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Friday 1st January 2021

School Closure Update January 2021

Dear Parents, Carers and Families.

Following the New Bridge Trust's decision to keep its schools closed on Monday 4th January 2021, I write to give you further information about Hawthorns School's plans for next week and the start of the new term.

I have consulted with the Trust's CEO Graham Quinn, and it is our school's intention **to open as normal on Tuesday 5th January** at the usual time for all pupils and staff. We know how imperative it is for Hawthorns children to be in school, and we want to do this in as safe a way as possible in the current circumstances. Hopefully this will give you some certainty in planning for next week.

There are many challenges ahead in the next few weeks. The government's amended guidance for specialist schools came out late this week, which has given us some new things to digest and has left many queries unanswered. Though we are meant to be on holiday, I can assure you that we have been working hard during yesterday and today to make the safest preparations that we can to re-open our school. There have been many robust discussions. Both the national government and the wider reporting in the media have focused very much on mainstream school children, with the greater complexities presented by the special school sector left more as an afterthought if considered at all. We work hard to put guidance into practice for the safety of our pupils and staff, even though often we need to apply more common sense than our political leaders sometimes demonstrate.

The COVID infection rate is rising rapidly in Tameside (it doubled in the week to 27th December from two weeks previously). This situation is going to become more acute in the coming weeks as the impact of people's mobility over the Christmas period, plus the effects of the new virus variant, really take hold. A national lockdown is a real possibility again. As a consequence of this, please be prepared for potential disruptions to school openings in the coming weeks. I know this is frustrating and inconvenient for you all, and we will do our very best to keep Hawthorns open for our children. But it must be safe to do so.

Our approach will be similar to last term – where a positive case by a member of staff or child is confirmed, those children and staff in immediate contact with that case in a 48 hour period will immediately be asked to remain at home to isolate. This could be a class, a whole bubble group or the entire school, depending on the level and range of contact. Please do not send your child to school if they or someone in their immediate family have symptoms of the virus, and definitely not if a positive case is confirmed. If you are in any doubt, please contact the school to advise you.

I know some of you will have anxieties about your child attending school, particularly as we are now in a Tier 4 status and that the infection rate is rising rapidly again. If you are anxious in this way, please keep communicating with us so that we can reassure you.

We had a sensible and collective response to the pandemic last term, which saw both our staff and our families extremely committed to the education of our children. As a result, attendance rates of both pupils and staff at Hawthorns were high compared to any schools in any sector across the country. We need to continue this commitment as much as we can for as long as we can, despite the further challenges coming our way.

We will use Monday to further bolster our risk assessment planning and to amend our already detailed current protocols in light of changed Tier 4 guidance. We will also assess our current staffing capability as this will determine more than anything else our ability to keep classes open. Cleaning protocols will recommence from Monday in preparation for everyone's return. We will contact Tameside's transport department and the relevant taxi firms to make sure they are ready to transport children to and from school in the usual way. If you are dropping children off at school or collecting them at the end of the day, please be reminded of the need to wear a face covering when entering our school premises.

These are trying times still. We are all weary of the restrictions on our liberties, the fears for our loved ones becoming ill, and the constant disruptions to services and to our work. Normality seems a long time ago. But we must be positive for an end in sight in 2021. Please continue to follow public and personal safety advice – wash hands regularly, keep sufficiently distanced from others, wear a mask when in the proximity of others, and try to maintain a regular flow of fresh air. Adherence to these protocols will help keep all of us safe, even though they are tedious for us all now. Hopefully the vaccination programme will step up in the coming weeks and the Tier 4 restrictions will be eased soon.

Take care everyone, we hope to see you soon. Happy New Year.

P. Coiffait

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