

13th January 2021

Dear Parents and Carers,

I am writing to provide you with a further update on school provision for your child during the national lockdown. At the end of last week, the government provided us with additional guidance about the expectations for special school opening during this period of restrictions, which are designed to limit pressures on the NHS and prevent the spread of Covid19.

The most recent guidance states the following points:

"During the period of national lockdown, primary, secondary, alternative provision and special schools will remain open to vulnerable children and young people and the children of critical workers only (recognising that the characteristics of the cohorts in special schools and alternative provision will mean these settings continue to offer face to face provision for all pupils, where appropriate)."

- All other pupils should receive remote education.
- Pupils who are self-isolating should not attend school.
- Clinically extremely vulnerable pupils are also advised not to attend school.
- Schools should continue to record attendance in the register.
- The government expect schools to authorise absence during this national lockdown period- it will not be penalised.

In effect, the most recent guidance suggests special schools should be fully open to students, but that we should authorise absence where parents make the decision for their child to access remote learning at home, due to the high rates of Covid19 at present.

The pandemic has put immense pressure on everyone in our community and we know how important your child's special educational provision is both to their educational progression and mental health and wellbeing. We also understand that it is impossible to replicate the school provision at home and that home schooling is very difficult for many families due to work and other childcare commitments.

However, special schools are part of the wider community and whilst we are ambitious to continue to meet the special educational needs of all our students on site, I need to be honest with you about the challenges this presents to us during a pandemic. Our staff are specially trained and specifically identified to work with individual students and groups. We take great care to ensure that provision is high quality and most importantly safe in terms of staff ratios. At present, we have a number of staff who are unable to attend work due to shielding and childcare issues, which are exacerbated by the closure of mainstream schools (many of which in Leicestershire require two parents to be critical workers to access onsite

provision). In addition to this, we have staff who are periodically self-isolating due to having Covid19 or being contacts of confirmed cases. This picture creates a scenario where it is more challenging to provide the consistent routines and safe provision that is usually on offer.

Further to this, we are operating in a climate with increasing cases of infection, which is putting a strain on health services; these are the same health services that many of our students depend on as part of their care. This means we need to further tighten up our Covid19 site risk assessment to ensure that where children are in school, we reduce the chances of them getting the virus and spreading it to each other. We know that for most people and children the virus is a mild illness, but we also know that lowering the cases of infection in the community helps to protect the most clinically vulnerable and support the NHS.

Therefore, it is clear there are two sides to this coin- the needs of our students and the additional challenges of meeting them against the backdrop of a global pandemic. It is in this climate, that as a special school we need to find the right way forward; I truly believe that the Birch Wood community can do this and can strike the balance of supporting and protecting each other.

From next Monday 18th January, we have considered how we can optimise the numbers of students and staff in school in line with government guidance and also **safely** meet special educational needs, both face to face and remotely. Your child's class teacher will call you today or tomorrow to outline the provision for your child next week. We have listened to your preferences and aimed to provide what each family has asked for where staffing permits this. This may look different for each family and child, dependant on needs and staffing availability. If you are not satisfied with what is in place, please do let your child's class teacher/form tutor know and they will look to see if we can make any changes.

Unfortunately, we are getting daily information about staff and students who are required to self-isolate, this does make it hard to guarantee that there will not be changes to what has been planned; sometimes this will happen at short notice. However, we will do our best to minimise disruption to plans and let you know promptly about any changes.

We respect that the decisions about sending your child to school at present are very personal and want you to know that we are here in a supportive capacity whatever your choice. We have an extensive remote learning offer, which is designed to provide appropriate access to learning for all of our student's needs. We can provide additional help to assist you in accessing this and like to catch up with you frequently on the phone or using Teams.

I will write to you soon with further details about our revised Covid19 risk assessment (draft version is on our website) and explain the measures we are taking to keep everyone safe in school at this time. I will be surveying families about your experience of Birch Wood during this lockdown, so that we can continue work in partnership with you to develop and improve.

In summary; Birch Wood School is open and we will optimise the numbers we can have in school safely, working with you to provide the face-to-face provision you would like for your child. If you would prefer at this stage to make full use of our remote provision, this will also be fully supported by school. Tutors will be in touch weekly to discuss your preferences for remote, or face-to-face learning for your child. We will let you know promptly if plans change due to staff absence and of any cases of Covid19 in school.

As a community, I am ever hopeful that we can support each other through this pandemic and want to thank you for your ongoing support.

Yours sincerely,

Rosalind Hopkins

Headteacher