

Year 6/7 Transition: The Covid-19 Challenge

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Photo by Tim Mossholder on Unsplash



To say that this year we were faced with a new challenge for providing a smooth transition from primary to secondary school would be an understatement.

Like most secondary schools, we have always looked to engage with new students through a variety of visits, transition days, school tours and enhanced provisions for both SEN and Pupil Premium students. Although some

schools have comprehensive sections on their websites to help aid this transition, we have never had anything but basic information, and none of this has been directly targeted at transition students. When schools closed their doors in

March, all of our usual transition plans were put to one side and we had to start getting creative about how best to prepare our new intake for the coming academic year.

To start with, there was always the hope that everything would get back to normal and we would be able to welcome new students and their parents/carers into our school but, as the weeks passed, it became clear that a new approach was needed and that approach had to be online. We identified some of the key elements that we thought students would miss out on this year and looked at how we could replicate these, as much as possible, without the students being in the school.

Fresh ideas

The key elements that were identified as being important parts of our usual transition days were: a tour of the school, meeting the tutors, a Headteacher's welcome, parents/carers' information talk, and a chance of meeting current students. On top of these, we also felt we needed to put in something to reassure incoming students and their parents of the fact that we felt confident about our approach to this year's transition and were aware of the

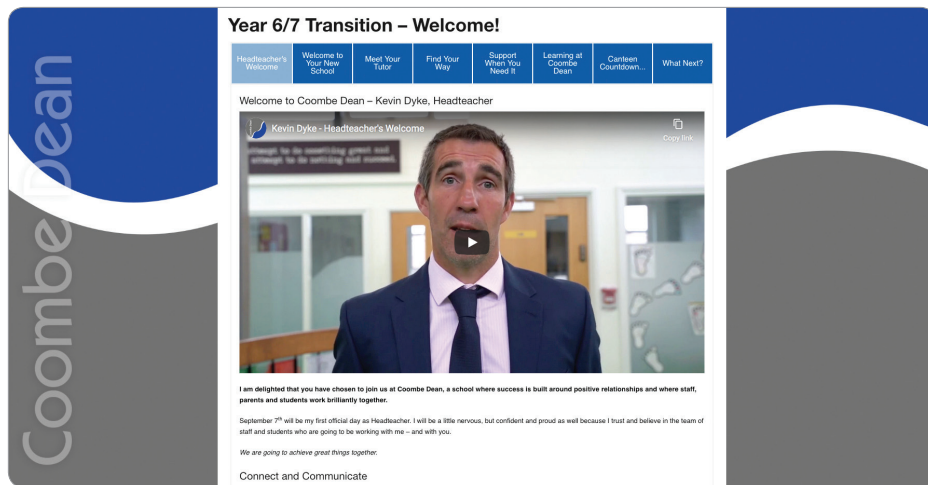
heightened anxiety of many of those who would be joining us in September. Considering that we had very little in the way of online resources at this point, we knew that there was a lot to accomplish in a short space of time.

Upgrading our virtual space

We were keen that the area of our website for transition looked professional and would be easy to navigate; therefore, we could not rush the process. We are very lucky that we have a good relationship with an ex-staff member with some skill and experience in producing video material for the school. He helped us develop ideas for what we wanted. His creativity was key to ensuring that the resources were vibrant and full of energy which we hoped would appeal to our students and encourage them to feel more excitement than worry about starting their new school. He was able to collaborate directly with our Website Manager and between them ensured a high standard of resources.

Communication is key

In order to open communication with parents/carers, we sent out regular emails including newsletters, FAQ



Screenshot from Coombe Dean School website

sheets and links to relevant sections of our website. We were able to keep them up to date with everything that was happening whilst promising them more resources were on the way!

During this time, the most requested resource was the tour of the school which we had told them would be added to the website when it was completed. For many students joining the school, a chance to look around was something they did when they attended one of our open evenings. However, we have a large proportion of students coming to us who did not attend these open evenings for a variety of reasons, and, therefore, have never actually set foot on our school grounds. In terms of helping students to feel reassured

about starting secondary school, this was a priority area for us to address. Our director was able to create a film in the form of an interactive treasure hunt. This allowed students to engage with the film by trying to answer clues as they moved around the school. The film featured our Deputy Head along with some of our current Year 7 pupils, which we hoped would help those watching start to recognise some faces for when they join us in September.

