



St James' Church of England Junior School

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"With exploring minds, and faith; we grow and learn together."

22nd May 2020

Dear Parents and Carers,

Joint letter from Head teachers of schools in the Whitehaven cluster

Infant, junior and primary schools from across Whitehaven have been working together to respond to the government's ambition for schools to reopen to some year groups from 1st June.

Our cluster of Head teachers and Governors have spent much time analysing and discussing the current situation in an attempt to see how we proceed particularly ensuring the safety of all our children and staff.

You may be aware that, as part of this process, schools have been instructed to undertake a risk assessment to determine whether it is safe for children and staff to return to school, with planning for this starting from Monday, 1st June. The Cumbria risk assessment documents arrived in schools during the afternoon of Wednesday 20th May. This has limited the time available with these crucial documents.

However, we have worked towards agreeing a shared position. In arriving at this, we undertook a number of steps:

First, we looked to the facts:

- The R rate for the North West region is 0.73 and rising compared to 0.4 in London
- As a local authority area, Cumbria currently has the sixth highest number of cases of coronavirus per head of population
- Copeland has been one of the harder hit areas in Cumbria
- Cumbria has the third highest death rates in the country per head of population

Secondly, we looked to what you are saying:

When many local schools have canvassed parents, they found that a significant number – up to three-quarters in some schools – said that they did not feel it was safe enough for their children to return to school yet. Within our own school, the proportion of parents who offered such concerns was less than others.



After that, we considered the guidance sent to schools by the Department for Education:

We find that the guidance includes advice that conflicts with itself, and with the government's ambitions, along with a number of mixed messages. Examples include

- "The majority of staff in education settings will not require PPE beyond what they would normally need for their work, even if they are not always able to maintain a distance of 2 metres from others"
- "Young children and children with special educational needs may not be able to understand the need for social distancing and may also seek close interaction with their peers or adults to provide reassurance at a period of disruption to their routines"
- "We know that, unlike older children and adults, early years and primary age children cannot be expected to remain 2 metres apart from each other and staff. In deciding to bring more children back to early years and schools, we are taking this into account."
- "The susceptibility to infection of younger children (up to age 11 to 13) might be lower than for adults, but the degree of confidence in this is low. For older children there is not enough evidence yet to determine whether susceptibility to infection is different to adults."
- "There is no evidence to suggest that children transmit the virus any more than adults. Some studies suggest younger children may transmit less, but this evidence is mixed and provides a low degree of confidence at best."

Finally, we asked staff:

It is clear that our staff all want to ensure that children return to school as soon as possible, but they believe the return should be in such a way that ensures the safety and wellbeing of our children, children's families; and of their colleagues and colleagues' families.

You will be aware that, during the time school has been closed, our staff have been working hard planning, marking and supporting children to access the National Curriculum through the Seesaw platform. They have also been keeping regular contact with our children and families, and setting work and activities to help support our children's ongoing education.

Many have also volunteered in the school hub (including during their holidays and Bank Holidays) in order to support our NHS and critical workers. It has been very challenging, but I hope you will that agree St James' staff have and continued to do everything they can to support the children and yourselves.

We also recognise that staff have understandably taken advice from their unions and professional associations.

In terms of availability, we have staff who fall within the government guidance on shielding the extremely clinically vulnerable (either themselves or a household member), or who are clinically vulnerable themselves.

In addition, we have staff who themselves have childcare issues, and so may struggle to do their full normal working hours within school.

Therefore, at a time when a higher staff to pupil ratio is needed to deliver the government's 'bubble groups' approach, we have a depleted workforce.



Given all of these considerations, as a group of Head teachers, we have agreed on some key principles:

(1) We need to take some time to ensure our buildings, and staff, are fully prepared for opening. This means that not all schools in Cumbria will be opening on 1st June.

(2) Once open, schools are slowly opening to different groups of children. This is to help ensure that the plans each school has in place are working as well as they can.

In terms of St James' C of E Junior School, the following steps will be taken:

Reopening timetable for St James' C of E Junior School

Monday 1st June to Friday 12th June - School will be open to children of key workers and vulnerable children from 8:45am – 3pm.

Senior Leaders and school governors will review this on Thursday 11th June. If we find that provision has run well, we will expand our provision to include children in Year 6 from Monday 15th June.

Each school in the area will keep their reopening plan under review, and we will keep a close eye on local data and guidance

As a Head Teacher, my job over the last few weeks has been one of challenge, soul searching and dilemma. With limited time, myself and my staff have worked hard to make sense of the government information and official Cumbria Risk Assessments, and provide details on the safety measures we would take. We really appreciate the supportive feedback we have received in doing this. Please be in no doubt **I absolutely want to provide an education for all your children, back in school, delivered face-to-face by our staff.** However, even with all the careful consideration that has gone into planning, I still cannot find it within me to satisfy the requirements outlined by teaching unions to offer any form of guarantee that we can fully eliminate the risk of such large numbers on site. Seemingly, neither can many of my colleagues across the county. Our school community have shown their trust in us to manage the risk; but my conscience will simply not allow me to guarantee safety at this stage. For now, myself and the governing body will look to gather further reassurances from unions and central government on the safest way forward.

It is again fantastic to read your feedback on how well your child has been supported to date. We will continue to teach the National Curriculum through our online learning provision and phone calls. I am grateful for your co-operation and engagement, and as a school, we thank you all for the amazing job you are doing.

I appreciate that there will be a variety of reactions from parents and children in response to our plans. To those Year 6 pupils who are disappointed at not being able to meet with school friends on the 1st June, I am sorry. I hope that once the disappointment fades you understand the reasons behind this decision. These decisions have always and will continue to be based on facts; discussion with relevant stakeholders, the Local Authority, and most importantly, thorough the assessment of risks.

We will, of course, keep you updated on a regular basis as we progress through this time.



This letter has been written and signed off by the head teachers and chairs of governors of the following schools: St James' C of E Junior School, St James' C of E Infant and Nursery School, Moresby Primary School, Bransty Primary School, St Begh's Catholic Junior School, Jericho Primary School, St Bridget's C of E Primary School, St Gregory & St Patricks Infant School

Yours sincerely,

Andrew Beattie
Head Teacher

Rev Rob Jackson
Chair of Governors

The sources of this guidance can be found by the following links below:

- 1) https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/885631/Overview_of_scientific_advice_and_information_on_coronavirus_COVID19.pdf
- 2) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/safe-working-in-education-childcare-and-childrens-social-care/safe-working-in-education-childcare-and-childrens-social-care-settings-including-the-use-of-personal-protective-equipment-ppe>
- 3) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-implementing-protective-measures-in-education-and-childcare-settings/coronavirus-covid-19-implementing-protective-measures-in-education-and-childcare-settings>
- 4) https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/885631/Overview_of_scientific_advice_and_information_on_coronavirus_COVID19.pdf
- 5) https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/885631/Overview_of_scientific_advice_and_information_on_coronavirus_COVID19.pdf

