

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINTY COMMITTEE

29 JULY 2021

MEMBER'S ITEM: RUSSELL HOUSE

Report from: Dr Lee-Anne Farach, Director of People – Children and Adults Services

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Summary

This report sets out a response to the Member's item, raised by Councillor Curry, concerning Russell House and its proposed future use by MHS Homes.

1. Budget and policy framework

1.1. Under Medway Constitution Overview and Scrutiny rules (Chapter 4, Part 5, Paragraph 9.1) Councillor Curry has requested that an item on this issue is included on the agenda for this meeting.

2. The Issue

2.1. Councillor Curry has requested that an item be placed on the agenda and has provided a full submission which is attached at Appendix 1 to this report. A summary of Councillor Curry's reasons are summarised below:

"MHS put forward a proposal to turn Russell House into a Foyer Project, providing temporary accommodation for young people aged 16-25 who have been in care.

The area around Russell House has a well-founded reputation for anti-social behaviour and crime. It is the area of Medway with some of the highest ASB and crime statistic in the south-east of England.

The objections to the use of Russel House as a Foyer project are based upon the serious issues the community around Russell House has to face on a daily basis. Placing vulnerable young people here puts them at serious risk of harm and it is the responsibility of this Council to prevent this harm. The local

residents have submitted dozens of letters of objection, the local police have objected as have the Medway Task Force”.

3. Director's comments

- 3.1. The Council remains keen to ensure the best possible outcomes for all children and young people in Medway. Key amongst these are the needs for children and young people to have the skills and opportunities to be independent and to be safe. Therefore, we will work with any Medway provider to ensure these aims are met for all children placed within any provision whilst accommodation remains of excellent quality.
- 3.2. Foyer schemes provide accommodation for a specified period of time with the aim of supporting young people to gain the skills needed to live independently. MHS have a track record of foyer provision within Medway and has achieved a high rating under the Council's quality assessment framework (QAF). Not all young people accommodated in foyers are leaving the care of the local authority, others will be young people that need accommodation.
- 3.3. Within the Council's sufficiency strategy, there is reference to improving the range and quality of accommodation for care leavers within Medway. Furthermore, this is defined as a need to have different categories of accommodation in partnership with Housing and Adult Social Care.
- 3.4. An alternative, for example it might be more purposeful to have within individual settings in the community rather than a 'complex' with all young people being together like student accommodation – Young People must learn to integrate with the local community. Having large numbers living together on one complex increases risks of inappropriate and risk-taking behaviour.
- 3.5. However as highlighted in the detail of the item raised, there is nothing to prevent the landlord from providing any form of accommodation providing that it complies with relevant standards, planning policy and building control regulation.
- 3.6. A disused building is likely to attract a level of anti-social behaviour, have a detrimental impact to the local street scene and is an underutilisation of affordable housing. The regeneration of schemes that are no longer fit for purpose or empty is generally likely to have a positive impact on the area in which it is situated.

4. Risk Management

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
Insufficient demand / need for provision	Future provision created in Medway for Medway young people will need to be assessed in terms for demand of local use.	A specific needs assessment would be needed to assess the effectiveness.	C2
Insufficient safeguards in place for residents	A foyer is one model of supported accommodation – a concentration of vulnerable young people could create issues that would need to be tightly managed.	A locality risk assessment would be needed to assess the risk to those placed.	C2

5. Financial and legal implications

5.1. There are no direct financial or legal implications for the Council arising from this report.

6. Recommendation

6.1. The Committee is asked to note the Director's comments in response to the Member's item.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – submission by Councillor Curry, Luton and Wayfield Ward Member

Background Papers

None

APPENDIX 1 – SUBMISSION FROM COUNCILLOR SIMON CURRY, WARD MEMBER, LUTON AND WAYFEILD

1. Introduction

- 1.1. Russell House is a former sheltered home for elderly people owned by MHS adjacent to Newnham Street and Listmus Road in Luton. In 2019 it was closed, the residents moved to other accommodation, and it has remained empty since then.
- 1.2. Following its closure MHS put forward a proposal to turn the building into a Foyer Project, similar to an existing one on Shipwrights Avenue. A Foyer Project provides temporary accommodation for young people aged 16-25 who have been in care. They are given training and support as they move into adulthood and an independent life outside the care system.

