

Council buying £1.25 million country mansion to send troubled families on holiday

EXCLUSIVE

Benedict Moore-Bridger

A LONDON council is spending £1.25 million on a 19th-century Oxfordshire mansion so it can send warring families on holiday, the Standard can reveal.

Up to three families at a time will be given a free break to “strengthen family relationships”, after Hackney council put in an offer on the sprawling property, set in a two-acre plot of gardens and woodland.

It is being paid for by the Department for Education, which has given the council nearly £2 million from an innovation grant.

But many locals are said to be “over-



Gardens and woodland: Hackney has put in an offer on the Silver Trees estate in Kennington, Oxfordshire



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whelmingly opposed” to the plans and have submitted letters of objection to the council, with one saying they hoped it was “a wind-up”.

The Silver Trees estate is on the out-

skirts of the village of Kennington, in a greenbelt area near Oxford. It is believed to have been built in the 1890s for an Oxford don.

Documents submitted to the planning team at Vale of White Horse district council, seen by the Standard, state the initiative aims to provide families with a break in a “home away from home”.

It would “provide them with time and space to strengthen family relationships, have fun together, and develop interests, skills and routines that will benefit them when they return home”. It is understood families will be put forward for selection by their social workers and could spend up to six weeks at the property.

But neighbours claim the plan to house troubled families near them is “inappropriate” and “completely unsuitable”.

Resident Matthew Batstone said: “This is a profligate use of public money in what is supposed to be a time of austerity. This property is completely unsuitable for the provision of short breaks for families. There are considerable environmental risks.

“This proposal is extravagant and it ignores the enormous and urgent need for family housing in Oxfordshire.”

Oxfordshire county council is looking into reports of “substantial dumping of building waste” in protected woodlands at the site. A spokesman for the local authority said: “We are due to go to the property to investigate soon.”

A spokeswoman for Hackney – which faces a £36 million cut in Government cash – said: “We received funding from the DfE Innovation Fund to run a programme to help children and families who would benefit from some structured time away from home.

“It is a voluntary programme with parents and, where appropriate, foster carers joining the children and taking part in... learning and support. It is primarily aimed at children in care or families at risk of breakdown, with a maximum of three families staying for short periods.

“We think this location is ideal. It will give families the opportunity to spend time together away from their homes in a tranquil location with plenty of space that is still a commutable distance from London.”

Vale of White Horse will decide whether to allow a change of use at the site – from a single residential unit to provision of living accommodation for a number of families and staff – on July 2.

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