



29<sup>th</sup> April 2020

Dear Parents and Carers

## Update on the proposal to introduce Reading and Therapy Dogs

I hope this letter finds you and your family well. We would like to take this opportunity to update you on the proposal to introduce Reading and Therapy dogs to Blessed Robert Sutton Catholic Voluntary Academy. 'Pet therapy' is widely accepted as benefitting children's well-being and communication skills. Studies have shown that the presence of companion animals can improve the well-being of children and lower the rate of anxiety simply by making the environment happier, more enjoyable and less forbidding. Dogs are increasingly being used in schools with great success and some of you may have seen in the media that they are now being used in some hospitals as the emotional health benefits they bring are so vast.

Of particular interest, is the current move towards "Reading Dogs" and "Therapy Dogs". The former is based on research which shows that many children who find reading practice difficult are more willing and able to read to the non-judgmental audience of an animal than they are to a human being! Therapy dogs are similarly being used as a source of comfort and relaxation for children and adults who may need "someone to talk to" or just someone who will accept them and offer comfort or a calming influence in their lives. There is much evidence that children who struggle with relationships or with managing their own emotions gain a great deal from spending time with a pet.

With these ideas in mind, and especially given the world pandemic we are currently in the middle of, we are delighted to share with you that, following our consultation and moving forward with parental support, the Governors have agreed to the concept of working with Reading and Therapy dogs in school. Blessed Robert Sutton have made the decision to introduce two Reading and Therapy dogs to the school from September 2020.

### What are the benefits of School Dogs?

- A calming effect on students
- Improved behaviour and concentration, reduced stress and improved self-esteem
- Encouraging expression, participation and confidence for all children
- Fostering a sense of responsibility
- Motivating students to think and to learn, as most children have a high level of natural interest in, enthusiasm for and enjoyment of animals
- Encouraging respect and thereby improving students' relationships with each other, parents and teachers
- Teaching children to nurture and respect life
- Helping work undertaken with the most vulnerable children
- Helping children build confidence in reading
- Improving attendance
- Further promote our 'Wellbeing' agenda for students

Next week, I will be going to collect one of our school dogs. He is a Cocker Spaniel Puppy, who in time will be trained to be a Therapy dog, whilst also living with me at home. He will be joining Mrs Wilson's dog - Hugo (Black Labrador). During this period of lockdown the dogs will be coming into school and, eventually, when they are used to the environment, they will be introduced to some of the children. Once we are back at school children will also attend assemblies and receive training about how to care and behave safely around dogs, from the dog trainer and the charity Dogs Trust.

Obviously, bringing any animal into school is not something to be approached lightly, both for the animal's sake and for the sake of the children and adults in the school. I have visited and taken advice from Headteachers who have school dogs. We have discussed the practicalities, including everything from risk assessments and insurance to dealing with training, doggy toileting and children's allergies. Also, I am very fortunate to be working with an accredited and experienced dog trainer, alongside the 'Dogs Trust' and 'Dogs Helping Kids' charities who already have a number of dogs successfully working and training in schools.

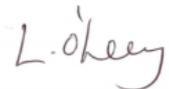
To reassure you, our dogs will not be around the school off the lead while they are training and they will be trained to an exceptionally high level. We are very mindful that introducing dogs into the school setting should not be a distraction to the children's learning but should enhance our school ethos and the experiences we offer our children. I attach a list of comments from the parental consultation - feedback from our parent body was incredibly supportive of the proposal. Whilst there were no questions raised by the consultation - for your information I have attached a copy of answers to a number of initial questions you may have. A risk assessment will be available on our website before the dogs arrive in school which will give you some indication of the amount of thought that has gone into this initiative.

On returning to school I will write to you again to collect further information around children with any relevant allergies or phobias or, if for any reason, you would prefer them not to have contact with the school dogs.

If you have any questions or queries regarding the introduction of school dogs into our environment, please do not hesitate to get in touch.

Thank you for your ongoing support during this unprecedented time.

