

Valley End C of E (VC) Infant School

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Headteacher: Mr Richard Mead BA (Hons) PGCE PG Cert

Dear Parents,

We have received some feedback about our reopening plans and so would like to explain further the reasons that the school is currently reopening only for critical key worker and vulnerable children.

The government announcement about possible phased reopening was initially made during the second week of May and the intention to reopen schools **from** 1st June 2020 for Reception and Y1 was finally announced on 28.05.2020.

This gave schools three weeks to prepare for reopening following the guidance given by government, which has produced in excess of 40 guidance documents being updated every few days.

The guidance, as given in our letter of 03.06.2020, shows that the following sequence of reopening must be followed:

- The first priority has to allow the return of vulnerable children and the children of critical workers.
- The second priority has to allow vulnerable children, the children of critical workers and children in Reception to return.
- The third priority has to allow Year 1 children to return alongside vulnerable, critical worker and Reception children.

As a school, we only made the decision to prioritise critical workers and vulnerable children, **because that is what the Government have told us to do. We did not make the selection of critical workers a priority because of any school policy or school-based or indeed, personal, opinions.**

Having discussed our situation with Surrey County Council's Area Schools' Office this morning, we understand that there are several infant schools in Surrey who can only accommodate vulnerable and critical worker children. Other local schools who have managed to open to Reception and/or Year 1 have lower numbers of critical workers' children, more staff or building space or indeed a neighbouring junior school to accommodate critical workers' children.

Every classroom must have hot running water and soap available. Pupils and staff must be socially distanced. At Valley End, these factors mean that six classrooms can be used with a maximum of 12 pupils in each, which allows a maximum capacity of 72 children.

Bubbles, or groups of children and staff, have to remain together every day and cannot mix or be changed. This is the government guidance designed to reduce the spread of infection as far as possible.

Critical key worker and vulnerable children must be able to access the school every day. They must remain in the bubble in which they are placed and the bubble cannot change.

We have decided that there must be two staff with each bubble to ensure that staff can help any child who may be ill or injured or needs to go to the toilet. There is detailed guidance about the use of toilets during this period. Staff also need to clean down frequently used items in the classroom, for example, keyboards, tables, pencils and resources being used to teach. Staff also need to be able to take a break which would not be possible if there was only one member of staff with a bubble.

Valley End has been notified by parents of their critical worker status and along with vulnerable children, there are **57** children who must be prioritised to return to school full time.

In each year group, there are more than 12 critical key worker/vulnerable children, which means that we must open more than one classroom in each year group. While that means we will not be at a complete capacity of 12 in each classroom, we cannot open the school to any further children as the bubbles must remain intact without any alteration. Again, this is government guidance and has today been verified by Surrey County Council's Area Schools' Office.

The original plan was to bring back Reception and Y1 on a rota basis. Each year group would have had to be split over three classrooms due to the capacity of 12 in each room and so would have attended for part of the week as critical key workers and vulnerable children would have had to remain in one or two bubbles if their numbers had remained low. There were further considerations of how to fill the space beyond Reception / Y1 groups during the week.

However, the critical key worker and vulnerable children have priority and we must follow government guidance.

As we let you know in the letter of 03.06.2020, there was a significant increase of parents indicating their status as critical key workers which has resulted in the use of all 6 classrooms to accommodate the children. The number has increased during this week and are all verified. We **cannot** name these families because of data protection and in any case, they should not be the target of any comments.

We are very happy to offer critical key worker and vulnerable children the places as advised by the government.

As a society, we value the critical key workers and vulnerable children needing support to have the chance to take advantage of the same life opportunities as their peers.

It may appear that we have space for a maximum of **15** more children after the **57** critical key worker and vulnerable children are in school. Unfortunately, we can only emphasise that when bubbles are set, they must remain fixed and further children cannot be added to on an ad hoc basis. Again, this has been verified today by Surrey County Council's Area Schools' Office. The bubbles will be in place every day as critical key worker and vulnerable children must be offered full time places.

