3rd July 2019

Dear Parent(s)/carer(s),

Re: Wellbeing Dog

We are very excited to introduce you to a new member of staff who we will be welcoming to our school over the next few weeks. Georgie was born on 9th May and she is an 8 week old Labrador Retriever who is in training to become a school dog and is set to become an integral part of our community. She will shortly be beginning her first set of puppy classes and, in time, we plan to train her to become a qualified ‘wellbeing’ dog.

Throughout the media, we hear significant stories about the increase in adverse childhood experiences and heightened anxiety. Georgie is joining the school to help support these students and will be based within The Marion Centre. However, she will be available to all members of our community who may benefit from her help. Georgie will settle into school life over the summer holidays in readiness for the new academic year.

There are many benefits of having a school dog. Wellbeing dogs have been working in schools for the past five years across the UK. However, they have been commonplace in other parts of the world for many years.

Evidence indicates that benefits include

- Cognitive – companionship with a dog stimulates memory, problem-solving and game-playing;
- Social – a dog provides a positive mutual topic for discussion, encourages responsibility, wellbeing and focused interaction with others;
- Emotional – a school dog improves self-esteem, acceptance from others and lifts mood, often provoking laughter and fun. Dogs can also teach compassion and respect for other living things as well as relieving anxiety;
- Physical – interaction with a ‘furry friend’ reduces blood-pressure, provides tactile stimulation, assists with pain management, gives motivation to move, walk and stimulates the senses;
- Environmental – a dog in a school increases the sense of a family environment, with all of the above benefits continuing long after the school day is over; and
- Reading – reading to dogs has been proven to help children develop literacy skills and build confidence, through both the calming effect the dog’s presence has on children as well as the fact that a dog will listen to children read without being judgemental or critical. This comforting environment helps to nurture children’s enthusiasm for reading and provides them with the confidence to read aloud.

While there are numerous benefits to Georgie joining our community, we recognise there are some concerns you may have. Please be assured that the school has been working with external agencies to ensure these have been considered. A few of these are listed below

**My child is allergic to dogs**

It is understandable that some of you may be concerned about possible allergic reactions to a school dog. However, Georgie will be subjected to the most thorough cleanliness and grooming regime. She will also only be allowed in situations with students who voluntarily wish to work with her. Your permission will of course be sought in advance of Georgie having access to, and working with, your child in school.

**Will Georgie be properly cared for?**

Georgie will be extremely well looked after. She will live with Mrs Thomas (Assistant Head/Head of Marion Centre) and her family and will come to school most days but will stay safely in the offices until satisfactory training has been completed. She will then, in time, listen to students read in a controlled setting and will always be accompanied by a trained adult. Georgie will undergo thorough and rigorous training (beginning with puppy classes) so will be extremely well-behaved. Whilst Georgie is in school she will have access to a dog pen and crate in the offices where she can relax during her non-contact time. Georgie will visit the vet regularly for all her
injections as well as regular check-ups. If Georgie is unwell for any reason she will stay at home with a baby-sitter!

**My child is scared of dogs**
Some children may have had upsetting experiences and/or have a fear of dogs (or other animals). Georgie will only be in contact with children whose parents are happy for their child to work with her. However, Georgie’s training will help her to be calm and gentle around children; she is already showing signs of a very loving and gentle nature. Experience and research have shown that, with proper guidance and handling, children can learn to overcome their fear of animals and grow in respect and appreciation for them.

**The school has a ‘no dogs’ policy**
Our school does have a ‘no dogs’ policy. However, as Georgie is training to be a ‘wellbeing’ dog, specific rules will apply to her, as a member of staff. She will be on a lead at all times when moving around the school site and will always be accompanied by a trained adult. Georgie will also be fully insured to carry out her role thus allowing her to be on the school site. Georgie will not be allowed to roam the site freely so there will be no issues with toileting etc.

We hope you will join us in welcoming Georgie to our family and embrace all that she has to offer. While Georgie will be introduced to the school in the coming week(s) via assemblies and walks of the site, should you not wish your child to come in to contact with our school dog then please do let us know. You can do this by getting in touch with Mrs Thomas, Assistant Head by email thomasj@bishopofllandaff.org.

I do hope you will see the benefits of this new addition of the team and we are certain Georgie will provide excellent support to our students.

Yours sincerely,

Marc Belli
Executive Headteacher