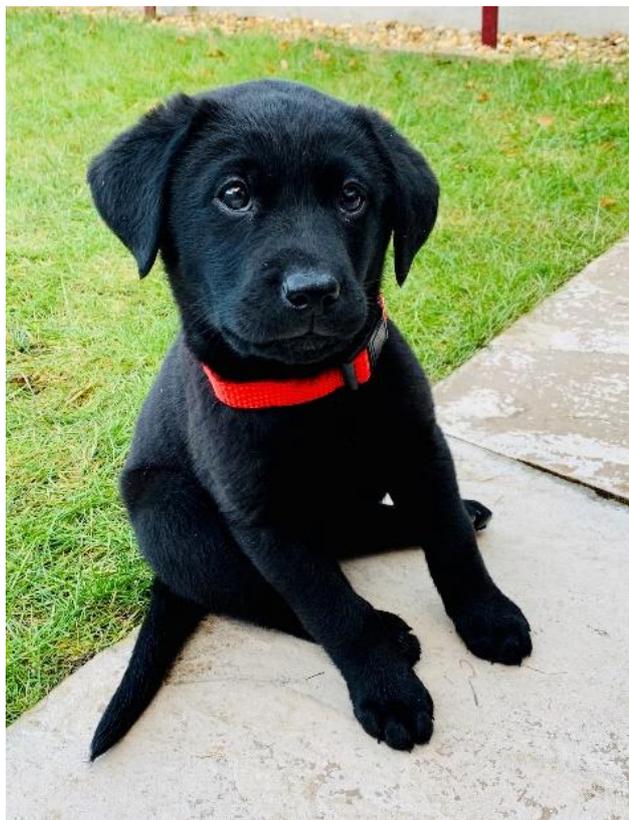
With best wishes



Laura O'Leary  
**Acting Headteacher**

Let us introduce you to our school dogs. They will soon be familiar faces around school!

## Hugo



Meet Mrs Wilson's puppy and the newest member of the Blessed Robert Sutton team, Hugo Wilson.

Hugo is a 10 week old Black Labrador. He is playful, enjoys having his belly rubbed and loves food. He is growing quickly but loves to sit on Mrs Wilson's knee for a cuddle.

Hugo came to live with Mrs Wilson a few weeks ago and originally he was going to have a different name but he came from the breeder with his name and he answers to it so we didn't want to confuse him.

He will be popping into school soon to get a feel for the place before he is ready to start working with students. Like all our lovely students Hugo will be going to school, Puppy School, to help him become an awesome school dog.

Joining Hugo will be our newest recruit - an 8 week old Cocker Spaniel.

His 'dog-mum' is called Panda and he comes from a line of champion winning dogs. His litter is 'The best in show litter'. This puppy's 'dog-dad' works as a Therapy and Reading dog. Several dogs from this breeder have already become School or Therapy dogs. He has been carefully picked with much guidance from the breeder for his temperament and his coat, so we think he is going to be a great recruit. Like Hugo he will be going to Puppy School where they will be working towards a range of awards including the Kennel Club Good Citizen Award as well as their accreditation as Therapy dogs.

But - we do need students help in picking out a name for him. Further details to be shared on Firefly.



