

**From the Chairs of Governors (Alan Johnson & Nicola Westlake)**

It has been wonderful to be able to welcome more children back to our schools this week and to see their pleasure at seeing some of their friends and the staff again. There are some photographs on some the school websites and more will be added in due course.

Our staff have worked incredibly hard to ensure it has been possible to open the schools up to more pupils. As you can imagine, the government guidelines that were issued regarding school opening included numerous processes and procedures that needed to be put in place, but with very little practical guidance as to how to go about this. For relatively small schools, such as ours, it was very difficult to ensure that we were meeting these guidelines. Devon County Council produced their own guidance based on that issued by the Department for Education. Detailed risk assessments had to be produced for each school and many school policies and procedures have been amended. Once these risk assessments were approved by governors, they were submitted to Devon County Council.

The commitment of class teachers and support staff to getting the new environment ready for our children was amazing. They were involved in measuring classrooms and rearranging furniture, removing many shared resources that were not deemed appropriate and creating interesting ways to ensure children were social distancing. They worked with the leadership team to create one way systems, toilet rotas and new working areas, whilst at the same time continuing to carry out the tasks they had been doing all along to look after key worker children and provide learning resources for those at home.

Our relatively small staffing numbers does mean that our structure, at the moment, is fairly fragile. The bubble model that all schools are using – where a group of children and the staff with them do not interact in any way with people in another bubble – means that if there is any staff absence, for any reason, then we may not be able to cater for that bubble for a while, or may even be in a situation that we need to close a school. As well as meeting all the new guidelines and not “bursting our bubbles”, we must still ensure that previous regulations are complied with, such as ensuring that there is a qualified teacher on site at all times, that staff to pupil ratios are appropriate and that we have the correct number of qualified first aiders in place.

As you will appreciate, in any given workforce, several people may be shielding themselves or family members and will therefore be unable to physically attend work. In “normal” times one of the benefits of having a federation of schools is that staff can move around to cover absences and support each other, but due to the “bubble structure” we are unable to do this at the moment.

This “bubble” structure also means that there is a chance that when your child does return, they may not be with their normal class teacher. They may have another class teacher or be working with teaching assistants. The requirements are that those children in Nursery must have a qualified teacher with them, whereas the older age groups can be taught by teaching assistants.

The current “bubbles” have been structured around the children that we knew were going to be back in school from 8th June, and we tried to ensure that children were with some others that they knew. As stated in Mrs Gray’s latest letter on the websites, we do ask that you give at least one week’s notice should you now wish your child to return to school (if they are in any of the eligible groups). This is to give us time to allocate them to a bubble or to organise a new bubble. Due to the nature of the small groups that we can fit in our classrooms there is a strong chance that they may not be with all their friends. We understand that your views about whether and when you wish your child to return may change with time and the more time you can give us and the more precise you can be the easier it will be for us to design our structures.

Whilst organising and managing our own staff (to try to ensure we can get as many children as possible back in school) we are also dependent on the various contracted staff that form part of our larger support teams, such as the cleaning, caretaking and catering staff. An interruption to any of these workforces may also impact upon our ability to provide for all bubbles or schools at any given time. For example, we would obviously be unable to open to any pupils if we were not able to ensure that an enhanced cleaning regime was in place.

We also face other constraints when thinking of alternative ways to work. It is not possible to hire other venues - as in many cases they are not allowed to open - nor would we be able to ensure adequate levels of health and safety and safeguarding which must always remain a top priority. We must also continue to function within the financial constraints of our school budgets and are therefore unable to simply source more staffing without consideration of any future impact this may have.

Once back at school, the experience will obviously be different for children. Our teachers are still providing home learning as well as classroom experiences. We must be mindful of the wellbeing of our staff and balance this with our expectations of what they are providing for all of our children at this time. It will take time to learn how best to deal with working in these new situations and gradually we will return to providing a more “normal” education and something that looks more like the normal curriculum, but for the time being we are working to the curriculum intent that was published on the school websites earlier on in the pandemic. Across the federation we have a team who champion mental health and they have provided a wealth of resources for their colleagues to use with the children – looking at a different topic each week, such as getting used to a new routine and maintaining friendships. In addition to this the focus will be on basic skills and any gaps in understanding that have resulted from being away from school.

We have faced considerable challenges in opening our schools to those pupils that are with us at the moment. However, we should like to reassure you that the leadership team and the governors are looking to the future and continually considering how and when we will be able to open to more children. Mrs Gray has published details on each school website with regard to what is being planned next. Given the time to focus and reflect on how each of our five schools has coped in the last week, and to review the changes in guidance that we are receiving on an almost daily basis, then we will do our best to ensure that all children who can safely be welcomed back, will be.