2. Planning issues

- 2.1. The Foyer Project does not require planning permission, as it is simply continuing the existing use as sheltered accommodation. However, there are a number of associated developments connected to the Foyer Project which have required Planning Permission. These permissions have been approved by the Planning Committee as they were technical in nature and not related to the operation of the Foyer Project.
- 2.2. It should be noted that both Kent Police and the Kent Fire and Rescue Service objected to elements of these applications on the basis that they contributed to the problems in the area, especially in relation to anti-social behaviour and access for emergency services

3. Foyer Projects

- 3.1. In principle the concept of Foyer Projects is a good one. They help vulnerable young people into adulthood in a safe and secure environment. The Foyer Project in Shipwrights Avenue nearby is in the main a successful one.
- 3.2. MHS describe the aim of these projects as being “*Tailored for 16-25 year olds, these schemes provide a safe place for young people who are in housing need.*” They go to say that, “*Beyond just that and with our support network, they offer the chance for personal development*”

4. Objections to a Foyer Project in Russell House

- 4.1. The area around Russell House, Russell Court, Newnham Street and Henry Street, has a well-founded reputation for anti-social behaviour and crime. It is the area of Medway with some of the highest ASB and crime statistic in the south-east of England.

4.2. The objections to the use of Russel House as a Foyer project are based upon the serious issues the community around Russell House has to face on a daily basis. The idea of placing vulnerable people into this area is simply dangerous for them. The local residents have submitted dozens of letters of objection, the local police have objected as have the Medway Task Force.

5. Stats for the Community + Panorama

5.1. A clear picture of the problems within this community can be seen in some of the basic crime statistics for the local area:

- For the month of May 2021 alone there were 72 recorded offences within the few streets around Russell House of which the majority were violent or sexual in nature or various kinds of anti-social behaviour.
- Many of us saw the recent BBC Panorama programme showing the work of the police and their drug prevention work in this part of Medway. Some of the filming for this was in the road close to Russell House.
- See Annex 1 to this report (below)

5.2. Anyone familiar with the area knows that drug dealing and prostitution are common here, even during the day. In fact, this behaviour is **literally** happening around the alleys and streets outside Russell House!

6. Current plans for operation of the Foyer Project

6.1. When the Foyer Project for Russel House was first proposed it was clear that MHS were either unaware of the problems within this community or thought that the young people they are proposing to house there would be unaffected by these problems. This is despite the fact that their own residents in the housing on Henry Street and Newnham Street report problems to them, the Council and the police all the time.

6.2. Initially, they proposed to house one or two social workers there, with a staff member overnight. This position has now shifted to include security guards, extra security lighting and high fencing. The Foyer Project for vulnerable young people is fast resembling a secure centre for potential offenders!

7. Duty of care and children at risk

7.1. It is clear that the young people house at Russell House will be put at risk. The matter before this committee is whether Members feel it is appropriate to house vulnerable young people in a location of this type where:

- They will be at risk of recruitment to local gangs and county lines; this is already happening to the young people who live in this area.

- They will have easy access to drugs and prostitution, literally outside the door of their accommodation.
- They will be in danger of becoming victims of violent behaviour.
- The whole purpose of the Foyer Projects, to integrate these young people into a safe and secure community, is predetermined to fail for some or all of them

8. The Future of Russell House

- 8.1. There is no doubt that the Council, MHS, the Police and all other agencies have a lot of work to do within this community. This work is happening and our hope is that over the coming years it will become a place where people will be able to live, work and bring up families in a secure and safe environment.
- 8.2. There is so much good will for this to happen stemming mainly from the local residents themselves. But as their objection letters and their response to this proposal tell us, this is not the time.
- 8.3. The Russell House building itself was for many years a good home for many people and it can be again. Placing vulnerable young people here puts them at serious risk of harm and it is the responsibility of this Council to prevent this harm.
- 8.4. MHS has a new Strategic Plan for 2021-24 and it aims to provide “safe, secure affordable homes as a steppingstone to a better future because everyone needs a decent home”. The Russell House building can easily be used for affordable accommodation. This would be a significant investment in an area that is really needed and would be one steppingstone for a complete renewal of the whole of this estate.

9. Councillor Curry's recommendation

- 9.1. That this committee notes this report and asks that the appropriate authorities carry out a full analysis and report of whether Russell House is an appropriate place for a Foyer Project run by MHS.

ANNEX 1: CRIME STATISTICS FOR CHATHAM CENTRAL AND LUTON AND WAYFIELD FOR MAY 2021

Chatham Central

Violent and Sexual Offences – 176
Anti-social behaviour – 57
Criminal Damage and Arson – 27
Drugs – 12

Luton and Wayfield

Violent Crime and sexual offence – 100
Anti-social behaviour – 22
Criminal damage and Arson – 20

Source: Police.UK ([Medway - Luton and Wayfield | Police.uk \(www.police.uk\)](https://www.police.uk))