

5 January 2021

Dear Parent(s)/Carer(s):

A week really is a long time in politics! Having established a programme for the first two weeks of the Spring Term, including making arrangements for on-site 'lateral flow' COVID-19 testing, as a result of the Prime Minister's announcement last night, the situation is now very different. We now, therefore, need to communicate further changes and appreciate that this will cause difficulties for many of you, in a really challenging time - we share your frustration with the situation. In short, the Prime Minister announced last night that a new national lockdown will come into force from tomorrow and there have been some very significant changes to the expectations with regard to attendance at school and examinations.

'Lockdown'

In this lockdown period, most students will be expected to stay at home and we have been informed that, with the exception of vulnerable students and the children of key workers, students will learn remotely until February half term.

Vulnerable students and the children of key workers

Consistent with government expectations, during the period of national lockdown, the school will remain open to vulnerable young people and the children of critical workers. As in last year's 'lockdown' period, parents/carers who are key workers, and who would like their son/daughter to be included in this on-site provision, will need to provide proof in the form of an identity badge or other confirmation of their employment. We would ask 'key worker' parents/carers to take advantage of the on-site provision only where this is absolutely necessary. With teaching staff providing a full programme of online lessons, our on-site capacity is limited and students should stay at home where possible.

These students will be accommodated in 'class bubbles' for the duration of the 'lockdown' period and will work on the online programme that other students will follow. The arrangements had already been put in place, and started today, but will now continue for a longer period than was envisaged. School meals will be available and a version of the school transport service will continue to run.

Examinations

Despite the lockdown, the government have announced that public vocational exams and assessments scheduled to take place this month will go ahead as planned. This means that the BTEC and other vocational exams scheduled for this week and next will still go ahead, as follows:

- Wed. 6th Jan, 8:45am-11:15am - Y13 BTEC Sport
- Tues. 12th Jan, 9am-12pm – Y12 and Y13 BTEC Performing Arts
- Wed. 13th Jan, 1pm-2:45pm – Y11 OCR Cambridge National IT
- Fri 15th Jan, 9am-10:30am – Y13 BTEC Sport
- Tues 19th Jan, 9am-12pm - Y12 and Y13 BTEC Performing Arts

However, we are now not in a position to go ahead with the Year 13 mock exams, as to do so would contravene government guidelines.

The government now also seems to have taken a position on GCSE and A level exams:

"In these circumstances, we do not think it is possible for exams to go ahead fairly this summer. The Secretary of State for Education will be asking Ofqual to consult rapidly on an approach for alternative arrangements that will allow students to progress fairly."

However, there has not yet been a definitive statement - the Secretary of State for Education is apparently making a statement tomorrow.

At this time, we do not know how grades will be arrived at if, as indicated yesterday, exams do not take place. We can only hope that the process will be a better one than last summer's 'algorithm' fiasco. At present, in the absence of any other information, our message to students in years 11 and 13 is that we anticipate that we will (as the situation allows) schedule further internal assessments later in the academic year, in order to strengthen our foundation for the generation of Centre Assessed Grades (in anticipation that we will be asked for them). At present, we do not know what the Ofqual model will be, but students need to engage fully with online learning in to ensure that they are well prepared for any further assessments later in the academic year.

Remote education

From Monday 11 January, all students can expect a full programme of online learning, provided through MS Teams in the form of live or pre-recorded lessons, with other resources accessible via SMHW. More information will follow. In the interim, live lessons are taking place for years 11 and 13 this week, with other online work set for students in other year groups.

We have a record of those students who we know have experienced difficulties accessing the online programme, as they do not have a laptop/tablet or do not have Wi-Fi. Lots of laptops have already been loaned out (provided through a combination of our own resources, the support of local businesses and a government scheme). Please do let us know if you need support and we will do our very best to provide you with what you need.

Free school meals

We will continue to provide vouchers, or food parcels, for students who are eligible for benefits-related free school meals, and who are not attending school.

Transport

Where parents/carers have paid for the school transport service and their son/daughter can no longer use this, due to the lockdown, the cost will be refunded. This will be done on a monthly basis, to reflect changing circumstances.

Testing

The situation regarding testing is not at all clear. It would seem that the testing programme will not go ahead as planned. However, we are now in a position to enable weekly testing for staff and daily 'close contact' testing for those staff and students attending school. For the group attending school, we only expect to test where a student has been identified as a 'close contact' of someone who has had a confirmed test result. We may subsequently be in a position to test students on return, but await further guidance on this.

Best wishes:

Stuart Jones
Executive Headteacher

Nicola Mason
Head of School