



25th January 2021

Dear Parents/Guardians

CHILDREN TRANSFERRING TO POST PRIMARY SCHOOL IN 2021

As post primary schools make their 2021 admissions criteria public I believe now is the appropriate time to share our plans for the future with you.

As you know, the past number of months has been incredibly challenging for primary 6 and 7 children and their families. The recent chaos surrounding the AQE common entrance assessments has, without doubt, caused additional stress for many of the young people in our community. Not only have children spent months preparing for the assessment, but now they find themselves in a position where they have no idea whether they will be admitted into a school of their choice. An already stressful time is further exacerbated by the limited choice many children attending our contributory Controlled primary schools have in regard to post-primary education. Indeed, concerns raised by a number of local primary school principals were acknowledged by the Education Minister in his letter sent to schools on 8th October 2020. It is our view that the governors and staff of Lisneal College have an obligation to respond to the pressures and challenges faced by the Controlled sector and all children caught up in the transfer uncertainty. Therefore, I am writing to you to offer a commitment to provide additional choice, reassurance and compassion for your child(ren) as you begin the admissions application process.

Where We Are Today

September 2018 was a significant moment in the history of Lisneal College. Although the number of children applying to our school had increased steadily since 2015, September 2018 saw a huge rise in applications (both first and second preferences) to our school. The admission of 156 children meant that we had to think carefully and plan strategically for a larger number of children who aspire to follow a curriculum with a strong academic focus. Prior to 2018 our curriculum offers at Key Stage 4 and Post 16 had become limited in respect of full GCSE and A Level courses as more applied and vocational subjects were introduced. This was the correct decision for the young people attending Lisneal College at the time and our examination results will show this to be the case. The 2018 year 8 cohort presented us with a very different challenge: how could we provide a pathway for a growing number of children who demonstrated high levels of academic ability throughout primary school? Could we do this whilst maintaining our commitment to supporting children with a range of special educational needs and for young people wishing to follow a vocational pathway? The simple answer is yes. Since 2018 a significant number of new GCSEs has been introduced to our curriculum and we anticipate this trend will continue. Our staffing profile has also changed significantly over the past three years as our overall enrolment continues to rise sharply. In the last three academic years we have added twenty-one new teachers to our staff to help us meet the curricular needs of all of our pupils. It should be noted that only three of these positions were replacement posts. Our recruitment policy very much focuses on a candidate's ability to teach to the highest academic

standards at A-Level, whilst also being capable of adapting to the needs of all pupils across all key stages. This allows us to not only raise expectations for our pupils, but of ourselves. The culture within our school is very much one of aspiration and raising achievement whilst supporting our children and young people pastorally throughout their time with us. It is my view that our reputation for strong pastoral care is now matched by our ability to provide high quality pathways for children of all talents and abilities.

It is fair for you to ask why we have become so confident in our ability to provide for all children, including those children with a strong academic focus. The reason is stability. In the past two academic years we have been oversubscribed and, as a result, we are able to plan more assuredly for the longer term and offer more subjects to more children; this wasn't possible four years ago. Although we can never be certain of what the future holds for any school, I am confident that the admissions pattern for our school will continue for the foreseeable future. This stability has allowed us to review and begin to plan for the introduction of a broader range of A-Levels to our 6th form curriculum.

School Data

Over the past three years we have gathered data on the number of children with AQE scores admitted to Lisneal College. The data have contributed to the evaluation of our curricular provision and the strategic positioning of Lisneal College as a true all ability school. Within our Key Stage 3 year groups there are 149 children who took the AQE common entrance assessment: 52 in year 10; 45 in year 9 and 52 in year 8. The scores indicate that up to 135 of our pupils scored higher than the minimum score required for admission into a number of grammar schools across County Londonderry and County Tyrone. This clearly shows that Lisneal College has adapted and that we are already meeting the demands of many more children who could have attended grammar schools. Within our system of education in Northern Ireland many people may question whether an all ability school can genuinely provide for all children of all abilities and talents. I can assure you that we, like other all ability schools in the region, have the capacity to serve all children.

Into the Future

After long discussions with governors and my senior leadership colleagues we have decided to introduce a band for children with a history of high academic performance. We anticipate there will be places for up to 40 children (final number to be decided) who wish to pursue a curriculum with a strong academic focus. Pupils will be admitted into the band based on their performance in age-appropriate assessments which focus on key aspects of English and mathematics. These assessments will be administered in our school in early September 2021. I must emphasise that these assessments will only be used to allocate places in the band after transfer and will not be used as a means of gaining admission to Lisneal College. Children who gain a place in the band will study the same Key Stage 3 curriculum as all other children; however, there will be a particular focus on supporting and challenging children who aspire to follow an academic curriculum beyond Key Stage 3. When the children reach Key Stage 4, all pupils will have access to our full suite of GCSE and equivalent qualifications. The governors fully recognise that children will grow and develop their own decision making skills throughout their time with us; however, we believe that a Key Stage 3 pathway which incorporates some level of academic based entry could help meet the demands of more children choosing to attend Lisneal College. The introduction of the focused academic band has been under consideration for some time and may also be introduced to years 9 and 10 in September 2021. It is important to note that children may move in and out of the focused academic band based on tracking, annual assessments and ongoing dedication to studies.

In accordance with our inclusive ethos, all children who attend Lisneal College will be equally valued. Our provision for children with special educational needs will continue to be of the highest standard and our curriculum provision for pupils wishing to avail of both high quality vocational and general qualifications

will ensure that each young person is provided with the opportunity to reach his/her potential. The introduction of a focused academic band is simply an extension of our already inclusive provision.

As our school enrolment continues to grow, we recognise that we must constantly review and adapt to ensure we meet the needs of each child who comes through our doors. Our curriculum offer at Key Stage 4 and Post 16 continues to grow, particularly in relation to general GCSE and A-Level qualifications, and our pupils have access to the myriad subjects available through the Foyle Learning Community. In essence, every child who attends our school will have the opportunity to follow their chosen pathway and be supported to do so. The staff at Lisneal College are highly dedicated, professional and ready for the next stage in the evolution of our school.

The purpose of the letter is not to canvas for pupils, but to simply reassure you that if your child is admitted into our school, first preference or otherwise, the opportunity to thrive will not be limited. We are for all children.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Allen". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'M' and 'A'.

Michael Allen
Principal
Lisneal College