

Olea Grove (formerly High View Oast) Stakeholder Meeting

Wednesday, 17 July 2024, 3:30 pm – 5:00 pm

MS Teams Meeting

Agencies and Services in Attendees
KCC, UAS Children's Service
KCC, Deputy Chief Executives Department
KCC, Prevent
DDC, Community Safety
DDC, Strategic Asylum and Resettlement Project
Ash Parish Council

Kent County Council (KCC) – Dover District Council (DDC) - 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 High View Oast, this will now be known as Olea Grove after the olive trees of Syria, which are well known as symbols of peace and hope.</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.</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 our experience of running our two current reception centres has shown that these children present very minimal risk to local communities.</p> <p>Olea Grove will be registered with Ofsted as a children's home of up to 22 beds, to accommodate children under 16-years-old. 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. The security presence is necessary to ensure the integrity of the site, to keep children and staff safe. Security will be present to protect against unauthorised access to the centre, not because of the children themselves.</p> <p>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. Education includes English language, law and society and providing opportunities to contribute to society.</p>

Children at Olea Grove 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. It is not anticipated that very young children will be at Olea Grove, these children will be placed in foster care.

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 Olea Grove and all new centres.

Before children arrive at Olea Grove, 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 children’s home 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. An Ash Parish Council representative queried if there is a process to ensure UAS children are their claimed age. A KCC representative advised that, crucially, Olea Grove is a home for children within Kent’s Children’s Services – therefore, it is not for adults. Experience from KCC’s two existing Reception Centres shows that it is rare for concerns to be raised about a child’s age. Where these are raised, Social Workers complete a thorough age assessment as a priority – if it is determined that they are 18 or over, they will be moved immediately into Home Office accommodation for adults. Robust safeguarding is in place to keep these issues to a minimum and for any concerns to be dealt with as a priority.

Building Works

A KCC representative shared photographs of the works taken place at Olea Grove, which are due to complete August. Works have included: intensive refurbishments; installation of fire-proof walls; divided rooms for bedrooms with ensuites.

An Ash Parish Council representative queried when the site would be open. KCC representatives confirmed that, following the completion of building work, there would be a period of transition for the service to start working on site and complete any training. It is anticipated that the site could be open by the first week of September, with the caveat being that the schedule of building works may shift.

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

Management of The Centre

A KCC representative stated that Olea Grove has an appointed Registered Manager, who is responsible for the day-to-day running of the home. There are Children’s Home managers for day and night, so there will always be a manager on site, as well as staff teams of Residential Support Workers working directly with children.

Appointed staff are very keen to start working with children at the home. Whilst recruitment has been successful, there are still some vacancies which are being advertised – details of these will be shared with stakeholders, as Olea Grove can serve as a good local employer for the community.

Ofsted applications to register the children’s home are also progressing well. 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.

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

KCC has started work to engage with places of worship and charities offering religious and cultural links for

children. KCC is working with Kent Police's Safer Kent programme, who are currently running a cricket programme with UAS children in Folkestone, to explore how similar programmes might be delivered/made accessible for children at Olea Grove.

A structured programme of education support will be provided for children. KCC wants to make sure the children at Olea Grove are engaged in activities and their days are filled – stakeholders are encouraged to let KCC know of any groups or organisations who may want to work with the children at Olea Grove.

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"*.

An Ash Parish Council representative queries if children at Olea Grove will be using the local GP. 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.

Stakeholder Questions

A KCC representative stated that the central Reception Centre Enquiries mailbox continues to run, so that resident and member enquiries can be responded to. To date, there have been 14 enquiries regarding Olea Grove, 13 directly from residents. The main themes of these enquiries include: lack of consultation prior to decision; ages of children; potential ASB/crime; impact on community services; and noise or damage caused by contractors. All enquiries have been responded to. Stakeholders are encouraged to promote the use of the FAQ webpage and central mailbox.

As the centre opens, we will be transitioning away from the centralised mailbox to local points of contact for residents to contact the Reception Centre directly and speak to the management team. There will be a contact number and email address for Olea Grove.

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.

An Ash Parish Council representative stated that they had directed enquiries through to the KCC Councillor, particularly to make it clear that the Parish Council do not own or run the Reception Centre. A KCC representative stated that it is regrettable that KCC was not able to communicate the plans for Olea Grove in advance, due to the legal challenges but assured the Stakeholder Group that KCC is committed to working with the community of Ash.

A KCC representative explained that this is the second Stakeholder Meeting held for Olea Grove. Once the site is open, these meetings will be more frequent and chaired by the centre's Registered Manager. These meetings will continue to be an opportunity for concerns from the community to be raised with the Centre management team.

DDC representatives noted that they continue to monitor any community tensions and are working with the Community Safety Unit.

AOB

None raised.

