

4th January 2021

Dear Families,

I am sure that the festive period looked very different for you this year and I hope that you all had as good a Christmas and New Year as you could have done, given the circumstances. As we prepare to welcome pupils back to school tomorrow, Tuesday 5th January, I am writing to update you on the current position at Riverside School.

In my letter dated 17th December, I informed you that during the Autumn Term, we had nine positive COVID cases across our whole school community. I can confirm that between the end of term and today, we have received confirmation of another fourteen cases (one pupil and thirteen members of staff).

We planned to run four days of play-scheme (Saturday 19th & Monday 21st – Wednesday 23rd December) and had a successful day on Saturday 19th. However, following the Prime Minister's announcement that evening that London and Kent would be entering Tier 4 with immediate effect, we took the difficult decision to cancel play-scheme from 21st – 23rd December. If you were affected by this decision, we apologise for any inconvenience caused but we hope you understand why we felt we had to make this decision.

Since that point, as we are all fully aware, there has been a huge amount of press coverage surrounding new regional restrictions, plans for mass testing in secondary schools and controversy around the reopening of primary and secondary schools across the country, particularly in areas where COVID infection rates are high. The directive from the Government has not changed for special schools, with the instruction that special schools should open for all pupils (except those who are clinically extremely vulnerable and living in Tier 4) on a full-time basis, from the beginning of term. Regardless of the perceived conflicting messages and controversy surrounding the directive that special schools should open as normal, at Riverside School, we have continued to focus our energies on ensuring our school is as safe as it can be for the whole of our school community.

As infection rates continue to be high locally, we have reviewed our precautionary measures and I can confirm that, from tomorrow, we will be introducing even stricter controls. These will mean that classes will not be mix at any point (lesson times, playtimes, lunchtime, etc.); there will be extremely restricted access to shared spaces (e.g. soft play, sensory rooms) on all sites; and there will be no mixing of staff across classes to cover staff absence.

This final point links to previous letters in which I have shared with you that, in common with schools up and down the country, maintaining safe staffing levels has remained a challenge from the outset. We have always been open and honest about the fact that if staffing ratios drop to a level that we deem to be unsafe, that we would, as a last resort, have to close classes until staffing levels are sufficient. In my letter dated 17th December, I informed you that due to the number of staff having to self-isolate, we had to reduce the number of days that a small number of pupils were able to attend school. This happened in 5 out of our 33 classes, and the majority of these children missed less than a week of school in total. Whilst we will do whatever we can to ensure we do not have to close classes, our priority has always been, and will remain, safety first, so if we have to reduce the number of days

that your child is able to come in, then we thank you in advance for your understanding. These decisions will only ever be taken as a last resort and by definition, there is unlikely to be much notice given (potentially, even first thing on the morning for that day). For this reason, please ensure that your contact details are up to date in case we need to call you and in case your child is already on the way into school, please consider in advance what contingency arrangements may be needed to collect your child.

As you will be fully aware, we are now in Tier 4 and within the contingency framework area, and there are significantly increased rates of transmission and infection in our area. Naturally, this is causing considerable anxiety for many people. We have already been contacted by a number of families to ask whether we would authorise their child's absence from school at the current time. I can confirm that should any families wish to keep their child at home at this stage, we would authorise and fully support your decision to do so. Please contact us if this is a decision you wish to take and your child's class teacher will be in touch to discuss home learning support with you. If your child is entitled to Free School Meals and you would like to collect a food package from the school, please let your child's teacher know.

You may also be aware that just before the end of term, the government announced their intention for secondary schools (and special schools with secondary-aged pupils) to roll out a mass testing programme in the Spring Term. As you will appreciate, we have been exploring the most effective and efficient way to introduce testing at Riverside School, in a way that works best for our whole school community. Given the fact that we have been given the directive to open to all pupils from the start of term, there is recognition that special schools will require longer to arrange and deliver a testing programme and we will therefore let you know our testing plans in the coming days. You will appreciate that there are a number of complexities for us in terms of our pupil population, size of school, number of staff, space, training requirements, etc. and we are in the process of working through these considerations. As with everything we have tried to do from the outset of the pandemic, we will communicate our plans in an open and transparent manner, as soon as we are in a position to give you full details.

If you require clarification about anything in this letter, please don't hesitate to contact the school and we hope that the information provided is clear and helpful as we start this new term. For many people, 2020 was a year to forget; we will continue to do our best to ensure that for your incredible children, 2021 is one to remember.

As always, our ARCHITECT values:

Aspiration Resilience Creativity Humility Integrity Trust Enthusiasm Courage Teamwork

will continue to shape our decision-making in the uncertain times ahead. Thank you for trusting us.

Kind regards,



Steve Solomons,
Headteacher