Dear Parents and Carers,

I apologise for the length of this letter, but I wanted to try and cover all the information you might require with regards to schools opening for more students. You will no doubt be aware that the government have said that schools should open to more children in certain groups from June 1st 2020. We have therefore begun the first plans to consider how we can gradually increase the numbers of children and young people attending Birch Wood and Birch Wood Vale School.

The first and most important consideration must and will always be the **safety** of both students and staff. Therefore, we will only open to more students provided that the **five key tests** set by government justify the changes at the time, including that the **rate of infection is decreasing**. We are planning ahead of confirmation that these tests are met and will communicate with you regularly to confirm if we feel it is safe to proceed based on our own risk assessment processes. This way we can respond promptly to expand numbers when it is safe whether that be on the 1st June or after.

I know many families are finding it very difficult at home and also may need to make plans as employers may be asking you to return to work, both these factors are also at the forefront of our planning. However, our ability to increase numbers in school is also closely tied to the ability of staff to be able to return to work and this includes having availability to safe childcare and schooling for their own children. Therefore, making this all come together is a big team effort and will require lots of co-operation and understanding from all so that everyone feels supported. I am confident that together we can find the right way forward.

Special Schools have been advised to work towards a phased return of more children and young people without a focus on specific year groups as in mainstream settings. We have written to you before about the Covid-19 risk assessments which every student at Birch Wood now has. We will:

* Use these risk assessments to form the basis for decisions about how and when students return to school (this will include availability of staffing)
* We will be making contact with you this week to explore your views on the possibility of your child returning to school in some capacity before the end of the school year.
* We know that for some cohorts of children and young people this may not be possible or in their best interests.

When students return it will be done gradually and carefully and there will be a reduced number of children and young people in classrooms compared to usual. This means that where students attend it will be on a part-time attendance rota, this is to give as many children as possible the benefit of safe access to school. It may also be the case that your child does not have their usual class teacher or support depending on staff availability. How arrangements look for your child will vary depending on what school site your child attends and what their needs are. We will also work with you to consider your family circumstances.

Where parents are key workers we will continue to do our best to meet your child’s care needs and provide a fuller school week where required.

We will continue to provide meals for all children in school that request them and have taken careful consideration to how we to open our kitchen to ensure that meals are able to be prepared and served safely. The provision of food vouchers for those eligible will also continue to be available where needed.

A range of protective measures will be put in place for staff and students, as far as is possible, to ensure that the risk of transmission is reduced; these include:

* Children will need to stay within their class group wherever possible.
* Frequent hand cleaning and good hygiene practices
* Increased cleaning
* Minimising contact and mixing
* Reducing ‘pinch points’ (such as parents dropping children off at the start and end of day) by having staggered arrivals and departures.
* Utilising outdoor space.
* Teaching about social distancing
* 2 metre markers around the school
* Zoning play areas
* Use of PPE where required
* Smaller class sizes

Measures may vary between the sites so that provision is appropriate to needs, so this is not an exhaustive list.

Parents will not be fined for non-attendance at this time (we have never done this) and we respect your decision to keep your child at home if you can accommodate them safely. Lessons will still be available on the student and parent portal and teachers and staff will continue to reach out to you via regular contact.

The following groups should **NOT** attend school

* Children, young people and staff who have been classed as [clinically extremely vulnerable due to pre-existing medical conditions](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19/covid-19-guidance-on-protecting-people-most-likely-to-get-unwell-from-coronavirus-shielding-young-peoples-version) have been advised to shield. We do not expect people in this category to be attending, and they will continue to be supported to learn or work at home as much as possible.
* Clinically vulnerable (but not clinically extremely vulnerable) people are those considered to be at a higher risk of severe illness from coronavirus, parents should follow medical advice if their child is in this category.
* If a child/young person or staff member lives in a household with someone who is extremely clinically vulnerable we do not expect those individuals to attend where medical advice advises them not to. They will be supported to learn or work at home.
* Staff and children or young people should not attend if they have symptoms or are self-isolating due to symptoms in their household

The government guidance suggests staff and students in all settings will be eligible for testing if they become ill with coronavirus symptoms, as will members of their households. However, I would be concerned about how some of our children and young people would cope with a test centre environment.

There will be a form for you to complete today with regards to your views and needs on your child returning to school before the end of the academic year (it will be posted as a link on this page on our website). In the meantime, I hope this information gives helps you a starting point. A summary of this information is also available on our website shortly.

I know this is a very difficult decision that families are facing, like you I have found it hard weighing up the practicalities and demands of keeping my own children at home against the safety questions of sending them to school and nursery. Ultimately it is a very personal choice based on every families’ unique circumstances. As always please do get in touch if you have any further questions using and the advice and support email service or our mobile phone family listening service.

Yours sincerely

Rosalind Hopkins

Headteacher