

Cypress House (formerly Edward Moore) Stakeholder Meeting

Thursday, 22 August 2024, 2:00 pm – 3:30 pm

MS Teams Meeting

Agencies and Services in Attendees
KCC, Children, Young People and Education
KCC, UAS Children's Service
KCC, Deputy Chief Executives Department
KCC, Councillor
KCC, Prevent
Kent Police
Gravesham Borough Council
GBC, Councillor
Kent Equality Cohesion Council
Gravesend St George's Church
Guru Nanak Darbar Gurdwara
Altheia Academies Trust (Holy Trinity Primary School)
Bevan Brittan LLP

Kent County Council (KCC) – Gravesham Borough Council (GBC) - Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UAS Children)

Welcome and Introductions
<p>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.</p> <p>A KCC representative advised that the names of Reception Centres have been changed to better reflect their purpose as temporary homes for unaccompanied children arriving across the world. The centres will be named after trees, which symbolise protection and connection across history and cultures. The centres are named after particular trees from the home-countries of UAS children. For Edward Moore, this will now be known as Cypress House. The Cypress Tree is a long-living evergreen tree and is the national tree of Iran.</p>
Overview
<p>For new and existing attendees, a KCC representative provided an overview of key information. KCC must comply with the High Court ruling to look after all UAS children arriving to Kent. KCC's existing accommodation is not sufficient, even though the majority of children move on to the care of other local authorities. New accommodation and services to UAS children are funded by central government, not through KCC reserves or Kent taxpayers.</p> <p>It is regrettable that KCC had not been able to share plans for Reception Centres ahead of time – this was due to the necessity to comply with the urgency of the court ruling, and the need to identify suitable accommodation for children who continue to arrive to Kent at pace, which meant that it has not been possible for KCC to consult with residents in ways it might normally, and would prefer to do.</p> <p>Generally, 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. A KCC representative advised that its experience of running its two existing reception centres has shown that these children present very minimal risk to local communities.</p>

Cypress House will be registered with Ofsted to provide supported accommodation for a maximum of 36 children aged 16-17-years-old. When KCC originally wrote to residents about Cypress House, it was stated that KCC's intention was to register the centre as a Children's Home for under-16s. However, when KCC wrote to residents on 18 July 2024, it was confirmed that KCC must now register the centre as Supported Accommodation for 16-17-year-olds. This was due to the withdrawn sale of another property and other sites elsewhere being more suitable as Children's Homes.

The centre 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.

Reception Centres are a temporary home for children as almost all UAS children who come into Kent are referred on the Home Office's National Transfer Scheme (NTS), which has a mandated timeframe for NTS moves to take place within 10 working days. Some may move earlier than 10 days, other may move a few days later. As this is a temporary home, UAS children are not enrolled into local schools and their education takes place largely on-site, with some supervised education and activities in the community. This will include English language lessons and guidance on English law and society, giving children the best and earliest opportunity to contribute towards their community, wherever that may be in the UK.

Children at Cypress House will be able to leave the centre independently and unsupervised for short periods of time – this takes place with the agreement of staff and understanding of where they will be and what time they will return. A child's age and circumstances will be taken into consideration in agreeing this.

KCC is mindful of the vulnerability of UAS children and the risk of them being exploited or to go missing. Robust protocols are in place if children do not return home at the agreed time – staff take all possible steps to locate them and, if required, will contact Kent Police for assistance. These protocols have been in place in our existing centres and work well – these protocols will be mirrored in Cypress House and all new centres.

Before children arrive at Cypress House, they will be met with by experienced social workers who assesses the risks described, to inform the plans around them once they are in the home. Staff at the Reception Centre and the children's allocated social workers are experienced in working with vulnerable children and responsible for implementing plans to keep children safe at the centre and in the local community.

A Guru Nanak Darbar Gurdwara representative queried what measures KCC would take to locate missing children. A KCC representative confirmed that, before a child leaves the Reception Centre, staff would confirm with them where they are going, who they a meeting with, etc – this will be the first place to look and people to ask. Some children have phones, others do not – if they have phones, staff will ring them. Social Workers meeting with children before they are placed in a Reception Centre 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). If all other methods to find the child are not successful, staff will contact Kent Police to report them as a missing child.

