

4 February 2021

Dear Parents/Carers,

UPDATE FOR PARENTS / CARERS – FEBRUARY 2021

You can watch a video about most of the information in this letter by [clicking here](#).

I hope you and your family are safe and well at this time. I know from speaking to / emailing many of you that it continues to be difficult managing the challenges of lockdown with work and home learning. You will, no doubt, be aware that the Prime Minister has now said he expects schools to begin opening to more pupils from **Monday 8th March**, if it is safe to do so. There are positive signs that rates of infection across Milton Keynes are falling, though sadly they do remain [very high at the moment](#) – well above the national average in the seven days up to Friday 26th January.

I wanted to write to you today to give a general update about goings on at school and give you some information you may find useful.

Children in School

We currently have 75 children in school, split across 5 ‘bubbles.’ This represents just under a quarter of our usual number (23%). Many of these children are classified as ‘vulnerable’ under the government’s definitions, and others are the children of parents / carers classified as being ‘critical workers.’

Remote learning offer

Last week, we published our Remote Learning Offer, which I would encourage you to read on our website [here](#).

We have now started running at least three ‘live sessions’ on Microsoft Teams per class, per week. The schedules for these live sessions can be found on your child’s ‘Calendar’ when they log in to Teams, or on our Facebook page. These sessions were really well attended last week, after a slow start as families struggled to ‘get to grips’ with the program. Our brilliant administrative staff (Mrs. Lowe and Miss Richardson) tried really hard to support the families who called into school. Please continue to be patient with them – although they are very good with computers, they are not ‘I.T. experts’ and have sometimes found it difficult to help over the phone without seeing your device. This is a problem since Microsoft Teams looks very different on many devices! If you continue to struggle, you can visit the [Microsoft Teams help and learning page here](#).

Teams has proved a really useful tool for helping us stay in touch with our children and monitor their usage and engagement with their work. We can now post messages to them in their class’ channel. If they have the Teams app installed on a device at home (and they are signed in), they should receive notifications of messages or upcoming events such as assemblies. Again, you can learn about how to set this up at the help page linked above.

Alongside the live sessions, we continue to produce ‘[Daily Sways](#).’ This is the focus point of our teaching and learning. By doing the quiz activities, teachers can monitor whether your child is engaging with the work and can even see how well they are doing. Remember, if your child has done some really good work, they can email it into

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their year group's email address (e.g. Year3@orchard.emat.uk). If they do so, they could be in with a chance of winning the Home Learning Star for the week and getting a 'shout-out' in assembly on Monday!

I know that trying to ensure your children are learning whilst you might be working is incredibly challenging. We would love to hear some of your thoughts on how we can continue to improve our remote learning offer, and will look to send out an online survey soon.

Remember, if you are struggling to access remote learning for any reason, we are keen to support you in whichever way you would like. Whether this is loaning a laptop or printing work for your child – please do get in touch and let us know as it is so important we do our best to stop your child falling behind their fellow classmates.

Live sessions

I am often asked why we have not moved to teaching live lessons online throughout the day. There are several answers to this question. Firstly, compared to many schools, we have a far higher percentage of children in school. On average, secondary schools have just 5% of their children attending. This means far fewer teachers are needed in school, allowing them to focus on delivering online teaching. Schools across Milton Keynes have an average of 13% pupils attending. The same is true for many primary schools who have fewer 'vulnerable' children attending. Taking into account the staff absences we've had due to covid recently, it would be exceptionally difficult to staff live sessions running all day alongside teaching the pupils in school. Secondly, many of our families have told us they would struggle to enable their children to use the internet for live sessions at the same time. This could be because they do not have enough devices, because their home broadband cannot 'keep up' with so many live meetings going on, or because the parent / carer is working from home too. Using pre-recorded teaching with assessments and activities that are available anytime gives families the flexibility to support their children's learning in a time and a way that is convenient to them. Although some parents (and schools) have held-up live lessons as the 'gold standard' of remote education, we know from a recent Ofsted publication ("[What's working well in remote education](#)") that this is not necessarily the case. We are confident that our remote learning offer now provides a very strong blended approach which, along with the regular live sessions, provides some social interaction for the children and a chance to 'touch base' with their teacher on a regular basis.

Please do make sure you have read our [Teams access guide and protocols](#). Teachers have reported that some parents have been 'prompting' their children during live sessions. We want children to be able to engage with their teacher and peers in the same way as they would in the classroom, without fear of saying the wrong thing or making a mistake. Having someone talking to them in the background will, at best, distract them and disrupt their thought process. At worst, it may stop them wanting to volunteer answers / thoughts altogether.

Mental Health and Wellbeing

Although most of the children are not in school, we remain committed to their safety and wellbeing, particularly during these difficult times. Our staff will be looking for any issues they may notice and will talk to you if they are at all worried about your child. Similarly, if you have concerns about a child during this period, please contact our Designated Safeguarding Lead Mrs. Sam James through the school office (01908 670 681) to discuss it. Alternatively, you can contact Milton Keynes social services by calling 01908 253169 or 01908 253170, or emailing children@milton-keynes.gov.uk

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There is also a wealth of support and information available to help you and your child during this lockdown period.

Short videos for parents:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A2d89wuAc4I>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uO9xTHIpdDA>

Help for adults and children:

[Coronavirus: we are here for you | Mind, the mental health charity - help for mental health problems](#)

Active breaks during remote learning:

imoves <https://imoves.com/the-imovement>

Cosmic Kids Yoga <https://www.youtube.com/user/CosmicKidsYoga?safe=true>

GoNoodle <https://www.youtube.com/user/GoNoodleGames?safe=true>

This Girl Can <https://www.thisgirlcan.co.uk/activities/disney-workouts/>

Please remember that we are here to support you and if you need to contact us during this lockdown period, please do so as normal through the school office.

Staffing

We have recently been delighted to welcome back Miss Dani Shaw (sports coach) to Orchard following her maternity leave. This week we were also thrilled to welcome back Mrs. Ann Scott (finance officer) after a long-term absence. I am delighted to announce the appointment of Ms. Sharon Johnston as Operations Manager. Ms. Johnston starts this week and has lots of experience working in schools as a School Business Manager. She will be leading our amazing administrative team and working across both Orchard and Shepherdswell.

We are also pleased to tell you that all our colleagues currently working in Cedar have now received the first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine. Staff working in the education sector with children who have complex needs have been prioritised by some local authorities in England, including Milton Keynes. With [yesterday's news](#) that vaccination may lead to a substantial fall in a person's likelihood of transmitting the virus, this is excellent news for both the staff and the children currently in Cedar class. Staff at Orchard are also now receiving regular lateral flow tests for COVID-19, which is clearly another layer of reassurance that we are doing our best to keep everyone safe.

We very much look forward with hope to be able to welcome your children back from 8th March if it is safe to do so. Until then, remember that if you or your children need our support there are several ways to get in touch – either by calling the school office, emailing the year group addresses, on Teams or through our Facebook page.

Please be safe, keep well and stay in touch.

Yours sincerely,

Mr. C. Brown
Headteacher

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