

Statement from the Diocese of Guildford

The use of the closed school buildings during Covid-19 – an evolving situation. For transparency we are including all our statements during this period.

03/07/2020

The Diocese of Guildford, Diocesan Board of Education (DBE) and Bishops have received several emails from parents of Year 5 children at The Raleigh School expressing their concerns that their children cannot return to school if the Ripley buildings are not brought back into use.

We understand and appreciate the concerns of parents and recognise how hard this period of lockdown and home-schooling has been for the mental well-being of their children.

All the parties involved in this situation want to ensure that children are kept safe from harm and are protected from any risk and this is why the DBE has offered the use of four classrooms and facilities at Esher High CE Secondary School. The school has remained operational throughout the period of lockdown offering a safe learning environment for children of key workers and is a registered school site which meets the requirements of the Department of Education guidance.

In the meantime, the DBE have now received the report from the risk assessment carried out on Tuesday 30th June commissioned by The Friends of Ripley and we have not received any other documentation, safety certificates or evidence that the site is appropriately insured, and is compliant with the requirements of the Health and Safety Act.

Fundamentally, there seems to be some misunderstanding on whether an unregistered school site such as Ripley be used for additional capacity for schooling during the pandemic.

The Department of Education is clear and unequivocal on this point. The Diocese has spoken with the Land and Capital Projects team at the DFE who have confirmed in writing that both the current guidance (as well as the new guidance issued yesterday) states that unregistered school sites should not be used for additional capacity for schooling nor will additional capacity be required in September.

The Diocese deeply regrets that the Year 5 children and parents at The Raleigh have been drawn into the ongoing dispute about the future of these Church school buildings which could have been avoided if the Diocese has been contacted at a much earlier stage rather than becoming aware just two days before the children were due to return. The offer to use the Esher Church of England Secondary School remains and can be taken up by The Raleigh School if they would like the children to go back to school before the Summer break.

02/07/2020

The Diocese of Guildford urgently looks forward to receiving the results of the Risk Assessment conducted on Tuesday. We have written to the Friends of Ripley asking for a copy as soon as possible.

The Diocesan Board of Education intends to meet this evening to review the report from the risk assessment as part of its due diligence on the overall safety of the site. We await the copy to do this.

Our priority is still the children, and our offer of Esher High Secondary school remains on the table, available to all staff and children now. No child needs to miss anymore school.

01/07/2020

The Diocese has been informed by Friends of Ripley that they have undertaken a risk assessment for the Ripley site rather than allowing an independent health and safety inspector on site. This is disappointing and does not match what was agreed with the RSC.

The Diocese is awaiting the results from this to understand what elements of a health and safety inspection has been carried out and by whom, and what the next steps may be, but it is likely to cause further delays before all parties involved can be fully assured that the site is safe.

It should also be noted that current government guidelines and the Department of Education guidance do not allow former (non-registered) school buildings to be used for educational purposes. The diocese will not contravene government guidance. However, if this guidance changes in the coming days, by making sure we have all the necessary checks in place around safety, we will be ready to review the position.

As we continue to explore all the different options, the offer to use Esher High Secondary School's four classrooms and facilities remains open to Sir Andrew. This offer enables all parties to put the education of the Raleigh Year 5 children first without losing any further days of school. Indeed, this is an offer that goes far beyond the opportunities for any other Y5 children across the whole of Surrey.

29/06/2020

It is with deep regret that the Diocese of Guildford's offer of four excellent classrooms and facilities at Esher High Secondary School has been rejected by The Raleigh School and the South Farnham Education Trust (SFET).

We must now look for a way forward. Safety has always been our main concern – because the main school buildings at the Ripley site have not been used for nearly two years. As such, we agreed with Sir Andrew Carter and the Regional Schools Commissioner that an independent health and safety inspection needs to be carried out, as a matter of urgency, to establish if the site is safe.

26/06/2020

The Diocese of Guildford has stepped in to [offer Year 5 children at the Raleigh School the opportunity to return to school before the end of term by using another one of its Church schools, Esher High Church of England Secondary.](#)

The national guidance issued by the Department of Education permits the use of registered Secondary Schools to support the return to school of primary aged children. Esher High Secondary School has offered to open its doors safely to all 60 Year 5 students from next week.

24/06/2020

Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic and the requirement for social distancing, the Diocesan Board of Education (DBE) has been working hard to support our 83 Church of England schools and our headteachers, governing bodies and school staff to ensure that they were able to keep their schools open for the children of key workers.

Recently, the Diocese of Guildford was informed by the Friends of Ripley that they were considering using the closed school site at Ripley to re-open for children from local schools.

Following national guidance issued by the Department of Education, and after liaising with the Regional Schools Commissioner and the Local Authority, the Diocese has been advised not to use the buildings for this purpose. We realise that this is disappointing to those locally, but the safety of children and staff is paramount.

The Diocese understands that the Friends of Ripley have offered the use of the buildings to The Raleigh School in Horsley. It is sad that The Raleigh school did not contact the Diocese before writing to parents to inform them of their plans to use the site.

Diocesan Director of Education, Mr Alex Tear explains:

“We understand that many parents are keen to see their children return to school as soon as possible but most importantly when it is safe to do so. Our main priority is the safety of children and school staff and we take these responsibilities very seriously.

The main school buildings at Ripley are no longer a registered school site and have not been used

for nearly two years. We have been advised by the Department of Education that opening the buildings at this stage of the school term could expose children to risks which would not be responsible or conducive to a good learning environment for the children.

The school site has been vacant since 2018 when the former primary school closed. The Diocesan Board of Education is hoping to use the school buildings for Special Educational Needs (SEND) provision for children with learning difficulties and disabilities. This will mean that the site continues to support children locally and across the county.

Bishop Jo Wells, Chair of the Diocesan Board of Education, said:

"I am deeply aware of the longing for this site to be reopened and fulfil its role of providing full time education to our children. The Diocese longs for that too, while recognising the problem of the many surplus places currently in neighbouring schools. To this end, the Diocese has invited the Friends of Ripley and the site trustees who are responsible for the site to explore an exciting possibility of developing Special Education Needs provision. There is huge need for this in Surrey, and we would be proud to support this precious yet vulnerable sector of the community."

-End-

Notes to Editors

The Diocese of Guildford supports 83 Church of England schools across Surrey, Hampshire and Kingston and is committed to ensuring that all its Church schools provide excellent education and serve their local communities.