



Portesham C of E VA Primary School

'Putting children first'

www.Porteshamdorset.sch.uk

22nd May 2020

Dear Parents and Carers,

Firstly, we hope that you and your families are safe and well at this time. We wanted to thank all of the parents and carers who have emailed and written in to support our Headteacher, Mrs Prior, and her team. I know that she has felt the support has been invaluable, and it has helped keep the spirits of the staff up, too.

Secondly, we write to inform you of a unanimous decision that our Full Governing Body arrived at in terms of a response to the Government's 'ambition' to open schools on June 1st - to 3 year groups.

After a FGB meeting conducted virtually using Teams, we discussed: -

- the risk assessments conducted by the senior leaders and their proposed plan to invite children back
- the 14 guidance documents issued by the Government in the past week and the publicly available BMA medical information,

We have decided that we, as a Governing Body, will *not* be extending the opening of school on 1st June 2020. For the reasons outlined below, we will be phasing the return of additional children to the school site. This phased return will start on 8th June 2020. We will continue to offer childcare to children of key workers, EHCPs and the vulnerable, as we have done for the past 9 weeks.

We have informed the Local Authority of this decision, and the reasons why, as we have set out below, and we hope that once you have read them, we can count on your support in this matter:

The National Governance Association has been clear. Although the Government has shared their 'ambitions' to get the children in Reception, Year 1 and Year 6 back to school as of 1st June, the NGA's view is that;

"The final decision on whether to invite pupils back will rest with schools... Schools should only invite those pupils back when and if their assessment of the risk is that it is safe for both children and staff to do so..."

We think it is important to be clear. Our priority is to guarantee the safety of our children, their parents, our staff and their families. The attacks in the press recently, about the commitments and dedication of education staff, are utterly unfounded and disgraceful. The staff at Portesham have been, and will continue to be, exemplary, and have children at the heart of all that they do, as do we, as Governors. The union guidance has been there not to stymie the Government plans, but to protect children and education staff where possible, recognising that schools have all been open.

Headteacher: Mrs V Prior

Winters Close, Portesham, Weymouth, DT3 4HP

Telephone 01305 871283

office@portesham.dorset.sch.uk

Having taken into account the advice issued to us, our views are that:

1. We have a duty of care to our staff and our children and this is compromised with the current intentions shared by the Government, which are not robust, and do not provide sufficient evidence that it is safe for children. On balance, to send children back to school at this time, and in the way that has been suggested, means that they, the staff dedicated to teaching and caring for them, and all of their families, are at an increased risk of exposure to the virus.
2. This week, school made phone calls to parents of the Government identified year groups and the indications were that approximately 50% of our parents would not be sending their children back to school as they feel it is not safe. Of the approximately 50% who indicated that they *may* send their children in, some said so tentatively, wanting to know the realities of the proposal, and the abnormal situation their children would be in, several thinking that it would be back to 'business as usual' for their child based on the lack of published information for parents indicating otherwise from the Government.
 - The learning environments in any school opening at this time, in order to attempt any semblance of social distancing, will have to be drastically different. Children would not necessarily be with friends and the capacity to physically comfort one another, play or interact as they usually would, will not exist.
 - They would have to stand/walk 2m apart in corridors, impossible in our school so a one way system will be implemented; sit at desks 2m apart, regularly be cleaning their work space, and attend school sporadically (as our school has mixed age classes from Year 1 to Year 6 we anticipate planning a part-time offer for any year group returning to allow the class teacher time to plan and prepare home-learning for their other year group, as well as staying in touch with children not in school).
 - We believe that many parents have been misled by the Government messages and the press and are not aware of the stringent practices schools would have to have in place as per the school guidance issued. Some parents, notably in Y6, were under the impression that the children would all be in together and enjoy celebrations, shirt signing, final assemblies, and so on, and this would simply not happen.
 - As school reopens to more children we will be creating 'bubbles'. Children will only be able to part of one 'bubble'.
3. We are waiting for Government to publish the evidence upon which its advice is based, this has been agreed but has not happened yet. Currently, much of the advice to schools does not follow the national guidance for every other aspect of society on social distancing in the same way that we must behave with our families, our friends, when shopping etc.
4. We do not yet have a sufficiently high enough level of confidence to say to you as parents that it is safe for your child to come to school, or for you, should your child bring the virus back home unwittingly.
5. We don't yet have a sufficiently high enough level of confidence to say to staff that it is safe for them to come back to school with the proposed number of children, or for their families, should they take the virus back into their homes unwittingly.
6. Because we are completely committed to our community and supporting the fight against Covid-19, **we plan to continue to offer childcare for our key worker families** and the children of the vulnerable **where it is safer for them to be in school**.

7. We want to re-open when it is safe for our pupils, staff and their respective families. When the time is right we will implement working towards achieving the Government's ambition of Years R, 1 and 6 returning to school.
8. Following the announcement by central Government expected 28th May 2020, the Governors and Senior Staff will finalise our Risk Assessment. We have been working on this extensively already but guidance has been changing almost daily and we feel it is imperative that information shared with us on 28th May is represented accurately in our Risk Assessment and is taken into account when agreeing our way forward.
9. During the week after half term (Monday 1st June to Friday 5th June 2020) our Risk Assessment will be submitted to the Local Authority, staff will be trained in the new protocols and expectations within the Risk Assessment and we will communicate with you, our parent body, about our plans to extend school provision in line with the Government's ambitions. It is vital that staff are confident with how the school will operate and understand their roles and responsibilities. By staff operating in a highly competent way we will sustain your confidence in us. Your children are always put first – their safety, their care and their development is our number one priority.
10. During the first week after half term we will continue to offer childcare to the children who have been accessing it during the initial phase of lockdown. Lots of Key Workers have not been using the childcare offered by school, however if your needs have changed and you anticipate needing Key Worker childcare after 8th June please could you contact the School Office (office@portesham.dorset.sch.uk) outlining your requirements. We will need this information to inform our planning.

We hope that you appreciate our position and would ask that you continue to give us your support. In return we will continue to be honest with you and regularly review our stance as more information is made available to us from the Government. We will be back in touch during the week after half term to let you know our timeline for reintroducing year groups to school.

Kindest regards,

Clive Burgess

Mr Clive Burgess MBE
Chair of Governors
Portesham CE VA Primary School