

Dear Parents and Carers

I hope this message finds you all well and managing as best as possible in the present challenging times. There are a number of items below that I would like to draw your attention to as we move towards the end of this half term.

Schools reopening – I am sure that you will all have seen or heard the announcement from the Prime Minister last week giving Monday 8th March as the earliest point at which schools could start to reopen in England. While it is disappointing and frustrating that we won't be able to get more children back into school after the February half term this announcement was not a surprise given the scale of infections, hospitalisations and deaths from coronavirus. We have no further information on the plans for the reopening of schools that the government are considering but we are planning for how this could work given different scenarios here in our schools so that as soon as it is safe to do so we can get the children back into classrooms again. It is not clear yet if we will be able to open from the 8th March and how that reopening will happen. I suspect that any opening will likely be phased like the summer last year and will most likely involve opening classes to our younger children first. However, I am basing this on previous experience and guess work so I could be completely wrong! It is also sensible to assume that the lockdown will be eased gradually and that some year groups will be able to come back to school before others meaning that remote learning may well be a fact of life for a while yet ☹.

Current arrangements for learning – firstly a huge thank you for all that you are doing to support your child's learning. We fully appreciate how difficult this can be and we are here to help in whatever way we can. Having three children at home at the moment means that I really do understand first-hand how stressful all of this is on families particularly where parents are also managing the demands of their own work as well. Our remote systems are well established now and engagement levels across the schools are positive. We are following the government expectation that younger children will engage with at least 3 hours of learning each day and our older children at least 4 hours per day. It is really important that we keep engagement levels high as by doing so we are giving our children the very best chance to keep learning and to minimise the damage caused by the lockdown. Good levels of engagement will also mean that the recovery work that we will be doing once the children return to school will be that much easier for the children if they have kept up with their learning and school type routines at home while schools are closed. Our teachers continue to balance working in class here in school and also online via our learning platforms. Below are some suggestions for helping to achieve this from the experiences of families and children over the last year:

- Have a structured routine and stick to it.
- Keep 'school' type working hours where you can.
- Have children keep their normal school day start each morning with a good breakfast and getting dressed for *school* in their school uniform will reinforce the mind set for school work.
- Involve your child in the creation of your timetable for learning activities – the more they have ownership of their learning the more likely they are to engage and to be motivated to learn.
- Ensure that you build regular breaks into your learning plans which include some physical activity & time away from screens to stimulate blood flow and to oxygenate brain cells!
- When working remove other distractions (TV off etc.) & try to find a good space to work if you can.
- All areas of the curriculum are important and your child will most likely tend to be more engaged and willing to persevere in those areas that they particularly enjoy. It is vital that a balance is maintained across the subjects and that the core areas of literacy and numeracy are a part of the daily timetable across all year groups.
- Know when you all need a break and take one. Getting outside for fresh air and exercise is essential for us all. This is particularly important when much of our lives are restricted – taking a camera out is a good way to engage your child with the natural world and will spark conversation too.
- Keep school day bedtime routines during the week.

Miss Symons and Mr Tong will continue to contact families to discuss children's learning if engagement levels are low.

Our current systems for remote learning will continue throughout the lockdown with Tapestry, Seesaw and Google Classroom being used with our different age groups across the schools. Please continue to contact teachers directly via their school email if you have any questions or need any support with children's learning & wellbeing at home. Our learning bubbles here in school continue to work well and will continue to be reviewed daily. We are being very strict regarding requests for places in our bubbles in line with government guidance that at this time the safest place for children is to be at home. This includes children of critical workers – who should only attend if they cannot be cared for safely at home. So far we have been able to keep our schools COVID free for both children and staff throughout the pandemic – we really want to keep this going as having to close bubbles or even the entire school, as we have seen in other local schools, is both distressing and disruptive. Keeping the virus out of our schools and school community relies upon us all following the rules. With vaccinations increasing every day there is now a light at the end of this dark tunnel but we all have a way to go yet until we can start to enjoy our freedoms safely again.

February half term. The February half term is fast approaching and the schools and nursery will be closed for the week. We will not be setting any home learning for this period and will start the term again on Monday 22nd February. Hopefully by then we will have further information on if and how schools can start to reopen from 8th March.

