 48 hours from arrival at Dover are when children are particularly vulnerable. Children first go to Kent Intake Unit (KIU) at Dover (Home Office Immigration facility). KCC Social Workers are based at KIU. Social Workers meet with children 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. 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.

Social Workers work to understand the child's journey, reasons for their arrival in the UK, etc. Social Workers gather the child's phone number and IMEI number (to trace phones). Sometimes, there is a joint visit between a Social Worker and Kent Police. In the event of heightened concerns, KCC will pre-emptively report concerns to Missing and Child Exploitation Team (MCET) with details of the child, including photo, phone number, etc – this so that, if the child does go missing, MCET already have the information available to them.

Some children who go missing are found quickly and some may go to extended family members in the UK, who they perhaps did not disclose to professionals at the time – KCC then works with the family and Local Authority (if outside of Kent) to reunite children with their family members.

Therefore, KCC and partners already have established processes and practice to identify and respond to the safety needs of UAS children. External CCTV is installed at the Reception Centres to ensure the safety of UAS children.

In response to a CCC Councillor representative, a KCC representative clarified that the assessment by Social Workers starts at KIU before a child is placed at a Reception Centre – but this assessment and the plan for the child continues – the child's allocated Social Worker and staff at the Reception Centre are involved in the continued assessment and planning for children after they have left KIU.

A KCC representative confirmed that staff at Reception Centres operate within 3 shifts with overlaps (morning into afternoon, afternoon into night, night into morning). Reception Centres operate with a 1:6 ratio of staff to young people during the day, and 1:10 overnight. These ratios have been used in operation at existing centres since 2008. At least one manager is on shift at all times.

A Prevent representative confirmed that they work closely with the UAS Children's Service and deliver training to staff. In reference to CCTV, they commented that it is important to be proportionate to ensure the UAS children are

treated as citizen children are in this regard. Issues of trafficking are dealt with by a partnership of teams, similarly to county lines, etc. 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, e.g. areas we would not want children to go to, etc. The location assessment directly informs the orientation given to children.

A KCC representative confirmed that there would not be large vehicles of children and that they could arrive any time of the day, due to the nature of their arrival to the UK. A framework of operators is in place to transport children from Dover to reception centres, similar to that used for home to school transport. Sometimes, it may be individual children being transported, but it can also sometimes be a group of 3-4. KCC will make every effort to avoid busy traffic periods, such as the school run.

In response to a CCC Councillor representative, a KCC representative confirmed that KCC uses a range of interpreter resources, including having interpreters join meetings/discussions via phone, interpreters joining meetings in-person (including for statutory meetings with social workers, and community meetings), and having translated written materials. For the weekly community meetings with children at the centres, interpreters for all languages required attend in-person. Officer don't rely on one method to access interpreters or to communicate to children, so will utilise the available resources and services depending on what is required.

A KCC representative explained, in terms of staffing, all managerial staff are employed permanently with KCC. The rest of the staffing within the Reception Centre is 50% agency, and 50% permanent. As the occupancy rate may change throughout the year, the staffing levels within the centre can flex up and down. KCC has been recruiting to the centres since January 2024 and will be advertising for Connors House soon – KCC is keen to be a local employer for the community.

A KCC Councillor representative raised concerns regarding staff feeling safe to leave site. A KCC representative encouraged the Councillor to share details so that this can be looked into further and commented that all centres have a security considerations assessment taken from the National Protective Security Authority and staff are briefed on the security arrangements at the centres, including ensuring safe arrival and departure from work. In the first instance, staff should share any concerns about their safety with their line manager.

In terms of wider public engagement, a KCC representative stated that, where public meetings have taken place, there have been instances of specific officers being targeted with abuse and threats made against them and their families, resulting in police intervention. Therefore, public meetings (online or in person) are advised against. However, KCC is keen to find other ways to reach residents. Work is being done to look into producing short videos, to help communicate key messages and share these videos with stakeholders (as well as publishing online). In some cases, letters have been translated into other languages and provided to stakeholders to make available in public spaces.

A KCC Councillor representative raised concerns that local councillors were being threatened and receiving criticism in relation to Connors House. A CCC Councillor representative suggested that this can be raised through the existing mechanism, i.e. safety partnership forum. A KCC representative confirmed that they are keen to support local councillors with managing the messages and communication with residents but cannot offer public meetings.

A KCC Councillor representative commented that they were aware of a community group being convened – a Prevent representative requested further details about this. A CCC Councillor representative commented that they were aware of a resident group in the nearby block of flats, but this was in relation to the management of their block of flats, not Connors House.

A CCC Councillor commented that the information provided in the meeting has been helpful and noted that they are able to signpost residents to the FAQs and enquiries email address. A CCC representative noted that part of the role of Councillors is to provide public reassurance and challenge misinformation and commented that this is about supporting very vulnerable and traumatised children in the best way we can. The CCC representative also agreed with including this on the Community Safety Partnership forum if there are concerns that need to be discussed.

A KCC representative thanked stakeholders for their questions and discussions and closed the meeting by sharing

feedback from the UN Refugee Agency, who visited KCC's existing Reception Centre in Ashford in May 2024 – they said: *“Evident from our visit that the centre is being run to a very high standard with professional and dedicated staff. The general atmosphere of the centre was warm and welcoming, and it was clear the children felt safe and well cared for. We noted there was a wide range of activities for the children, with a focus on learning skills to transition into the community. They were afforded with freedom of movement both in the centre and community...which is likely to have many positive impacts on their mental wellbeing”.*

**Stakeholder Questions**

Covered in earlier discussions within the meeting.