## Pastoral School Dogs – Feedback from our Parental Survey

- I think this is a fabulous idea and it will help enormously to support those children who do suffer from anxiety and need extra input and a different learning environment. We've used therapeutic pets for a long time in adult social care and rehab and they do provide a new opportunity for engagement and connection to people who can be hard to reach and resistant to traditional methods of contact and engagement. I do wish you every success in this new endeavour at the school.
- My child has an allergy to dogs that causes eye itching and sniffles. She gets a bit wheezy too but isn't asthmatic as such. Just wondering if all students will access the dogs and if so how long for at a time. Thanks. I think it's a great idea for supporting children's SEMH needs though.
- I think it's a great idea having therapy dogs in school, they will be a fantastic addition to our school family.
- I think this is a brilliant idea!
- When I went to visit a Year 10 work experience at The Friary school in Lichfield they had a school dog and to see the students interact with him was so lovely. I can see our students responding in an equally positive way.
- This is an excellent idea. We have a dog ourselves and she is like Christmas Day every morning, she has changed our lives for the good in a big way.
- Introducing animals within school is a fantastic idea, it will give the children a great deal of overall wellbeing.
- We all think this is a great idea and will be fully on board. My daughter is very excited about this proposal. My daughter can occasionally be slightly allergic to new dogs initially but does calm down and only an antihistamine is needed. She does live with our own two dogs so this shouldn't be a problem.
- I think this is a great idea, I just hope ALL children {that want to} get to have some time with them and not just the same children. Maybe an idea that each year group has a day that is their time with the therapy dog e.g. Monday Year 7, Tuesday Year 8 etc.
- I know my daughter would love a therapy dog in school. She is a lover of pets...especially dogs. We have a dog at home and she loves him dearly.
- We think this is a fab idea and very exciting too. Fingers crossed all goes to plan.
- I think this is a wonderful idea with many benefits to student wellbeing and has our family's full support.

## **Pastoral School Dogs – Answers to some questions you may have**

### **Who would be the legal owner of the dogs and who pays for their costs?**

The legal owners will be Mrs Wilson and Miss O’Leary, who will care for them out of school hours in their own homes and will bear all the costs associated with having a pet dog, including the purchase of the dog.

### **Will the Dogs be from a reputable breeder?**

Yes, we have spent many months researching for a reputable breeder. The breeder has monitored the puppies for eight weeks and has advised us as to which puppies would most suit our exacting requirements.

### **Will the Dogs be a distraction?**

The dogs will be kept in different supervised offices around school. These offices are separate from the classrooms to ensure the dogs only come into contact with students who are happy to have contact with a dog under strict supervision. We will be careful to ensure that time spent with the dogs is shared amongst students.

### **Has a Risk Assessment been undertaken?**

Yes, a formal Risk Assessment has taken place – a copy (along with a Pastoral Dog policy will be available on the school website). We have carefully considered having a dog in school and sought advice from many sources, including other schools that successfully have a School Dog.

### **Who is responsible for the training?**

Miss O’Leary and Mrs Wilson would be the legal owners and, as a result, will be responsible for training. Appropriate professional training will be obtained; initially they will complete basic puppy training and then work towards becoming a ‘School Dog in Training’.

### **How will the Dogs be toileted to ensure hygiene for all?**

In the interest of health and hygiene the dogs will be toileted in a sectioned-off area of the school site where children have no access.

### **When will the Dogs come into School?**

It is recommended by ‘Dogs Helping Kids’ that dogs integrate gradually into school life from eight weeks of age, as this is a crucial stage in their socialisation. This will take place during the current period of lockdown.

### **How will the Dogs' welfare be considered?**

They will be regularly walked by a member of staff (on a volunteer only basis) and have plenty of opportunities to use the toileting area. The dogs will be kept in school offices and will only have planned and supervised contact with students and visitors. They will be provided with food and unlimited access to water, a bed and favourite toys. The dogs will be carefully trained over a period of time and we will work very closely with other professionals to ensure their welfare is always carefully considered.

### **How will this be managed where students have allergies?**

In order to interact with a dog, students will not need to touch them unless of course they wish to do so; this will relieve the possibility of allergic reactions. We already manage a number of allergies at school and this will be no different for students and adults that are allergic to dogs. Individual needs will always be met and we are happy to work with parents to put additional control measures in place for individual allergies.

### **A student is afraid of dogs, how will you manage this?**

Access to School Dogs would be carefully managed and supervised and students would not need to have close contact with them. We hope to work closely with students who are fearful of dogs (at parental request) to alleviate their fear and to help them manage this.

### **What would happen if Miss O'Leary / Mrs Wilson were not in school?**

Being on the Senior Leadership Team we appreciate that at times it would not be feasible for us to bring the School Dogs into school and arrangements would be in place to keep the dogs at home.