

Wednesday 24 June 2026

Dear Parents,

### **Update on Environmental Factors and Skin Reactions**

As stated in my previous communication, I am writing to provide you with an update regarding the recent influx of skin rashes and insect bites we have experienced at school.

I want to begin by assuring you that the health, safety, and comfort of our children are our absolute priorities. I know how deeply distressing and uncomfortable these skin reactions and rashes have been for the children affected, and I completely understand how worrying this situation is for you as parents. Over the week, I have been in constant communication with the Enfield Health & Safety Team, the UK Health Security Agency (Public Health), the School Nursing Team, and the Arborist Team, which is part of the Environment and Communities Department at Enfield Council. They have expressed that they are very happy with the proactive steps we are taking and feel we are doing everything we can. Together, we have been thoroughly reviewing the situation—including checking the number of cases and photographs of the rashes—to continuously update our school risk assessments.

### **What the Experts Have Advised**

Public Health and the Council's Arborist Team have clarified that the skin reactions we are seeing are due to a combination of factors, heavily exacerbated by the current extreme heatwave:

- **Heat Rash:** Many reported cases look very similar to insect reactions but are actually heat rashes (prickly heat). In this extreme weather, heavy sweating can easily block the skin's sweat ducts, trapping moisture beneath the skin and triggering these uncomfortable, itchy red bumps.
- **Hives (Urticaria):** Some of the skin reactions reported are hives, which appear as itchy, raised red or skin-coloured welts on the skin. These are often an allergic response that can be triggered directly by contact with seasonal insect bites, but they can also be brought on by the extreme heat itself.
- **Standard Seasonal Insect Bites:** This time of year naturally sees a peak in standard insect activity, including midges, fleas, mites, aphids, mosquitoes, ticks, other caterpillar species, and common grassland bugs. Because our school grounds and the surrounding areas are so green, with an abundance of trees, shrubs, and grass, we naturally have a high baseline of insect life. The recent very hot weather has significantly exacerbated this, making these insects far more active and directly impacting our children and staff with an increased frequency of bites and subsequent skin reactions. The Arborist team has confirmed that there is, unfortunately, nothing we can do to prevent this natural seasonal increase in general bugs.
- **Oak Processionary Moths (OPM):** There is a confirmed presence of OPMs in the local area, including along our boundaries, on the wider public highway along World's End Lane, and in nearby parks. These caterpillars are at their most active from June until August, and when combined with the current extreme

weather conditions, instances of OPM reactions will naturally increase. It is highly possible that children are picking up these hairs on their journey to school, while spending time in local parks, or when passing near trees in the area. Please note that while OPMs are not active all year round in caterpillar form, the risk of irritation persists in old nests attached to trees, which still contain millions of shedding hairs. The health impact from OPMs is typically limited to a skin rash, which is very similar to other types of insect bites and usually calms down after a few days, and it is very unlikely to be more severe than this. We have attached a leaflet from the Forestry Commission to help you identify OPM and advise on the appropriate actions to take if nests or caterpillars are found.

The experts emphasise that OPM irritation is caused by microscopic caterpillar hairs, not bites or stings. Because of this, standard insect repellents and repellent bands will not prevent exposure or irritation. While these hairs can occasionally become airborne in the wind (especially when disturbed), the Arborist team advise that the airborne risk is generalised and significantly lower—particularly for nests located high up in the trees—and is considered a manageable, acceptable environmental risk that cannot be prevented. The primary health risk remains direct physical contact with the caterpillars or their nests. They have also highlighted that nest removal can be costly and is only typically undertaken where there is a significant public health risk, particularly for nests located below 4 metres.

### **What the School is Doing**

We are taking this matter incredibly seriously and have been implementing an array of rigorous, practical measures on-site:

- **Exclusion Zone:** We securely cordoned off the affected oak tree on our site as soon as we first noticed it—well in advance of any reports of rashes. In previous years, we have not had issues like this, and this level of skin reaction has never happened before. We have now extended this exclusion zone so that the adjacent path is closed; this path cannot be used and everyone must walk around it. Children are strictly prohibited from playing underneath its canopy or near its base.
- **Nest Removal Plans:** We have arranged for an appropriately qualified professional operator from the official Arboricultural Association directory to remove the nests from the affected tree on site. As outlined in the government's OPM risk management guidance, we must use a certified, qualified operator from this official list to carry out this specialised work. Although we successfully treated this tree multiple times previously, the extreme temperatures over the last few days have suddenly escalated the situation in a way we did not experience last summer.
- **No Pesticides:** We consulted the Arborist team regarding chemical spraying to eradicate insects or prevent bites, but they have strongly advised against using pesticides on site. The Arborist team confirmed there is nothing more we can do in terms of treatments; spraying would not successfully eradicate or control the vast, natural population of seasonal flying and crawling insects anyway, and the health risks of introducing chemical pesticides into a school environment are far greater than the risk of the insects themselves.
- **Grounds Maintenance:** We have made our grounds maintenance contractors fully aware of the situation. They are keeping our school field grass regularly and closely cut, as well as carefully maintaining and trimming back shrubs and bushes across the site to reduce the risk of bugs nesting in them.

