

Dear Parents/Carers,

5th June 2020

School procedure for re-opening

As you will have seen in the news, many mainstream primary schools have re-opened for some year groups this week. As an all through, special school we have different guidance to follow. As a school in a trust we also have guidance and protocols to adhere to. In the letter Wayne Norrie, CEO of Greenwood Academies Trust, sent to you before half term he said we shall not rush and regret. This remains our priority - to be sure to get things right for our children, staff and whole school community.

There is much guidance for us work from. The DfE guidance 'Coronavirus (COVID-19): implementing protective measures in education and childcare settings', updated 1st June 2020 states '*Special schools, special post-16 institutions and hospital schools will work towards a phased return of more children and young people without a focus on specific year groups*'. We are also liaising with other Peterborough special schools and the local authority who fully support our phased reopening.

Over the lockdown period, we have all faced much uncertainty. With this in mind, my aim through writing this letter is to give as much clarity to the picture of what transitioning back to school looks like at Medeshamstede; adapting to our 'new normal' way of school life. It has been a very unsettling time for us all, but rest assured that we're doing everything we can to make sure we're ready to receive children if it is safe for us to do so.

We cannot just pick up, without missing a beat, exactly where we left off. We need to acknowledge what individuals have experienced in terms of the pandemic and lockdown before we can hope to get back to the business of teaching and learning in school. The daily routine and the picture of school that children left with will not look the same as it did before. As we know most individuals with autism find it challenging to navigate change. We will support children through a phased transition process. Our intention is to begin by preparing children prior to returning. Giving careful consideration to each individual's needs and provision has informed the safest transition process for our whole school community.

Some parents have made the choice to keep their child at home for the remainder of this term where they are safest and now in a routine. We respect this decision and I want to reassure you that we're not going to be pressuring anyone to send their child to school. We'll continue to keep you updated so you can make an informed decision.

Why do we need a phased return or a transition process?

Transition is not a fixed process. It has to remain adaptable and flexible to fully meet the needs of every child. We cannot fully predict or know how children will respond. For that reason, we ask you to be patient a while longer as we cannot give a fixed time line and dates for all families at this point in the transition process. We can, however, outline our intentions to get children and colleagues back into school with their safety at the heart of every decision made, underpinning the rationale for our transition process. We intend cohort one to return on 15th June.

We know each child will have experienced lockdown and adapted to home learning in a different way. Some will have enjoyed this experience as it suits their need for a flexible routine, whilst others rely on the familiarity of school routine and will have found this difficult. All our children are different; there is no one size that fits all. Some will want to come back to school, others who enjoy the experience of home learning, will not be so eager and will need time to process change.

What happens next ?

Next week, through home learning appropriate to your child's individual needs and stage of development, teachers will implement visually supported social stories with photographs contained in a transition booklet. This will help children to build an understanding of our 'new normal', changes to the school environment and inform them of what to expect. Even those not returning this term, will hopefully be reassured to see photographs of school showing them the physical changes to the layout, signs and floor markings to know we are still here, prepared and a safe place for when they return.

What is the concept of a 'pod'?

You will have heard about the concept of 'bubbles' or 'pods' in the news. This concept ensures that children are kept together as a small group, with the same teacher and do not mix with others outside of their pod throughout the school day. The pod will be a group of 5 children, of mixed year groups, with a teacher and a support assistant. This has been determined by the size of rooms in school, bearing in mind children's sensory needs and social distancing rules. The pod reduces risk of infection and spread as individuals only mix with those within their own pod.

Who will teach my child ?

We have a number of staff with underlying medical conditions or with shielded family members who may be at risk. Therefore, for now, if it is safer for staff to work at home they will continue to plan and deliver home learning. We will, where possible, assign staff to pods in school who are familiar with the children and who they know. It does mean, however, your child may not necessarily be taught in school for the remainder of this term by their class teacher or in their usual classroom. Miss Youngman supported by Mrs Jordan will teach the first pod in one of the larger classrooms containing its own toilet facilities and outdoor area. Ms Combes has already contacted parents of cohort one.

What other changes will be made to ensure health and safety ?

A risk assessment has been put in place containing adjustments to our usual operational procedures to ensure safety of all children and staff.

Children will have:

- a designated classroom where the pod remains and does not transition through the building. This may not be their usual room. We will not have use of the halls, other rooms, trampolines, PE facilities or outdoor play equipment.
- staggered start and finish times
- a shorter school day to begin with, that may increase over time, to ensure children can cope with change without overwhelm
- their own named desk and chair
- their own equipment at their desk, not to share
- classrooms and desks that have been physically rearranged for social distancing
- to remain seated at desks for lessons to ensure social distancing
- all soft toys, equipment and soft furnishings, including the sensory room, removed as they are difficult to keep clean
- doors to the outdoor area propped open to keep rooms well ventilated
- their own zoned area outside for their pod to play/exercise in
- their own designated toilets for their pod
- lunch in their pods, in the classroom. There will be no cooked lunches but we will provide a choice of sandwich, drink and a dessert from the daily menu. This means good hygiene practice as packaging can be disposed of safely.
- a cleaner on site who will clean high contact points such as desks, taps, door handles, light switches, etc. throughout the day
- outdoor learning as much as possible, which further reduces risk of infection

There will be no visitors to school, such as therapists or other professionals, at this stage of the process. This is a further precaution to reduce the risk of spread and infection from others who may visit other settings.