Space restrictions and government guidance prevent us from offering places to more children, which is as frustrating for us as it is distressing for you. We wanted to welcome back all children in Reception and Year 1, even if on a rota basis. Our preference would be to have all children back in school but until there is a change in guidance, we cannot have anyone other than children in the first priority group back at school. The scenario of having all children in Reception and Year 1 back in school was indeed discussed by Mr Mead and the Full Governing Body, but was deemed unsustainable and did not allow for the maximum health and safety of pupils and staff. Given the parameters set by the government we have ensured that children and staff will be as safe as possible.

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We are not excluding children from school. We can only emphasise again that we are following government guidelines.

Mr Mead has weekly Zoom meetings with the other Surrey Heath Headteachers in order to discuss the response of other local schools including that of home learning. The quality of home learning that has been sent home by Valley End is in line with other local infant schools and again this was verified as appropriate by Surrey County Council's Schools' Area Office. In fact, many parents have commented positively on the different approaches that we have taken as a school to enable home learning. Parents have particularly appreciated the personal emails to and from teachers and the 'how to' videos as well as useful website links. The teachers and teaching assistants are really missing their classes and so felt it important to make enjoyable videos to let them know this and to keep in touch. We must emphasise, however, that these 'enjoyable' videos were recorded and produced by staff in their own time and at weekends and were not part of any teaching time.

Over the coming weeks Mr Mead will continue to meet with other local headteachers as he hopes to agree a manageable set of protocols with a view to the shape of home learning across all Surrey Heath Infant Schools. We will then communicate this to parents if and when these protocols have been agreed.

There has been an enormous amount of government and Local Authority (LA) guidance which has changed almost daily in some cases. We would like to assure you that there have been many hours of research, investigation and checking to arrive at the current offer of places.

Mr Mead spoke personally with Michael Gove MP on 03.06.2020 expressing his and the governing body's dismay that more children cannot be taken back into school. Mr Gove commended Mr Mead for the work he is doing to ensure that the school follows the government advice to ensure there are full time places for critical key worker and vulnerable children. Mr Gove also explained to Mr Mead that he had done the right thing by prioritising places for vulnerable children and those of critical workers as instructed by the government. Mr Gove further advised that if you have any questions or queries about the choices that have been made at Valley End that you should contact him directly at: michael.gove.mp@parliament.uk. Please also direct any concerns about Valley End to Liz Mills, Director of Education and Life Long Learning at Surrey County Council. Liz.Mills@surreycc.gov.uk

We also wanted to assure you that Mr Mead has reported our situation to Surrey County Council and he will be reporting it to the DFE.

We will be looking closely at how the school is operating and will review all government guidelines and advice as it is updated so that we can respond as soon as possible and make any changes possible as quickly as possible. Much depends on the country's behaviours coming out of lockdown and the spread of the coronavirus, which cannot be predicted now.

We would love to tell you what will change in the next few weeks or in September and will update you as soon as we have received guidance and information from the LA; but at this moment in time, there is no plan from the government or the LA.

There is also current media speculation about schools opening during the summer break. We have received no information about this proposal and so cannot comment on any possible summer opening at this time.

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We hope that you now have a flavour of the amount of time and effort that has gone into looking at the issues of space in school, staffing, health and safety and government guidelines. We must follow guidance, which is more complex than the headlines in the media suggest.

Finally, thank you to all those parents who have sent the school their support and best wishes during this challenging time. However, the school's Chair of Governors, Mrs McLeod, would like to express her disappointment and concerns about some of the negative, untrue and personal comments against Mr Mead within his role of Headteacher. Mr Mead has worked tirelessly throughout this whole situation, especially with regard to running the school according to government guidelines and the wellbeing of staff and pupils. As a National Lead Governor, Mrs McLeod works with many other schools and headteachers and would like to let you know that Mr Mead is one of the most supportive and caring headteachers that she has had the pleasure to work with as well as being a highly professional practitioner.

We look forward to updating you again once we have reviewed the current situation on the 17th of June.

Yours sincerely



Mr R Mead
Headteacher



Mrs Y McLeod
Chair of Governors