

Tuesday 28 April 2020

Dear Parents, Carers and Colleagues,

We are writing to you to provide you with an update on recent developments at St Mary's. In December's letter, we said that '2020 will be an important year in the life of St Mary's. Well, back in December we certainly could not have foreseen the situation that we all currently find ourselves in. 'Unprecedented' is a word that is sometimes overused, however, in this situation it seems entirely appropriate.

Given the current circumstances, we felt it would be helpful to write and let you know how St Mary's has been responding to and adjusting to the Covid -19 crisis. I know you have all received the letters we have sent to parents and carers throughout the crisis. Natalie Edwards will continue to provide updates as and when guidance becomes available to schools, or when there are events or developments that we need to communicate to you. You may also have seen that recent letters have been published on the newly recently updated school website. Further resources and links are still being added, but we are pleased that the feedback we have received so far is that the new website is clear, easily navigated and a useful resource.

It has been a busy and unusual few weeks since schools were 'closed' on the 26th March. There was a great deal of speculation leading up to this, largely about what it might look like in practice. Situations leading to school closure understandably lead to uncertainty and worry – and affect everyone in the school community, especially alongside with the government's guidance about self-isolation, shielding and social distancing. We particularly noticed that a growing number of parents and carers started to keep their children at home in the week or so leading up to the closure date – this was typical across schools locally and nationally and reflected the increasing anxiety. We communicated at the time that parents and carers would not be penalised in any way for absences related to the Covid -19 situation.

Crisis management is obviously not easy and one of the most challenging aspects for us has been the timescale between announcements made by the government in televised briefings and the subsequent publication of more detailed information, sometimes several days later. One example of this was when it was announced that schools would close, other than to 'vulnerable pupils' and those with EHCPs. We wrote to parents at the time to inform them that we would, wherever possible, offer a school placement, for day and residential pupils and students as all of them have EHCPs and some may fall into the 'vulnerable' category. However, over that weekend, details were published that gave a much stronger message about the need for all children to be kept at home if it is safe for this to happen – including most pupils with EHCPs. We then had to subsequently re-contact parents who had indicated they would be happy for their child to continue to attend, to explain that in many cases, this would not be in line with government guidance.

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We do understand that the uncertainty will have been very confusing for families and their children and young people, as it was for us.

We are proud that our staff responded brilliantly to this situation. Unfortunately, but understandably, we do have a small number of staff who are shielding either due to their own vulnerability, or that of family members in their household. At any one time there is also a small number of staff members who are self-isolating due to them or someone in their household experiencing symptoms. All other staff are currently on a rota to attend school. In many cases they will attend for a week and then be rostered to work at home for up to two weeks, to avoid unnecessary travel or contact with others. You will, I am sure, appreciate that this is a particularly anxious time for staff working in schools, given the risks associated with the virus and the general advice for people to stay at home to stay safe. We are very grateful for their ongoing commitment.

We have been able to keep our residential facility available for those who most need it, so our attendees are a mix of day and residential pupils. We are in regular communication with parents and carers and as well as checking on welfare issues, staff are providing activities and learning opportunities at home. This is sometimes a difficult balance to achieve and we recognise that the most important thing is that children and families are safe at this time. We are delighted to say that in some cases we have been able to start providing therapy input using video links between school and home. This is new for us, so please do bear with us if there are teething problems.

We do anticipate that some pupils and their families will experience difficulties during this period and we will continue to work with social workers and other professionals to ensure that if there is a need and it is safer for a pupil or student to be in school than at home, a place can be offered.

Other aspects of school life are continuing, albeit differently to normal. Our IEB governor meeting was conducted as a virtual meeting and this is likely to be repeated in similar meetings during the coming weeks and months. We are pleased to report that our Standard 20 termly monitoring visit did happen (remotely) just prior to the Easter holiday. This provides external monitoring and quality assurance to our residential provision. Our Standard 20 inspector communicated how impressed they were with the way St Mary's has responded to the current situation.

We are also continuing to work on improving facilities around the school, including some not very glamorous, but nevertheless essential works to replace boilers, pumps and associated equipment within the residential houses and the swimming pool. We are also in the process of refurbishing a number of classrooms and developing plans to improve the facilities around the school site.

When Jean wrote to you in September, she updated everyone on the financial position of the school. We are pleased to report that, although we still have some way to go, the financial situation is looking increasingly improved. This is due to some diligent work by our team and to the steady increase in pupil referrals and placements. We are hopeful we will have close to 70 pupils on roll in July and that this number will continue to increase in the coming academic year.

Our next priority will be to begin to attract more residential pupils to St Mary's during the coming months. We are always keen to receive referrals for these sought after placements. Of course, the Covid -19 situation makes the immediate future somewhat unpredictable, so we will have to do our best in these challenging times. We are also continuing to commit resources to plan for essential maintenance and developments around the school and college.

We would like to thank the staff at St Mary's for their work in recent months and particularly our senior leadership team, who have worked tirelessly to both manage the school in these difficult times, but also to continue to focus on their work to improve the school further. We have been recruiting new teachers and support staff who will start working at St Mary's in the coming months and we will provide more details as this happens.

Finally, we would like to send our very best wishes to all of our pupils, students and their families and carers. We hope you are able to keep safe and well and we look forward to seeing everyone in person again soon.

With our very best wishes,

Richard Preece
CEO

Jean Haigh
Chair of Trustees