Any child or staff feeling unwell or with covid-19 symptoms will be asked to go home and to take a test following government guidance. If your child is clinically extremely vulnerable, or living with someone who is in this group, they should continue home learning. If your child is clinically vulnerable (but not clinically extremely vulnerable), you should follow medical advice to decide if they should come back to school.

What is a recovery curriculum ?

You many have heard about the 'recovery curriculum'. Through the recovery process:

- we have a mechanism for acknowledging recent events in a way that allows us to process and repair
- we can arrive at a better frame of mind, individually and collectively
- we should think of a recovery curriculum in terms of 'recovery conversations' we have with children
- we will draw on our core provision of social stories, Zones of Regulation and Think Social curriculums for emotional regulation and social thinking to teach children about the cultural change to expected behaviour for social distancing, washing hands and keeping safe
- set out clear expectations for children and families about how things will be from now on

There can be a tendency through a recovery curriculum to focus on the negative, but it's important to also remember the positives. There are plenty of accounts of children rising to the challenge not just of doing activities set by teachers but also of supporting others during lockdown (think of all those rainbows, DIY and cooking photographs in the newsletters).

In this way, by investing time – through storytelling, listening and allowing children to be heard – we can acknowledge what has happened, good and bad, and can draw out the most positive aspect of all: that we are safe, still together and on the road to recovery.

What will the curriculum in school be ?

As the pod will be mixed year groups, we will endeavour to deliver the provision of each child's EHCP to meet their long term outcomes and personalise their learning.

Activities such as PE, science, cooking, art, library sessions and sensory play will currently not be able to take place in school because of health and safety measures. We will continue with the TEACCH approach to learning which lends itself well to the physical structure of the classroom layout for social distancing. Children are familiar with this work system and work station approach. Children will continue to follow the curriculums of Think Social and Zones of Regulation which are critical to the transition period and their understanding; as well as addressing communication and interaction, sensory and physical needs and social, emotional and mental health needs. Each pod will follow a themed approach to learning centred around common interests. There will be a continued focus on teaching maths, phonics, reading and writing. Each child will have their own named laptop for use in school.

Why isn't my child in the first pod ?

We understand and value the different learning styles and needs of all children. In the initial phase of transition, a risk assessment of each individual child has determined which children are in cohort one as the first pod to return. Children in the first pod are our most vulnerable, as well as our most formal stage learners; able to follow verbal instructions, self-regulate, process and adhere to rules with visual

reminders, have good self-care, independence, tolerance of others and whose learning style is most suited to independent working at a desk.

Alongside our most vulnerable children, we have consciously made a decision to begin with those secondary children who most easily adapt to change. Once children in pod one are fully adapted and settled to their 'new normal' daily routine we will consider the next pod and layer in further groups of children in this way.

The timeline for the next pod into school wholly depends on how well and how quickly the first cohort settle. In our special school context we have a concept known as the 'domino effect' where one child can become sensory overloaded which may then overwhelm and trigger another. We want to ensure a calm and safe start to a phased re-opening. This is far easier to build upon than to have a difficult start which means children will then take longer to settle and others function throughout their day at a level of high anxiety. Starting with the most independent children means we can have a more fluid and faster transition process for all.

What happens to my child who is not returning to school yet ?

We will not disrupt the home learning routines you have worked hard to establish. The check in, check-up and check out system will continue with teachers contacting parents/carers three times a week. Digital learning through Teams will continue and we will endeavor to effectively transfer provision for EHCPs to the home setting, as we have been. Children will continue to learn through their termly Cornerstones curriculum theme, their interests and fascinations and we will continue to personalise home learning in this way.

We know some employers will be encouraging you to return to work, but we're not in a position right now to extend places to other children.

How will my child get to school ?

Peterborough local authority transport service have capacity at present to transport children in their pods for staggered start and finish times. Escorts are working with operators. Parents of cohort one should contact the transport service directly. Alternatively, parents can bring their own child to school and with prior arrangement claim for mileage to be reimbursed directly from the transport service.

Finally, we would all like to thank you for your continuous support in helping your child learn from home. We appreciate this is not always an easy task, however, we will continue to enjoy working in close partnership with all. We'll keep you updated throughout the transition process for your child's start date.

We want nothing more than to see all children back at school as staff have really missed them. I want to reassure you we are working towards this goal as much as we can without jeopardising the health and safety of everyone in the school building and community.

If you have any questions, please phone school or email admin@medeshamstedeacademy.org.

Warm regards,



Mrs Laura Ives
Head of School