- **Sand Pit Safety:** We have been explicitly informed by experts that the risk to the reception sand pit is minimal. The sand pit is located far away from the affected oak tree. Because the health risk is primarily associated with direct, physical contact with the caterpillars or their nests (which are located securely within the tree), any potential hazard from OPM hairs or anything else that would cause skin irritation for the children is extremely low.
- **Education, Handwashing and Cleaning:** We are continuing to educate the children on what the OPM caterpillars and nests look like, advising them to keep a safe distance and strictly warning them never to touch or disturb them. Furthermore, we are actively encouraging the children to wash their hands regularly throughout the day, as caterpillar hairs can easily transfer from hands to skin and clothing. Additionally, we will continue to clean classrooms and shared areas thoroughly, regularly wiping down surfaces in case any hairs have made contact. We will continue to closely monitor and manage the site daily.

### **What the Council is Doing**

Enfield Council manages OPM risks on public land and highways. Enfield has been designated an “Established Zone” by the Forestry Commission, meaning OPM is now an established species in the region that cannot be fully eradicated, can only be managed.

- **Management and Risk Assessment:** The Council has clarified that private landowners do not have a legal responsibility to remove OPM nests from their properties. Because there is no single permanent eradication method, targeted nest removal and spraying are the primary management options. Widespread borough-wide removal is incredibly expensive and does not equate to the actual public health risk, as in most cases the reaction is a skin rash that clears up after a few days. However, because our specific situation is near a school, the Council has carried out a targeted risk assessment. To reduce instances of skin irritation for young children, they have prioritised taking action on Worlds End Lane.
- **World's End Lane Trees:** The Council's Highways Tree Contractor has confirmed they will be stepping in to remove the OPM nests from the oak trees on World's End Lane as quickly as possible. Because these trees are located so close to the school, they are prioritising this work to prevent caterpillars from falling onto the pavement. Physical contact with the caterpillars is when it is most dangerous. Please reinforce with your children that caterpillars should not be stepped on, as doing so releases their harmful, microscopic hairs, which can easily cling to footwear and be transferred on their way into school—which is likely how many of our recent cases occurred. They usually only focus on nests below the height of 5 metres, in this case I have been informed they will be removing all of them.
- **Long-Term Outlook:** The Council has noted that OPMs have been present in Enfield for the last five years or so and the population has been steadily growing, leading to the current "boom" we are experiencing this summer. However, "mother nature" is starting to fight back; natural predators, such as blue tits and other animals, have begun feeding on the caterpillars. It is highly anticipated that these natural predators will do their job over the next few years to help naturally reduce the OPM population – we are certainly wishing them a very healthy appetite!

### **Practical Advice for Families**

If your child develops a rash or skin irritation, medical professionals and the Council recommend taking the following steps to alleviate discomfort:

1. **Symptom Relief:** OPM and standard insect reactions typically ease within a day or two. The use of over-the-counter antihistamines, hydrocortisone cream, calamine lotion, Sudocrem, a cool bath, or a cold compress can significantly reduce inflammation and itching. Antihistamines are highly recommended as they are effective in easing the physical symptoms and reducing the itch.
2. **Clothing Care:** Caterpillar hairs can easily stick to skin, hair, and clothing. If you suspect your child has been in contact with hairs, it is highly effective to have them remove their shoes and socks upon returning home, gently shake out outdoor clothing outdoors, and place their school clothes straight into the wash.
3. **Insect Repellent and Bands:** Please note that insect repellent and repellent bands are highly effective against seasonal midges, fleas, and mites, but they will not prevent irritation from OPM caterpillar hairs, as they are mechanical irritants rather than active biting insects. However, please feel free to continue using insect repellent or repellent bands if you wish, in order to reduce the risk of bites from the regular seasonal insects currently present in the area.
4. **When to Seek Medical Advice:** Public Health advises that anyone experiencing persistent or severe symptoms should seek a clinical assessment via their GP or NHS 111. Please explicitly inform the medical clinician that there is a possibility of environmental exposure to OPM or seasonal insects in the local area. As always, any child with a fever or who feels generally unwell should remain at home.

### **Moving Forward Safely**

Encountering seasonal bugs, heat rashes, and outdoor elements is an inherent part of growing up. By teaching the children to manage these risks safely, we can ensure they continue to enjoy their vital time outdoors.

We genuinely feel for those children who are currently dealing with these uncomfortable symptoms, and we send our warmest wishes to anyone suffering for a very speedy recovery.

Please continue to inform us if your child experiences any severe medical reactions so that we can actively monitor any patterns and continue to update our risk assessment. We deeply appreciate your partnership, support, and calm collaboration as we safely navigate these final weeks of the school term together.

Best wishes,

**Tijen Hassan**

Headteacher

Grange Park Primary School