

Cllr Millard: Hello and welcome to talk Richmond. I'm Jim Millard and this is episode 5. It's time to go back to school and I'm joined by headteacher at Orleans Park School in Twickenham, Elaine Ball, and the Director of Children's Services for Richmond and Kingston, Ian Dodds, to discuss schools fully reopening and all children heading back to school. This, for me and I'm sure many, many parents out there, is a very important episode. After months of lockdown, some parents and carers will be happy for their kids to be going back to school. But some others will be a bit anxious and even scared about the risks around coronavirus. Elaine and Ian will be discussing schools reopening to all year groups and the provisions taken to try to make schools as safe as possible for our young people.

So, without further ado, welcome Elaine and welcome Ian.

Cllr Millard: Hi Elaine, how you doing?

Elaine: I'm very well. thank you. Looking forward to going back to school myself as well.

Cllr Millard: Excellent, yes, yes. Thank you so much for coming on. And Ian, how are you?

Ian: I'm very good. Thank you. I'm also looking forward to getting out of my house and visiting from schools when they have reopened.

Cllr Millard: Yes, yes, it's going to be brilliant and I mean it's such an important thing and we've been through so much this year. I'm sure we all remember very clearly on the 18th of March this year it was announced that the UK schools, nurseries and colleges would have to close to the majority of children and young people until further notice to reduce the spread of coronavirus and ultimately help save lives. Although schools remained open to children, of course, of key workers and those deemed vulnerable and then began to partially reopen in June, millions of children have not been in the classroom for months now. What were your concerns for children not being able to go to school when that happened? Elaine, I'm going to ask you first. What were your thoughts about how it was going to affect your students?

Elaine: most children really like going to school, they love learning, they enjoy the time in the classroom with their teachers and they enjoy the play time and they enjoy the extra curricular and it's just that whole loss of that sort of physical experience I think has been really, really challenging for children.

Cllr Millard: Absolutely. Schools have obviously adapted to that fantastically and there's been a huge amount of work that had to go into that. And Ian, and I just wondered if you had any thoughts about what with the concerns for children when the lock down happened and when schools were told they had to close.

Ian: So I suppose my big concern was that those children who are safest in schools - who are most vulnerable children - were encouraged to attend, and it was really positive that all of our schools were open and providing that care and support and learning for the most vulnerable children and young people in our borough, including those who got special educational needs and disabilities and complex health conditions. I suppose I was also concerned, Jim, about those children who wouldn't learn well at home using virtual classrooms or work provided to them at home by their teachers, so we know that some children have been really happy to be at home and to learn at home and others have found that more challenging. And so I suppose I was concerned about the differential positions for each of those children that some would come back to school having had a really good learning experience and some would come back not having had that - and would be behind in terms of their learning and education.

Cllr Millard: Yes, absolutely. I mean Elaine, lots of work was done around trying to make sure that those children didn't have access to technology and things like that were not left out of the loop. Is that right?

Elaine: Yeah, I mean, for example, we gave out about 100 Chromebooks to students to enable their learning, but it you know it took time for schools to get up and going with remote learning, and, you know, schools are there for a reason. Remote learning is not the same and we can't replicate that as an experience that they that they will get in the classroom.

Cllr Millard: Yes, yeah, well absolutely. And some parents and carers, nonetheless, we will be very anxious at the thought of their children returning to the classroom, especially if they themselves are having to shield from coronavirus. Well, it's obviously impossible to ensure totally risk-free environment. I wanted to ask what are some of the measures schools in the borough are taking to help welcome children back. Ian can you start on that?

Ian: I can. So I know that all schools have completed really detailed risk assessments to look at what they need to do to make their schools as safe and Covid secure as they possibly can. There will be a whole range of measures that they have taken, including you know the implementation of one way systems around their schools. Smaller classrooms are use of other space around the school so that children are able to spread out, all of those kind of things schools have worked through, but it's not just about what's happening in the classroom. It's also about you know how they manage communal spaces in the schools, how they will hold whole school assemblies, or year group assemblies or how they will manage their school canteens and other spaces as well, and they're play spaces outside. And I'm, I'm sure Elaine will be able to give us a really detailed information about how it's working at Orleans Park.

Elaine: OK, we've all gone through a very detailed risk assessment following the government guidelines on prevention and response to an incident. There are things like staggered start, using different entrances, significant reduction in movement around schools including the one way systems, we're ensuring that students stay in year groups in zones, and they're not mixing between year groups. The younger year groups will stay in one classroom and classrooms will have desks in rows, etc, no group work to start with. There are seating plans in place so we know exactly where every child is every lesson. They will be then staggered lunch times, so there's less queuing, so rather having for us 1,350 children out in playtime there will just be 400 children and they won't mix at lunchtime. We've moved from the finger scanning system to pay for large to a card reader, hopefully all about reducing the opportunity for transmission. We've made decisions to have no assemblies and they will go virtual. So all of those are trying to prevent the transmission of COVID-19. Also then we've increased our washing facilities, we've gotten 150 sanitizers on site, so every time you go into the classroom or leave, you can sanitize your hand.

We also have been place responses for any incident of COVID-19 and through that around collection of the child from the classroom. There's an isolation room. There's cleaning in place, if there is anybody suspected. We also support parents then in booking test appointments will also be given this week tests field to do on site so we're doing everything then if we do have an incident or suspected incident, we want to make sure that we respond appropriately and safely to check that the site is safe for all children.

Cllr Millard: Thank you Elaine. That is actually really reassuring to hear - the level of detail, it's clearly been thought out very carefully and a lot of time, effort and resource have been put into this. I mean I, I'm sure I speak for all the parents in this borough when I say please pass on our thanks to all the school teachers and staff had to work over lockdown through this summer to to make sure schools prepared. It must have been a big effort.

