

Update from the headteacher: September 24th.

It has been wonderful over these last few weeks to see students back in school and learning. In my e-mail to parents before we reopened, I said that I was confident that our young people would step up and make this work. They have. We have had a great start to the term.

As a school, we have enjoyed discovering that we can produce online assemblies. We are now filming for our virtual Open Day, peripatetic music lessons have restarted, and the school library is open and lending books again. Importantly, our year 7 students have settled in well and are enjoying their learning. We are once again running a full and happy school, albeit using some very different structures and systems to those that we normally use.

Of course, his outward normality masks the fact that there may be difficult times ahead. As the government has made clear, this could be a long haul. I want to provide you with some information about some of the issues we may face in the future and our contingency plans for them.

Year 11 students, GCSEs and progression.

We know that many year 11 students are anxious about what the arrangements will be for their GCSEs and for progression to sixth form, college or apprenticeship. The government has stated that GCSEs will go ahead as normal next year, with slightly reduced content in some subjects. We are planning on this basis and year 11 should assume that their exams will run as normal. Now that year 11 settle back into learning in school, our priority is identifying learning gaps and ensuring that they are filled. Year 11 mock exams will go ahead as normal in early December.

It is possible that the government's position will change before the GCSEs. Students should be reassured that we have good systems in place to provide centre assessed grades, as we did this year, should the need arise. Despite the negative national media coverage, this process ran very smoothly for us this year, with a large majority of students moving seamlessly to their post 16 courses with some very good grades.

To support the transition to post 16 education we are running a careers programme in tutor sessions. This covers the post 16 options that students have, as well as providing support with applications. All students continue to have access to our experienced careers team and our careers drop-in is already proving popular. Year 11 students need to focus on working hard in lessons and at home and on engaging with the careers programme. Whatever happens over the next few months, I am confident that they will progress smoothly to post 16 education.

What happens if a case of COVID 19 is confirmed in school?

It is almost inevitable that, over the next few months, we will have students and perhaps staff who test positive for COVID 19. We have detailed plans in place, supported by national guidance, for this situation.

When we learn that a person has a positive test result, we will work to trace the close contacts of that person in school. We have access to support from the Department for Education and Public Health England and will take advice from them on whether other students need to self-isolate.

If students do need to self-isolate, we will telephone the parents of those students. This telephone call will be followed up by a letter from Public Health England. Depending on the situation, the number of students who need to self-isolate could range from one to a whole year group. The current organisation of the school is designed to limit the number of close contacts that each child has. In year 7, the contacts are likely to be very few. In year 11, who move to different option classes, the number could be higher.

We will inform all parents, by e-mail, when we have had a case in school. This e-mail will tell parents that we have already informed those who need to self-isolate and that other children can continue to attend as normal. I am sure that you will understand that we will not give details of who has tested positive.

Remote learning

The government is determined to keep schools open if possible. As a school, we support this aspiration. There are however circumstances in which students would need to learn at home. An increase in the infection rate may require a partial closure of some schools. Alternatively, we may have to send some students home to self-isolate after a case is confirmed in school.

We are currently training all students and staff on the use of the Microsoft Office 365 suite of software. All students should now have access to their school e-mail account. Students also have access to Microsoft Teams and OneDrive and to the online versions of Word, Excel etc. We are encouraging students to download these services to their mobile phones for easy access.

Microsoft Teams enables work to be set for students and to be returned to staff for feedback. It allows students to 'chat' with teachers online and has the facility to host either recorded or live online video lessons.

It is essential that students engage with this technology now so that if remote working is necessary they are ready to go. They should get into the habit of regularly checking their e-mail. The training for students has been provided in ICT lessons, or for students who do not study ICT, in drop-in sessions.

The use of this technology is a useful life skill for us all. It has the potential to allow seamless working between home and school and will be of use beyond the current emergency. Please ask your child about this work. If they do not yet have the technology set up, they need to attend one of the drop-ins.