

Durham County Council

Our Lady & St. Thomas R.C. Primary School

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Dear Parents and Carers,

Following the recent government announcement regarding a phased return to school for some pupils, we would like to update you on Our Lady and St Thomas's approach to this.

Covid 19 Update and 1st June Re-opening of Schools

School has been open throughout the pandemic to vulnerable pupils and the children of key workers. The new Government guidance regarding extending this to other year groups from June 1st has been debated widely in the press. We wish to thank you for your prompt response to our parental survey. This has allowed us to explore options for our own unique setting, building capacity and staffing.

We have been working closely with a number of partners in our approach to establish what is right for our school. This includes Durham County Council, Diocesan Directors as well as taking into account the guidance issued to cluster schools already part of the Bishop Hogarth Academy Trust, which in time we will be part of.

The Government Guidance is to start the first phase for planning for wider opening from 1st June, based on the most up to date scientific and medical advice. It is important to note any time-frames to adhere to the Government guidance is at the discretion of each individual school and we are merely being asked to begin to plan from the 1st June, not necessarily to take pupils, as has been widely reported in the Press.

OLST will not be re-opening on 1st June, but will look to take small steps in bringing children back to school from 8th June.

This is in line with schools in the Bishop Hogarth Trust. Given the much higher R rate in the North East and the fact a number of Local Authorities are delaying the re-opening of schools, it is prudent that we do not rush this process. The guidance is also not statutory. We intend to use the first week in June to plan and prepare the building to accommodate the new 'normal' which is expected to keep everyone safe. School remains open to key worker pupils as usual.

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Health and Safety

The Council is supporting all schools in the County, to establish a pattern and time-frame that works for them. They have provided a lengthy risk assessment, which is designed to put the health and safety of children first and ensure each school mitigates, to the best of its ability, risks associated with a phased return.

We are being asked to continue to accommodate the most vulnerable pupils and the children of key workers whilst also bringing in our youngest pupils in Reception and Year 1. Pupils in Year 6 are also a priority group. We are looking at all options, however, OLST is a small family school and does not have the building or staffing capacity to necessarily accommodate all of this, given the current social distancing measures. Our risk assessments will be fully scrutinised by the Governors. As we are Voluntary Aided Primary School, we must give due regard to the Local Authority but it is our Governors who will make the final decision on what we can safely offer and accommodate at Our Lady and St Thomas School. I know you will all appreciate this stringent approach as confidence in the safety measures our School puts into place is paramount to any parental decision.

Planning – June 2020

We were hoping to offer part-time provision for the above year groups, meaning that we could have accommodated more year groups as time went on. However, updated DFE guidance since I last communicated with you on Friday 15th May, has meant that we have had to rethink that idea.

We will share with you next week the exact plan for moving forward and contact individually those parents who have expressed that they would bring their child back. We will share the finalised detail of groupings, staffing and the safety measures school will have in place.

I would also like to direct you to our website where a Government document is available for parents to view titled **‘Opening Schools and Educational Settings to More Pupils from 1 June’**

We will continue to add pertinent Government advice for parents which may be of interest.

We are looking to begin with our youngest pupils, initially Reception and Year 1. This will allow us to use our staff to create small social bubbles. The guidance states 15 in a class with an adult who must remain the same. However, we intend groupings to be around 7 or 8 with the same adults, as the youngest children will have the most difficulty with social distancing.

We will review this regularly and consider Year 6 at a later date if our capacity increases.

I feel it is only fair to point out that school will look and feel very different. Classrooms and the playground will be more controlled environments and there will also be safety measures we must employ for parents with drop-off and pick-ups from school whilst social distancing rules are in place. You will be informed of these in due course.

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The best way to contact school is through email so we can respond to you quickly and effectively. The office will not be open for parents or to the public, although they will continue to answer all queries and assist families as usual.

Many thanks for all your good wishes, support and positivity regarding communication, staff support and online and home learning.

Enjoy the sunshine and continue to stay safe.

R Veitch and Mrs A. Aisbitt

Mrs R. Veitch (Head teacher) and Mrs A. Aisbitt (Chair of Governors)

