

Dear Parents,

Sadly, we had the heating engineer in today, and he briefly got the boiler going but, the heating is NOT working properly. This is because the pump needs an adaptor which he will not have until Thursday morning when the engineer will return to fix it all properly. Because we have to have increased ventilation, with windows open, the contingency extra heaters, we sometimes use, would not be sufficient to keep staff and pupils warm. For this reason school will be CLOSED until Friday, assuming that the engineer can fix it on Thursday morning.

This difficulty with our heating means we have no option but to close.

Many apologies for the very short notice.

Looking beyond our heating problems, as you will have seen in the media there is mixed advice about whether primary schools should open in January.

This morning the local Whitehaven head teachers and I had a heated teams meeting and decided that Whitehaven primary schools will be CLOSED tomorrow and then aim to open Wednesday or Thursday for vulnerable children and key workers. Below are the main factors why this decision has been taken.

## **REASONS TO CLOSE**

- As you will be aware we don't understand why the new strain is spreading so rapidly. This made some headteachers unsure if our current mask and visors would still keep us safe.
- Scientist theories the new strain's spike may be stickier. Where previously the virus had let's say a 1 in 100 threshold of infection, so if 100 virus particles got in to you only 1 of them would successfully enter your cells. The new virus strain may be better at entering your cells due to its stickier spike protein. So this could mean that only 50 particles need to enter your for the same chance of 1 entering.
- Alternatively some behavioural scientist theorise that the increased spread we are seeing might be due to "COVID Fatigue" where people get so fed up of the rules they stop adhering to the precautions and procedures that would reduce spread.
- Or alternatively it could be something completely different..basically they don't know yet.
- BUT what we do know is that the current tier 4 measures are not stopping the spread and numbers are rising more quickly than expected. Currently we have 12 new cases in the Lowca, Distington, Parton area. This is very low compared with

other regions in south east. BUT Eden area near Penrith is at 820 per 100, 000 compared with Copeland at 230.8 per 100,000.. But think back to the reasoning that made all Cumbria go in to tier 4 ( despite Copeland being one of the lowest in the country) ie that Barrow, Carlisle and especially Eden are SO high that hospital capacity is overloaded and movement and shopping patterns mean it will spread to us. It is a good idea then to get ahead of this because of our close proximity to high areas. This is the thinking of Tony Scott, Cumbria's county leader.

- We are also waiting for the post-Christmas day increase in hospitalisation which is inevitable and which will put at risk the local hospitals ability to help those who are more likely to have tragic outcomes.

## **REASONS TO STAY OPEN**

- This was balanced with the feeling that we owe it to the pupils to try and catch up on learning they have already lost out on and we should be open because our rates are so low.
- Also previous evidence indicates the virus doesn't spread through primary schools evidenced by % of teachers dying of the virus being no higher than other professions.( Although evidence suggests it does spread through secondaries hence the lateral flow mass testing being introduced.)

Considering all the points I feel we would be wise to only partially open to the vulnerable pupils and those who are children of critical workers that cant arrange alternative child care so am writing to you to inform you of this below.

Dear parents and carers,

I hope you and your families are safe and well at this time ant that you have had a peaceful Christmas and New Year.

I am writing to advise you that for Health and Safety reasons, Lowca School will only partially re-open from Friday 8<sup>th</sup> January, for the most vulnerable pupils and the children of critical workers. We will provide home learning (online or printed) for all other pupils. I will write later today with this information ready to start remote learning tomorrow. Cumbria County Council have written to the government this weekend to request a partial opening for all primary schools. Cumbria Public

Health are deeply concerned about the likelihood of further significant transmission of Covid-19, when schools do start. It is due to the more contagious new strain of the virus, its prevalence among younger age groups, and the fact that North Cumbria's NHS intensive care capacity is now full. Unfortunately, the DfE refused Cumbria's request and said schools should fully reopen. Stewart Young, the Leader of Cumbria CC is quoted today as saying, "this is the wrong decision for Cumbria and for our families and communities... we are concerned... about staff and pupil welfare and safety." He also stated that, "any school that cannot open the school fully in line with the government instruction will have the full support and backing of Cumbria County Council".

Having spoken to staff today, a number of staff have advised us that on the basis of national scientific advice and local data, they do not feel that a full primary classroom is a safe workplace at this time. They do not wish to put themselves, pupils, families and communities at risk by coming into work in a fully opened school, and they are exercising their right under health and safety law, not to do so. As a result, because of a lack of available staffing, Lowca School expects not be fully re-opening until Monday 18th January, however we will continue to keep this under review.

Today, Whitehaven Consortium of Primary Headteachers( Whitehaven Primary Schools Consortium: Bransty Primary School, Moresby Primary School, Kells - St Marys Catholic Primary School, St Begh's Junior School, St Gregory and St Patrick's Infant School, Monkway Junior School, St James' CofE Infant and Nursery School, St James' CofE Junior School, Valley Primary School, Kells Infant School, Lowca Community School, Jericho Primary School) have met virtually. We discussed the current concerns over the rising Covid-19 numbers across Cumbria and the high transmission rates of the new strain of SARS-COV-2. Primary Schools across our cluster and fellow clusters across the west coast will not fully reopen and will only open to vulnerable and critical key worker children. As a group of headteachers, we are monitoring the situation carefully ensuring that our priority as always is the safety and well-being of our pupils and staff and the communities that we serve.

**VULNERABLE PUPILS** We are carrying out a full review of current pupil needs, using national guidance. Mrs Crawford will contact you tomorrow directly if we feel that your child needs a place in the classroom, due to their own additional needs.

**CHILDREN OF CRITICAL WORKERS** Critical Workers are defined as those who are essential to the Covid-19 response and work in: Health and social care Education and childcare. Key public services Local and national government Food and other necessary goods Public safety and national security Transport and border services Utilities, communication and financial services National advice on Critical Workers is here.

To apply for a place for your child as a critical worker, please text Mrs Crawford on 07872181619 explaining your role, and let us know by Thursday 7<sup>th</sup> January. We do need to limit numbers, both for safety reasons, and to ensure that staff can also manage the home learning for pupils not in school. As a result, we would encourage you to support the children at home with their remote learning rather than sending them into school, if possible.

**UPDATES ON CASES AND SELF-ISOLATION** Please can we ask that if your child is required to self-isolate in January over the coming days, or if there any positive cases in your household, please can you email school to our email address: head @ lowca.cumbria.sch.uk so that we can be fully informed of the latest situation in the community. We will of course keep this information strictly confidential. We are very sorry to have to write to you like this at the very end of the holidays, and we are doing so because of our wish to keep our children, staff and families safe. Thank you for all your support,

Kind Regards,

Joanne Crawford Headteacher Lowca Community School