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COVID-19 and Hawthorns School closure update

Dear Parent/Carer,

Following the Government's recent announcement regarding plans to re-open some schools, I will now take this opportunity to update you with regard to where Hawthorns is up to with this recent development.

Firstly, I would like to personally thank you for your continued efforts to adhere to the Government's requests to stay at home and stay safe. The challenge this has presented to you and your families has been immense, and the longer the restrictions have been in place, the tougher this has been on all of you. At Hawthorns we acknowledge and respect the hard miles you have had to put in on this, we know how demanding this has been for so many of our families. Your tenacity and resilience at a time of great anxiety and uncertainty are testament to the incredible people that you are.

Now the Government has begun to turn its attention to how we all emerge from the controls and restrictions on society as a whole, we must proceed with our next steps with caution. At Hawthorns we would like nothing more than for 'normality' to return, and to have all our children and staff back in school. However, the COVID-19 virus is still active and it still poses a threat to safety, and we have to be mindful of this fact. Our school has been open all the way through the lockdown period for a small number of pupils specified by the Government, and any increase in the number of pupils in the near future will be done gradually and carefully. I am sure you will be understanding of this, and you will be patient as this process unfolds. Safety of pupils and staff, and of all their families, is our primary consideration.

The Government has now published more detailed guidelines to school about their expectations and plans. As with all of their guidance to date, some of it is confusing and contradictory, and a significant element of it is directed at mainstream schools rather than special schools (for example, the phasing of specific year groups mentioned does not apply to us). There are many things for us to consider as we put together our plans to fulfil their wishes, particularly around the practical implications of social distancing (which the majority of our pupils will not understand), the provision of personal care in a safe way, and the staff capacity available to us at this time to be able to increase pupil numbers safely. The Local Authority and the staff unions also have their demands that we will have to take account of. The Government has stated that the local context of schools must also be factored in as we plan to gradually re-open our doors. In the case of Hawthorns two things compromise us more than the majority of schools: the fact we share a site with a mainstream school, which will mean that there will soon be a substantial rise in the number of children and adults in our environment beyond our control; and the fact that we are physically constrained because our school is so over-subscribed and there are no break-out spaces for us to utilise (we are a school built for 66 children with 112 currently on roll). These things make social distancing significantly more challenging.

We are currently digesting the guidance and unpicking the various demands made on us. There is a period of time where we need to plan carefully to re-open our school in a safe and controlled manner. It will be a long time before

we can have everyone back together and to operate in the way we would like, most likely well into the Autumn term. And even when we are all back, there will need to be an adequate period of time where we re-establish routines, we support children and staff with the impact this period has had on their well-being, and where we re-engage children with positive behaviours and attitudes for learning after a long time away. This will be done in a sensitive and patient way, and we will need your help to keep us informed about your child's progress and any concerns you may have.

As part of our planning processes, we will need some information from you. Some of you will be wanting your child to return to school, even if it is only on a part-time basis. Some of you will want more information about what might be offered before you can make a decision on this – for example, the availability of transport, or the staff that may be available from Hawthorns or elsewhere, or the safety arrangements we are planning in school. Some of you will think it is too early for your child to return while the virus is still active and while restrictions are in place elsewhere. We intend to counsel your views on this soon, to give us an idea of how many pupils may want a place and how we may or may not be able to service that need. I have had contact from a couple of anxious parents about feeling pressured to send their child back to school following the Government's announcements. I want to make it clear to everybody that we will not be hounding parents to send their child into school against their wishes at this moment in time. Certainly for the rest of this academic year, we will not be pressurising anyone over attendance. You will have an opportunity to express your wishes when we contact you in the near future – knowing what you think and want is an important part of our planning process.

On another note, we are still working hard in school to complete many of the other things that need to be done. Statutory EHCP reviews for Year 2 are currently in full swing, and we are now turning our attention to the statutory reviews for Year 5 children. This is substantially more challenging than usual, given everything has to be done through technology and that we do not have the same degree of support with the process from other agencies as we would normally have. The process takes longer, but it will still be completed. Once this is done, we will start the annual review process for all our other year groups and intend to have this done on time by the end of the summer term. Your support with these is crucial and we will be immensely grateful for your input.

We are also working through the admissions process with Tameside Local Authority as normal. Again this is compromised by the current circumstances and is taking us a lot more time to complete than usual. What is certain is that our numbers will rise again in September because of the level of demand for places at Hawthorns and the limits of alternative provisions available. We are hopeful that temporary classrooms will be sited soon to facilitate these extra children so that we can keep a cap on class sizes which is something of great concern to us. Hopefully now the restrictions on construction work have been lifted, work can start soon on the installation of these classrooms.

In order to service an increase in the number of classes next year, we have continued with our recruitment plans as usual. Recruitment is notoriously difficult anyway in our sector, and under the lockdown period there are some additional challenges to this. We have managed to recruit the teachers that we will need, and our attention will now turn to recruiting other staff. Once this has been completed we can determine class and staff plans for next year, and we will of course inform you of these when they are finalised.

We are also mindful of the need to support transition, both for the new children joining our school and for our Year 6s soon to be moving to secondary schools. Obviously this is very challenging in the current climate, as pupils cannot visit their new settings just now. There are still things we can do, and we are currently working on plans for some sort of transition available for these children during the final half term of the summer.

As much as possible, we are working hard to make sure that we are doing the things that need to be done, both in preparation for the gradual re-opening of our school where it is feasible next half term, and to ensure we are ready for the children in the Autumn term. There is an immense pressure on us, partly because we don't have the full complement of staff available to complete all of this preparation work, and partly because the COVID-19 situation is asking a great deal from us at this time. We take the responsibility for the health and safety of our children and staff VERY seriously, it weighs extremely heavily on our minds. Many of the decisions we are having to make have complex elements and serious implications. We are grateful for the support you continue to give us, it makes all the difference to us at this very difficult and challenging time. We are inspired by your awesome endeavours throughout

the last seven weeks, and we are grateful for the support you are giving your children at home. Please keep communicating with our class teams, and keep sharing the positive stories and activities. We can all give each other a positive lift as the challenges of the current restrictions begin to take their toll on all of us.

I will update you further as our plans to gradually re-open become more concrete. In the meantime, please continue to keep yourselves as safe and as healthy as possible.

Pierre Coiffait

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