September 17th 2020

Dear Parents and Carers,

It has never felt better to be back at Birch Wood! Our community has really come together again to support each other to manage the new precautions that we have brought in to help keep everyone safe. It has been wonderful to see the classrooms full of learning, with a clear drive from all to make up for lost time. I am immensely grateful to our staff for their flexibility and determination to put the student’s interests first. Staff have worked hard to remodel their teaching to support ‘bubbles’ and make PPE a normality.

As we reflect on what we have all been through and are still going through collectively it is easy to understand that many people will undoubtedly be experiencing a mixture of worry and irritation. At Birch Wood our approach has been to safely and steadily rebuild our offer so that we can sustain our core function and stay fully open for as long as possible. We aim to ‘control the controllables’ and respond sensitively to the changing situation around us. I thank you for your patience and understanding that we can’t do all the activities we did before and that we must continue with our staggered morning and end of day routine.

**New facemask guidance for Parents**

Sadly I have been informed that infection rates continue to rise across the county, and as a result the Director of Public Health and the Director of Children and Family Services have requested that **face coverings are worn by parents and carers at school pick up and drop off in Leicestershire.** I am confident that all our parents have been very safety conscious and that our protocols stop people gathering at school drop off and pick up times as has occurred in other schools. However, please can I ask you to support the wearing of facemasks at these times unless you have a health reason not to so (you do not need to wear a mask if you are staying in your car.)

**Coronavirus Testing Implications**

In following the government guidance anybody experiencing Coronavirus symptoms has been asked to stay at home and book a test (please see attached guidance about Covid related absence which may be useful for parents). We are aware that availability of testing is quite limited at present and this has caused delays in people being able to get tested. Unfortunately this has put additional pressure on our staffing levels and as result we are not always able to keep staffing as consistent as we aim to within our bubbles. However, in order to mitigate against the risk of staff working across groups more frequently all staff are wearing facemasks and adhering to handwashing/sanitising protocols. Where possible and appropriate to the student’s needs staff will remain working at a safe distance from students. In doing the above we are able to ensure class bubbles can stay open and function safely with the right staff in place. Student bubbles will remain constant. If you have any worries about this please do get in touch.

**Parents Evening and Annual Reviews**

Another precaution we have been forced to introduce as infection rates continue to rise is that all annual reviews will now need to be carried out remotely. All parents will be offered to use Zoom or MS Teams so that external professionals can play a full part in the review. We appreciate this is not ideal but feel in does reduce the risk of adults from different homes gathering in one space for a prolonged period of time. Parents who need support with this technology or who would like to discuss alternative approaches to meeting should contact the member of staff conducting the review who will be happy to find an appropriate and safe compromise.

Unfortunately, Parents Evening will also need to take place remotely this year, however we are confident that we can ensure it will still be extremely informative and supportive. More information will follow about this soon.

**Education Continuity**

We are also looking at the creative ways we can make best use of Tapestry and emails to communicate with parents and keep everyone up to date with their child’s daily progress. In addition to this we are hoping to launch a new parent app later this term which will support a greater flow of progress information for parents. Finally, Michelle Walker and Pia Delucchi our Education Continuity Leads, are busily working away on our education continuity plans which are aimed at helping students access good quality learning remotely. We know that nothing can replace the ‘in school experience’, but they aim to build on our previous experiences and work closely with you, so that we can respond with a good second best if there are any further closures or lockdowns. Michelle and Pia will be updating you shortly with regards to our ‘virtual classroom’ plans.

I would also like to thank parents whose children have the most complex physical and health care needs for your feedback. We are aware that many remote learning packages just won’t be accessible or suitable for you and we are therefore aiming to make further contact to discuss any specialist approaches we could utilise and develop with you in partnership.

**Communication**

We have been excited to welcome our new students to Birch Wood this term, taking our number on roll to 201 compared to 164 this time last year. It is a pleasure to become a new part of those families lives, but we know that there is a lot to take in, so please do get in touch if you have any questions. For all families our Senior Leadership Team are here to support you during the day and our Family School Link Worker, Sarah Allridge is on hand to answer questions in the day Mon-Thurs. Teachers are teaching during the day so may not be able to respond to emails and telephone calls during school time, but they will try their best to make any requested contact before 6pm.

As a community we are all trying our best to protect our children from concerns about Covid 19, whilst also preparing them for life as it is now. Our students have shown great resilience and yet we are aware that we need to provide a safe space in school to allow them to express their feelings and also provide additional emotional and therapeutic support at this time.

It remains an absolute privilege for us to work within such a fantastic Birch Wood community and I am confident that if we continue to keep the lines of communication open we can find the best way to get through this together.

Yours sincerely

Rosalind Hopkins

Headteacher