A GBC representative asked what partners have been engaged, particularly in terms of local services in the community. A KCC representative confirmed that, since the last meeting, KCC has met with Dartford and Gravesham Muslim Association and Kent Equality Cohesion Council to explore religious and cultural support for children. KCC is working with charity Safer Kent to explore possibility of existing or new programs being available to children at Cypress House. KCC has also spoken with Aletheia Academies Trust about possible opportunities to work together. It was noted that the GBC representative provided links and contact to other local organisations and services, which will be taken forward by the Service Manager and Operations Manager.

A GBC representative asked how often children stay in Kent beyond the 10 working days for NTS moves and how long delayed moves could potentially be. A KCC representative confirmed that some children move on the NTS very quickly e.g. 2 working days, other children may move after the 10 working days e.g. day 11 or 15 for different reasons. However, the experience over the summer period has been positive, bringing the overall average to 11 working days KCC's commitment is for children to move safely and timely. It is anticipated that the majority of children will be in Kent for 2 weeks.

In response to a GBC Councillor representative, a KCC representative confirmed that the notes of the Stakeholder Meeting will be circulated to attendees for agreement before being published on Kent.gov.uk

A GBC Councillor representative raised concerns about how quickly children will transfer from Kent to other Local Authorities and whether this short time provides them the opportunities to settle. A KCC representative confirmed social workers meeting with children upon arrival to Kent explain how Cypress House is a temporary home until children move to their permanent Local Authority. Whilst the children at Cypress House will change, with children leaving on the NTS and new children arriving, social workers and staff are experienced in supporting children with these changes.

A Guru Nanak Darbar Gurdwara representative queried the length of stay expected, as several timeframes have been mentioned in the meeting, and also asked if the Gurdwara would be able to be involved in the induction for children at Cypress House, particularly to ensure understanding of rules in relation to the Gurdwara.

A KCC representative confirmed that the current average of 11 working days is from a data ranging across several years. This year, the government's incentivised funding for transfers to take place in a timelier way and within 2 working days has seen some impact. As it stands, most are moving within the 10 working days. Transfers may not happen within this timeframe for a number of reasons, e.g. the recipient Local Authority is identifying a placement, or Social Workers are doing work to identify UK-based family members who may be able to care for the child.

A KCC representative confirmed that the Gurdwara would be welcome to be involved in the orientation and support to children at Cypress House. The Gurdwara (and other local organisations and contacts) will be introduced to the Reception Centre Operations Manager once they are in post, and they will be able to take forward what stakeholders can input into the orientation and activities for children.

In response to a question around a confirmed opening date for Cypress House, a KCC representative advised that this would be determined by the building schedule, which is subject to change. The building is expected to be ready end-September to early-October – this does not mean that children will be placed in Cypress House from this point, but the building will be handed over to Reception Centre staff about 1 week before children will be able to be placed there. This will be dependent on arrivals and, given the local and national tensions, KCC cannot publicly announce any specific date for children to start arriving to Cypress House. Once children are placed at Cypress House, KCC will communicate this to Stakeholders.

A Guru Nanak Darbar Gurdwara representative noted the recent far-right protests and disorder, stating that the Gurdwara are concerned that they may be a potential target, and queried what additional measures KCC is taking. A KCC representative confirmed that none of KCC's Reception Centres received direct specific threats during the recent disorder. However, before the events in August 2024, KCC undertook work with Kent Police and Prevent to monitor activity of certain groups, so that it could implement preventative measures. A dynamic risk assessment is in place with Kent Police and Prevent and, during the recent disorder, identified the need to increase on-site security and implement enhanced patrols by Kent Police.

A KCC representative confirmed that there is a weekly meeting with the Home Office and KCC, to monitor and highlight any protest activity coming forward – as soon as protest activity was identified to be coming to the Kent area, security was raised at all sites (including those in construction phase), and lockdown procedures were practiced. No direct threats were received by any of Kent's Reception Centres.

A Guru Nanak Darbar Gurdwara representative raised that they had applied for support from the Home Office as a place of worship and were provided with 2 security officers for 4 weeks. The Gurdwara sees the potential risk of threat as on-going beyond 4 weeks and increasing over time – support from KCC to their requests to the Home Office to extend this security support was requested.

A KCC representative noted that Kent Police also have a role in communicating with local organisations and residents any concerns about places considered vulnerable and explaining the mitigations. A Kent Police representative confirmed that they would share this information and that patrols would continue and increase around the opening time of Cypress House.