Elaine: It's been a busy time for us. We don't have much of a holiday, but yeah, we you know we're all genuinely excited about receiving children back and making it as positive as possible.

Cllr Millard: Absolutely, and you know the next question is really how else will school be different for when children go back? Will the curriculum change? I know you mentioned your awareness of the growing gap over the lockdown between different children from different families. You know how is the curriculum going to change and how is that going to be sort of looked at as the sort of catching up aspects of things?

Elaine: Yeah, I think most secondary schools will need to keep a very similar curriculum as they would normally deliver, because obviously we're working towards GCSE and a levels so certainly in the older year groups they will be in the specialist rooms - food technology, design technology, the Art Room, science, etc. So that is really not going to change. Year seven and eight are going to stay in the same classroom, so they won't have, unfortunately, the opportunities to be in food tech room science rooms, and that really is just to limit movement around the site. And I'm sure many secondary schools are in a similar position. We certainly are though ensuring that everybody's got Physical Education. So we're doing a lot of sport, they'll be able to change, we'll be doing play outside, getting fit again and really sort of use some energies – that's going to be a really important part of our curriculum. Obviously we think that students will need to catch up - some students will need to catch up, and we're going to put in some additional lessons there, particularly around the core, English and maths, to make sure that the younger students are up and ready to go to, you know, make sure they can achieve their GCCSEs and a levels in the future.

Cllr Millard: And Ian do you have anything to add to that?

Ian: So Elaine is specifically talking from a secondary school perspective, and I know that primary schools will be following a very similar approach. So there will be a focus in the immediate weeks when children return on the foundation subjects, so literacy and numeracy and then gradually building up all those other subjects that children enjoy at school. And of course, the government is also provided some additional funding so catch up funding and some funding for tutoring for individual pupils, which will which schools will be able to use to meet the needs of those children that need it.

Cllr Millard: Elaine how are staff feeling about returning to school?

Elaine: Yeah, I mean most of the staff the teachers have been in school during lockdown because initially we just had obviously the key work and the vulnerable, so we only had about 20 then, but then when after June 15th when you had year ten and year 12, we had about 100-150 every day on site, so that involved quite a lot of staff. It will be different even though you know I've been in virtually every day, but it will be different when there are 1350 children on our site and when there's that movement. So I think some people are more anxious than others, but we're working with the staff, they've seen the work we've done to actually make sure they feel safe, but the bottom line is we're all teachers, we all love working with children and we want to be doing that back in the classroom.

Cllr Millard: Absolutely, you know it. It does sound very reassuring. And a question for Ian, if I'm a concerned parent, does my child have to return to school?

Ian: Yes, essentially so the expectation is that all children will return to school at the beginning of term in September, and I realize that some children will be anxious about returning, and I know some parents will also be anxious about their children returning to school. I think the most important thing is that parents discussed those anxieties with their children, and if they remain anxious to discuss them with their school as well to find a way forward. So I've been asked a lot of questions around, you know, will the local authority be fining parents who don't send their children to school now that you have that power back? And of course, the answer to that is no, we would want to work with parents initially to make sure that we can support them to get their children back into school as smoothly and as quickly as possible, and to work through any anxieties that they may have about returning to school. But as I say, the most important thing is to have that conversation with your school at the very beginning.

Ian: You asked me at the beginning what I was worried about in terms of children not being at school, and I think one of the things that I have become worried about is an increase in children who might have anxiety or emotional health issues or even some mental health concerns from not being at school. And so in particular, I think we're going to have to do some targeted work with those children to make sure that they are comfortable about returning to school. So you know, for me, they fall into several groups, so there will be those children who over the lockdown period developed some anxieties about school and about attending school, and they'll also be a group of children who have been really happy at home and they've thrived there in terms of their learning and development. But again, it's important that they return to school for all the kind of structure that school provides in terms of the things beyond learning, so being with their peers, learning to play and work with each other again - so those are important things that we need to get children back into that routine of doing.

Cllr Millard: Well, it's clear this is important - the more we talk about this and start talking about it now, and I hope this podcast could be part of that, the better it is. I certainly I'm starting to get my head around the whole process a lot more as a parent just from talking to you too, and I'm sure others listening will be.

Cllr Millard: And finally, what one message would you both say to parents who are still concerned? Elaine

Elaine: Just email us, give us a ring, talk to us and we can talk through the plans in details. We can, you know, even get you into school. Just keep that conversation going. We are genuinely doing this for your child. We want them back in school because they need to be learning.

Cllr Millard: And Ian?

Ian: So I would say schools have done an enormous amount of planning to make sure that they are really safe places for your children to be. Take a look at that and talk to your schools and your teachers and the head teachers to find out what they've done and they'll be able to answer any questions that you might have and hopefully you know put you at rest in terms of the actions that they've taken.

Cllr Millard: It's been a real pleasure and you know, as our children start heading back to school, it clearly is really important discussion to start having looking at all the detail of what's being done. I hope parents and carers in the borough have found this episode useful. I know that I for one as a parent myself understand that people can feel nervous at the thought of kids going back into school. However, having spoken to you both, it really is very reassuring to hear about this and it's clearly the right decision to go back, and it's great to hear that our schools are doing everything they can to make sure that their learning environments are as safe as possible.

For further information on the topics discussed, check out the show notes below. If you have any questions, please email us on talk@richmond.gov.uk. Please do subscribe and leave a lovely review. Hope to get an A plus plus. I'm Jim Millard. Thanks for listening.