Tackling logistics head-on

This theme of having different members of staff and students in the videos was continued through all our resources. This was a challenge as we had to comply

with our Covid-19 risk assessments which prevented anyone from being near anyone else and keeping to strict staff/student bubbles. We predominantly used students who were already in school for EduCare and tried to film staff on days when they were already on the rota to be in so as to keep the number of people accessing the school site to a minimum. We were able to introduce new students to their Form Tutors, Head Teacher, Deputy Head, Year 7 Team Leader, SENCO, Behaviour Support & Catering Staff. We hoped that the use of video, instead of just using photos, would allow students to start to feel more familiar with the team that would be there when they arrive on their first day of secondary school.

A virtual welcome

Another of the key resources on the website is our 'Welcome' video. As Year Team Leader for Year 7 this was the area that I took responsibility for myself. This video was in the planning stages very early and is a wonderful example of how we can learn from others working in Transition around the country. Having seen a similar video shared by a practitioner on a Facebook Transition Group, I was certain that this was something that would be vital to

our transition process this year. In many ways this provides a replacement for the usual parents/carers' talk we would do at a transition day, but it is a much more valuable resource than that. The most valuable part of this presentation is that families can watch it as many times as they want to. At a time when anxiety levels are particularly high, we hope that this will provide reassurance about the expectations of students when they join us.

I was particularly keen that this presentation should not just be a series of slides or a voice over as I want the incoming students and their parents/carers to start to feel like they know

"How lovely! The video is great. I've just sat with my 'soon to be year 7' daughter and watched it and she came away excited about starting."

“Thank you Coombe Dean School for the warm welcome and great introduction video. My husband and I are very excited that our son will be starting in September.”

who I am and are happy to contact me with any questions they have. As this video became available, the decision was made to publish it before the main website area was completed. This was done through notifying parents/carers by email alongside posts on our school social media platforms. The video was very well received by families.

Above and beyond

Although there are many more elements

of the website, the final one I would like to discuss is our “Support When You Need It” video. This was something a little different from our usual targeted messages for new students. Although we are proud to be a school known for the way we support our individual students, this year it felt particularly important that we highlight our understanding that students may be feeling worried about the next stage in their education and to reassure them that all of their feelings were normal. We were able to directly address the situation with Covid-19, how this may be adding to their worries and reassure them that we were going to ensure that their move to secondary school would go well despite this. This also gave us a chance to introduce our SENCO and Behavioural Support team which we felt were important faces for students, particularly those who are most vulnerable, to recognise when they come to school.

Reflections and future planning

The Year 6/7 Transition area of our website is now a wonderful resource which, thanks to the combined efforts of our talented Film Producer and Website Manager, looks great and is easy for families to access. Moving forward we will be utilising this resource in future

years, even if it is in addition to face to face contact. Having information that families are able to access as many times as they want is a real asset to our transition programme although it cannot truly replace being able to allow incoming students to physically engage with the staff, current students and the school. Over the next few months, we will be thinking about improvements that could be made for next year, which will include using more of our students. One of the ideas that we had to shelve this year was to have current students answering FAQs for incoming students, but both lack of time and available students made this unachievable.

Although these resources have been generally well received by families there are still lots of emails coming in from parents with questions that they have. These are predominantly from parents of children who are the first in the family to move onto secondary school and those with SEN. In order to ensure these are responded to as quickly as possible we have set up an email address specifically for Year 6/7 transition which is accessed by several staff members, including the SENCO. The SEN team have also been very busy making phone calls, answering questions, preparing plans and giving some students personal tours of the school. Enhanced transition, for

those students who need it, was never something that could be delivered fully through a website. We will be consulting families as to how this year’s transition process could have been improved upon if we should need to work under the same restrictions again.

The next challenge

At present we are using the lessons learnt through this process to start to produce resources for virtual Open Days, as we will not be able to welcome potential students into our school this September on a large scale. We are hoping to be able to combine online resources, live online open evenings and primary school visits to reach all of our potential students for next year, but, as with all things in this ever changing time, we will have to see what September brings!

Useful links

Coombe Dean School Transition

Web Pages

