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18th May 2020

Dear Parents and Carers,

We hope you are all well and still managing to stay safe. We have no doubt that many of you will have all been following the Government's Daily Updates and seen Boris' 'Road to Recovery' plan. The reason we are writing to you today is because school re-opening to a wider group of children is a key part of this. All staff and Governors have contributed to this letter and so this represents our views.

Before listing the plans, we could put in place, we wanted to be completely honest with you about our current thoughts and feelings.

Obviously, we have remained open for key worker children who need support with childcare but extending numbers from around 8 children to potentially 70 is a whole different ball game.

We have updated a thorough risk assessment and set up the classrooms with as many tables as we are able to, allowing a 2m distance between children's workstations, doorways, fire exits, sink areas for water and staff spaces. These are the measures we have put in place to make the school environment as safe as possible.

Overall, do we think it is safe to re-open schools to more pupils? **No**. And this is why:

1. When asked about transmission rates from children, the Chief Scientific Advisor for the Department of Education, Osama Rahman, and Dr Jenny Harries, Deputy Chief Medical Officer, both said that their current belief is that children transmit the infection as much as adults. During an interview, Osama Rahman was asked whether re-opening schools to more pupils was "potentially putting together hundreds of potential vectors that can then go on and transmit" he answered "possibly, depending on school sizes." On Saturday, Dr Jenny Harries said that "children probably have the same level of infections, but do not get as ill with the virus." She went on to say that seven different return to school plans had been modelled and the one the Government has adopted "scientists estimate will give the smallest increase in the R number." We do not find this at all reassuring. When talking to a group of Headteachers, Dr Matt Butler explains that children are at the end of the transmission chain because it started with the older population and has worked its way down. There is very little data about infectivity because, due to lockdown, they have not been in circles of open population. The impact of schools opening more widely is not really known. If you would like to watch Dr Matt, the link is here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K2bEm_NvIpc
2. The advice to adults returning to work is to work from home if you can, and if you cannot, make sure that workplaces are set up to ensure social distancing. In a place where this is not possible, wear face masks to reduce transmission of Covid-19. The advice to schools is that PPE is not necessary. This is completely contradictory. Especially when they have acknowledged that it will be very difficult to practice social distancing in a school setting. Dr Matt believes this is because it would be seen as 'counter-cultural' and he urges schools to trial the wearing of face masks as children in particular are likely to be asymptomatic. Whilst we have been told repeatedly that masks only need to be worn by the person who has symptoms, we all know that children rarely cover their noses and mouths whilst sneezing and coughing and so, we feel there is an increased risk in a school setting.

3. People have been told they can go to an open space to meet one other person from another family and yet if schools re-open to more pupils, many children from many families will be meeting and then returning home with new germs to share. Again, this seems to be contradictory advice from the government. Would you choose to take your children to Tesco with you at the moment? If you feel this is unsafe then we will struggle to keep school any safer.
4. The BBC have been making lots of comparisons to schools in Denmark so we can see how they have managed to re-open to pupils. Unfortunately, their education system is run quite differently and so the comparison is not valid. In Denmark children do not start school until they are 6; our children start at 4. They have no Reception or Year 1 classes. The usual class sizes in Denmark are 20; ours are 32. Denmark have had 550 total deaths from Covid-19; we have had over 34,000 deaths.
5. We have a total of 9 staff who are not classed as being in the clinically extremely vulnerable or vulnerable groups or living with people who are in the above categories. We are advised that they should continue to work at home if they are in these categories. However, if they live with someone who is clinically vulnerable, they can attend work and if they live with someone who is extremely vulnerable, they can only attend work if stringent social distancing can be adhered to! So, we are in a position where we are asking staff to put themselves and their families at increased risk.

The risk is greatly increased for you as families too. Now your child will be mixing with up to 12 other children and bringing their germs home with them to you. Some of their group might be children of key workers who are dealing with Covid-19 patients and therefore at an even higher risk of carrying the virus- because the younger children show no symptoms, it could be asymptotically spreading.

Do we think re-opening will be good for the children? **No.** And this is why:

School is a safe place, a fun place, a place to chat and play with friends, a place to learn and feel proud, a place built upon warm relationships between children and staff, a place to celebrate during assemblies, a place to sing and a place that the children have known since they were four years old.

School is not that place at the moment. In the same way that shopping at Tesco is not the same, school is not the same. The children can't run up to their friends and hug them, they can't grab each other and huddle for secret chats, they can't run around the playground throwing a ball around, they can't be with their best friend in the den building, they can't hold hands and roll down the hill, they can't share new sparkly colouring pencils, they can't squeeze on the same chair while they have snack. They cannot work in groups whilst being taught or have an adult sit next to them and offer them support and point at words whilst they are reading. What they will be able to do is sit on their own table 2m away from everyone else, spend the day in a group of 12 children maximum with an adult they know from school but who probably is not their teacher, have a playtime without equipment whilst staying away from the friends they are desperate to be near, eat lunch on their own table, try to do some work while they're actually wondering why this isn't the same and why they can't do all the things they normally can. From a staff perspective we are mindful that we will not be able to administer first aid in the same way, we would always give an upset child a reassuring hug if needed. The same applies for children who are just feeling a bit sad or lonely. We are also very aware that the youngest children will find leaving their parents more difficult after lockdown and we are not going to be able to cuddle them or do the firm 'hand hold' removal technique. There will be many other things we have not even considered and of course we need to achieve all of this without making them fearful of germs and other people whom they can normally trust.

Is opening going to help children 'catch-up' with the learning they have missed during lockdown?

No. And this is why:

Because the children have been kept safe and well at home. When children are safe and secure their brain is relaxed and they are able to learn. They will have learned as much, if not more at home than they will have done at school. During a regular school day once we remove the time used during registration, assembly, play and lunch times we have roughly seven minutes of time per child. This includes the time we actually spend in front of the whole class- explaining tasks, teaching methods, reading stories etc. When we have done this, we probably have nearer two minutes 1-1 time with each child in our class per day. I can guarantee that you will have spent more than two minutes 1-1 with your own child / children. We recognise how much you are having to juggle in home-schooling and although you might feel like it is a battle, we have every confidence that by using the apps and resources we have suggested that they will have done some good learning. School is going to be such a different place when they come back that their brain will be busy processing these changes and will not be so open to learning. They may well be in a group for the rest of the year led by a teaching assistant. Depending on how we are able to sort the groups, they may also not be with children from their own year group, let alone their normal friends. In the past when talking to children about school we have had year 6 children explain to us that they really struggle to stay focused at times because they are so excited about playtime and are thinking about their friends and the games they will play. This is the joy of school for children, it is a safe place where they can be free and have fun. Much of this will be taken from them, as hard as we try to maintain this for our youngest children- the reality will be very different. Children learn best when they are happy, it will take a while for them to settle into the new routines and potentially 3 weeks later all other children are expected to return so there will be massive upheaval.

Will we be welcoming to your child should they come into school?

Of course - none of this is their fault and we cannot wait for the normality of a school day; laughing and having fun with the children. We will do everything we can to make sure your children have a lovely day. However, that is completely separate from whether we actually think that school is the safest place for them yet. We completely understand that some of you are financially desperate to get back to work, and for those people, if your child being back at school means that your family will be able to survive this crisis, please use this opportunity to send them into school. But, for those of you who have more of a choice, we would urge you to use the opportunity you have and keep your children at home. You are not stuck at home, you are safe at home.

We know that you will make the best decision you can, we just wanted to share some reality of the situation from our perspective.

Best wishes during these difficult times,

The Staff and Governors at Great Easton Primary School