A KCC Councillor representative queried if there has been any work to calculate the expected vehicle movements for children arriving/leaving, given the location in a residential area, and also queried what vehicles would be used for transporting 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. All children must go to the Kent Intake Unit in Dover when they arrive and will be met with by Social Workers based there, alongside Immigration colleagues, to assess their risks. Due to the whole number of arrivals, it is not possible for Social Workers to transport all children themselves – therefore a framework of operators is in place to transport children from Dover to reception centres, similar to that used for home to school transport.

A KCC representative confirmed that staff at Cypress House work 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. Large numbers of arrivals to Cypress House are not anticipated – so, other than staff arriving/leaving work at the times of their shifts, it is not anticipated there will be high-levels of traffic in/out of Cypress House.

A KCC Councillor representative queried if the NTS is mandatory and also asked how many UAS children go missing and are not found. A KCC representative confirmed that the NTS has been mandatory since December 2021 and is a central government operated. In terms of children going missing, KCC is mindful that newly arriving children are vulnerable to going missing and therefore social workers meet with newly arriving children to assess their needs and risks, including trafficking and exploitation. Social workers and staff at reception centres are trained and experienced in working with vulnerable children and are responsible for implementing plans to keep children safe and manage the risk of them going missing. If a child does go missing, the centres use established protocols to locate them and if children cannot be located by centre staff KCC works with = with Kent Police to locate them. Sometimes, children are located as they present to another Local Authority, which can be for different reasons, and often that Local Authority will take responsibility of them under the NTS.

Building Works

A KCC representative shared photographs of the works taken place at Cypress House, which are due to late-September/early-October. Works have included: electrical installations; new heating system installation; internal walls. Ceilings, lighting and showers to be installed soon. Communal areas are available in each section of the building. The generator has been removed, as gas and electric are now available on-site.

As stated earlier, handover to the Reception Centre staff is due by early-October – this is usually followed by 1-week to 10-days of staff getting familiarised with the building, with contractors on-site to support the teams. This 'soft landing' handover has worked well with other sites. Security remains on-site and, once handed over, the security firm will change from contractor security to service security.

A KCC representative stated that, ahead of the centre fully opening for children to arrive, stakeholders will be invited to tour Cypress House, to give them the opportunity to meet staff and view the facilities. The visit would likely take place at the start of October – an invite will be sent in due course.

Management of The Centre

A KCC representative stated that Cypress House has an appointed Operations Manager, who is responsible for the day-to-day running of the centre. There are Reception Centre Managers for day and night, so there will always be a manager on site, as well as staff teams of Centre Workers working directly with children. KCC's application to register Cypress House with Ofsted is progressing as planned.

Staff are very keen to start working with children and will start their inductions before the centre opens. Whilst recruitment has been successful, there are still some vacancies which are being advertised – details of these will be shared with stakeholders, as Cypress House serves as a good local employer for the community.

Ahead of opening, KCC will be working through its mobilisation period to get security arrangements, catering, and cleaners in place.

A KCC representative also noted that Ofsted had visited existing Reception Centres in May, to view the work being undertaken to bring those to the same standards and had spoken very positively about KCC's work in that regard.

A KCC representative noted that the UN Refugee Agency visited KCC's existing Reception Centre in Ashford in May and stated: *"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"*.

A Kent Equality Cohesion Council representative commented that certainties cannot be provided to everyone on every issue and things will develop over time. They stated that Gravesham prides itself on being welcoming and hopes that community will offer additional support. It is positive to note that there is an opportunity for creating local jobs. They stated that, in light of the recent riots in the UK, we are living in a world where misinformation spreads quickly and that all of the members of the Stakeholder Group need to demonstrate a show of leadership to not let divides in the community occur.

A Kent Equality Cohesion Council representative stated that Gravesham is a welcoming borough and make it a positive experience for the UAS children at Cypress House. They stated that the UAS children are not in detention and will go out into the community, as other children do, and should not be demonised – they noted that some will have come from difficult backgrounds and had challenging journeys to the UK. Whatever the period of time they are in Cypress House for, stakeholders should work with the service to ensure this is a positive experience. A KCC representative thanked the Kent Equality Cohesion Council representative for their comments and agreed that they looked forward to continuing to work with them and other colleagues.

A GBC Councillor representative stated that Gravesham's strength is the richness of its diverse community and emphasised the importance of keeping the chair of the Dartford and Gravesend Muslim Association engaged and informed. A KCC representative agreed and noted that KCC colleagues will continue to engage with stakeholders in the community.

