

Thu 04/03/2021 12:28

Dear Colleagues,

Wednesday's Budget

As most of the contents of the budget had been comprehensively leaked in advance there were few surprises. The extension of the furlough scheme is welcome from a financial point of view <https://www.shropshirelive.com/business/2021/03/03/shropshire-business-leaders-react-to-sunaks-spring-budget/> . It may give us some more room for manoeuvre, but we would all rather be busy welcoming back learners to our centres as soon as possible. This budget announcement will be added into the mix of the decisions that the Operational Coordination Team (OCT) are working through as we decide what and when we can offer courses and holidays to our customers. There are still unfortunately a number of unknowns and as ever I am mindful that ongoing uncertainty is difficult for all of us.

Dates for Reopening?

At the time of writing, the sector and some of our most supportive MPs continue to push the DfE hard on changing the guidance to the current advice against school visits. That indoor education can restart before outdoor has caught the media's attention. As you can imagine rumours and hopes abound but we do not have anything concrete yet. The Covid Operational Planning Team have always been careful to avoid speculation until we hear direct from government but if I were to try and guess I would say that day visits at least might be allowed to resume before residential. I believe that next DfE review will be on the 22nd of March so watch this space. Wales is continuing to state that the guidance is under review although no date for either a review or decision has been provided unless something is announced in next week's cycle of updates. Scotland have stated that the guidance will "continue to be considered for day trips as schools re-open more fully, and for residential trips by the end of March 2021." This week saw roadmaps without dates for both Scotland and N Ireland indicating the likely order of reopening. The Scottish Parliament, however, has other things on its mind.

Information from our Human Resources Team

If your role was not significantly affected following the restructure and consultation process and you have not yet received a new contract, you should expect to receive a new contract as per the format agreed via the collective consultation within the next couple of weeks in an email.

Health, Wellbeing and Useful Guidance

Few announcements of key dates (apart from the much anticipated return of Line of Duty on 21st March) will have been so welcome as the return to school in England on 8th March. A more phased return is already underway in Scotland and Wales. Many of you have juggled responsibilities, shared space and stretched broadband to its limit. The government have produced some guidance on [what to expect](#) when children return to school which you may find helpful.

In the meantime the 21st June feels like a long way away. We have always tried to find useful sources of Health and Wellbeing advice so I want to flag up the BBC's latest offering [Headroom](#) which is truly comprehensive and I'm pleased to see that the theme of [Escape to Nature](#) has a prominent place. A

couple of programmes come highly recommended. [Winter Walks](#) is incredibly relaxing as the presenters let nature speak for itself with some nifty camera work and for those who find any celebrities too distracting you might enjoy [Turtle, Eagle, Cheetah: a slow odyssey](#)

Office for Environmental Protection

I recently indicated that a few green shoots of policy normality were returning. It might not be Boris' crocus of hope, but one is the setting up the OEP in an interim form until the Environment Bill gets Royal Assent which isn't expected until the Autumn. The OEP and the extent of both its independence and powers were hotly contested when it was first outlined, with FSC's policy officer sniffily referring to it as the Environmental Watch Poodle. The principal objective of this independent body is to contribute to environmental protection and the improvement of the natural environment. This OEP is setting up shop in Worcester rather than in Whitehall as part of the government's move away from a London-centric mode. Whether this geographic distance is to be mirrored in an independence that can truly call the government to account is yet to be seen.

Blencathra Self Catering

I have attached a leaflet showing our self-catering cottage offer at Blencathra. These are selling well on Heart of the Lakes, but ideally, we would prefer to give staff a chance to book directly and take advantage of the 20% staff discount. Given the present government guidance, we can open these up from April 12th so staff who want to get away before centres get busier and holidays are harder to take in our peak summer period might want to catch this early bird offer. For those not familiar there are lots of good outdoor attractions close to Blencathra – not just the mountains – that can be enjoyed as we move out of the initial lockdown period. It may even appeal to those working from home for a change of scenery – a walk up the Glenderaterra Valley makes for a good lunch break and 'daily exercise'!

Keep well and stay safe

Mark