COVID Recovery. Another announcement made last week was additional resources for schools to use to implement learning recovery programmes for children once schools start to reopen. We have had no official notification about these funds as yet but we are actively looking at how we can best use resources to support the educational recovery for all of our children. We had already instigated one-to-one tutoring which was due to start on 4th January – this has sadly been postponed until the end of the current lockdown. As we hopefully start to move to the recovery phase with schools reopening my message is very clear to all families – the more your child can do now to maintain their learning the better placed they will be once they are back in school. Recovering from the impact of the pandemic on our children will be a significant collective effort and will need us all to work in partnership over the coming weeks and months. As noted earlier in this letter please do contact us here in school if you need support, we may not be able to solve the problem but we will continue to do all we can to help. It is really important that we all keep trying to help our children with their learning, to find enjoyment and happiness in our individual situations and to remain positive and hopeful for the future.

Wellbeing. This is a much used phrase at the moment and with good cause. The stresses and strains upon us all over the last year have been significant and will continue to be so in the weeks and months ahead. Here in school we have been considering how we can further support children's wellbeing while they are having to stay at home and as we hopefully get them back into school in the coming weeks (and also parent wellbeing and our own wellbeing too!). We have created a series of activities designed to support wellbeing, to balance academic work expectations at home, reduce screen time and hopefully be very enjoyable for children and families. As we have a wide range of ages across our schools the activities and approaches used will vary. **We do not want these activities to be just another thing that is being asked of families at home so we will be adjusting the work set by teachers to accommodate these important wellbeing activities. Please work them into your home routines as best as you can alongside the academic activities.**

Supporting the mental health and wellbeing of children and families:

Early Years & Reception – parents will not see a huge change in work from school as lots of the activities already included in the weekly learning are play based and will support your child's well-being as well as their wider development - these can be completed anytime over the week and posted on Tapestry for staff to see.

Year's 1 to 4 – the children in Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 at Wooler First School will have planned *Wellbeing Wednesdays* where teachers assign wellbeing activities to be completed on a Wednesday. These

activities will involve learning from a range of different subjects and often be creative and collaborative in nature. On a Wednesday the posts made to Seesaw and Google Classroom will be from the range of activities provided for the day.

Year's 5 to 8 - the children in Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 at Glendale Middle School will have a menu of wellbeing activities to choose from and we are encouraging children and parents to try 1 or 2 a week and fit these around the lessons which are assigned in their Google classrooms. To incorporate this we will reduce the expectation to 4 hours of English and 4 hours of Maths a week for all year groups plus their foundation subjects.

Of course if there are activities there that you would like to complete on other days that is also fine but they would need to be done as well as the subject work set on these days. If you have siblings across the schools and want to complete wellbeing activities together this is also great and staff will be happy to see this on your posts. For example if you have a child in Reception and one in Year 5 then of course the younger child can join in with the wellbeing activity as appropriate and this can be posted onto Tapestry, Seesaw or Google Classrooms. Here in school lessons will continue as they are at present with staff managing and responding to the wellbeing of their classes throughout the week. Children in our bubbles are very welcome to also enjoy these wellbeing activities with their families at home in the evenings and at weekends. We have trialled some of these approaches over the last week and will be getting them fully in place for next week.

Another important aspect looking after our mental health is for us all to maintain contact with friends and family during the lockdown. There are many apps and platforms available via the internet, on our computers and on our phones that allow us to connect with each other. We have been doing this at home to be able to connect with friends and family that we have not been able to see over the last year and although it is no replacement for actually being with friends and family it does help us all to feel connected. I would encourage all families to make best use of these platforms but to also supervise the use of these technologies, particularly with younger children. We are continuing to look here in school at how we can facilitate face to face contact for children in their classes & form groups and there are technical, safeguarding, child protection and organisational challenges that we need to overcome.

February half term contact tracing. Throughout the pandemic head teachers have been on-call 7 days a week to respond to Public Health Officers if a positive case occurs in children or staff in their schools. This expectation is continuing again over the February half term period. Over the week of the half term break I still need to be informed if your child develops COVID symptoms and that you have booked a test. **This is only needed if your child has been in school during the week before half term.** I also need to be informed of the test outcome as Public Health test and trace will be relying on me to share with them details of any close contacts that may have occurred while children were still at school during the last week of term. I will also need to communicate key information with families if their child is identified as a close contact. To enable parents and carers to contact me I will again be using the special email account created solely for this purpose over the February holiday. This is the only email that I will be monitoring each day so please do not use any other school email (including individual teacher emails) or the school phone number to communicate with me during half term.

February half term COVID email: mrdeanehall@gmail.com

All of our COVID secure procedures will continue next term and we hope to have more information to share regarding the reopening of schools soon.

Keep safe (and keep going!)

Mr Deane-Hall