A KCC representative commented on the recent situation and challenging overall numbers of UAS children and adults, noting that Gravesham has consistently been one of the most popular boroughs for children to stay and in, which is in recognition of its inclusive and diverse nature. They thanked colleagues for their efforts to make Gravesham a welcoming place for UAS children. A GBC Councillor agreement with the comments made and stated that Gravesham's strength is its diversity.

A KCC representative emphasised the importance of Cypress House being a local employer, providing resources into the community. A Kent Equality Cohesion Council representative agreed and stated that there is an opportunity for the Reception Centre to utilise and support local business, e.g. shops for halal meat, etc and stated that, in the context of national and local negativity, there is a duty to also promote the positives to the community.

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 18 individual enquiries regarding Cypress House, most directly from residents. The main themes of these enquiries include lack of consultation prior to purchase; disagreement with money being used for UAS children generally; complaints of noise from the building – e.g. security dogs, generator, etc; ages of children; impact on community services; and proximity to the local Primary School. All enquiries have been responded to. Stakeholders are encouraged to promote the use of the FAQ webpage and central mailbox.

As the centre opens, KCC will transition from the centralised mailbox to residents being able to contact the Reception Centre directly and speak to the management team. There will be a contact number and email address for Cypress House.

A KCC representative confirmed that the 18 enquiries have mostly be individuals contacting the service directly, or via the previous MP.

A Guru Nanak Darbar Gurdwara representative noted that it had previously been raised that KCC is not holding

public meetings, however, they are in contact with a resident who has re-raised this request to meet with KCC representatives directly. They raised that some residents do not want to use the mailbox or are not computer literate. It was noted that KCC had provided translated versions of the letters to residents.

A KCC representative confirmed that KCC's position to not hold public meetings remains the same, but 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) Regarding the translated letters, these were shared with the Gurdwara to confirm the translations were accurate and clear (where some words may not exactly translate).

A Guru Nanak Darbar Gurdwara representative clarified that the earlier points raised about length of stay were to understand how the Gurdwara can help to make their stay a positive experience, i.e. this will look different if a child is there 3-4 days compared with 10+ days. The Gurdwara is welcoming, but also needs to try to ensure that conflict within the community does not arise. A KCC representative noted the comments and stated that, when a child is first placed at Cypress House, the service may not know with any certainty how long a child will be staying there so children's orientation and support is focus from the very beginning and throughout their stay. KCC welcomes the request for the Gurdwara to be involved in the orientation.

A KCC Councillor representative raised that residents had directed questions to them about where the funding to purchase Cypress House came from. A KCC representative confirmed that the funding for the purchase of buildings and the UAS Children's Service is wholly funded by central government, not public money or Kent taxpayers. The funding had been agreed under the old administration and honoured under the new administration. The High-Court ruling is clear about Kent's responsibilities under Section 20 of the Children Act for any child without an adult who is able or willing to look after them. A KCC Councillor representative stated there are challenged with misinformation circulating and Councillors are sharing the messages that have been made publicly available. A KCC representative suggested potentially submitting a County Council question this matter (if window is open), so that a further response to this can be provided.

In reference to the points raised about public meetings, a KCC representative noted the duty of care to staff and recognised past experiences that have shown public meetings to be potentially dangerous. Instead, KCC has engaged stakeholders and community leaders directly.

A Gravesend St George's Church representative asked how Holy Trinity Primary School has been consulted (and parents of students). An Altheia Academies Trust representative confirmed that engagement is being maintained at a Trust level and conversations have taken place with KCC to explore what the Altheia Academies Trust can do to support the settlement of children. Other issues relating to the day-to-day management of the Centre have been discussed, e.g. no extra traffic during school drop off/pick up times. Altheia Academies Trust may write to parents in due could, however, information has been provided by KCC, which the Trust and School will refer people to.

A KCC representative confirmed that, prior to the letters to residents, KCC engaged with schools, recognising their role as leaders in their community. In reference to the points about transport/traffic, it was noted that Cypress House is not the only centre nearby the school but, wherever possible, KCC will make every effort to avoid busy traffic period of time, such as the school run.

A KCC representative explained that this is the second Stakeholder Meeting held for Cypress House. Once the site is open, these meetings will be more frequent and chaired by the centre's Operations Manager. These meetings will be an opportunity for staff at Cypress House to understand the community and for the Centre to provide updates.

KCC's experience over the years is that the majority of enquiries are resolved positively and successfully at a local level. This may involve the resident meeting in-person with the team at the Reception Centre. However, if the issue is not resolved locally, these will be taken through KCC's formal complaints procedure.

AOB

None raised.