

12 February 2021



Dear Parents and Carers

As we approach the half term break, I wanted to write with a few messages and reminders.

### **Thank you**

Firstly, I want to say a big thank you to all of you who have been supporting your children's learning at home. I know this is far from easy but the levels of engagement we have seen this half term have been excellent. The vast majority of students have been trying really hard and parental support in ensuring punctuality and focus has been a great help.

### **Reopening**

We still have no further details of when schools might reopen. I am being absolutely candid when I say that we get no more information about this than you do. Headteachers across the country sit down with a notebook in front of the televised government briefings, waiting to find out what we will be required to do! So far we know that the 8 March has been mooted as the first day that schools *could* reopen and we should find out how likely this is in the briefing on 22 February. As soon as we find out what we will be permitted to do in terms of reopening, we will formulate a plan and share it with you as quickly as possible.

### **LFD Testing**

What does seem likely (but again, has not been confirmed) is that schools are going to be asked to test students for Covid-19 on their return, carrying out two Lateral Flow Device (LFD) tests within the first week back. The aim of this is to identify asymptomatic cases before they can go on to infect a wider cohort.

This is not a perfect system but is a useful additional safety precaution. We established our testing centre at the start of term and staff are now having twice weekly LFD tests. It is a simple procedure and the idea is that students will swab themselves (with as much or little help as they need) with trained staff being responsible for processing the tests.

Jane Richardson has already written to you with more details about this and to seek consent for this process. Whilst we do not yet know when all students will be returning to college, it would be useful to have all consents in place so this does not cause delays to reopening. If you have not already done so, please complete this Google form:

<https://forms.gle/WaoM55NTxxv8Dn9g6>.

Students in our Sixth Form can consent in their own right and have been invited to do so. There is an option on the Google Form to not give consent, too. As both Jane and I have previously stated, LFD testing is entirely consent based. No child in Years 7-11 will be given access to an LFD test without parental consent and neither will they be refused access to education if they do not have LFD testing. We will continue to follow guidance from Public Health in our approach.



## **Catch-up**

There is a lot of media focus on the need for children to 'catch up' at the moment. It is true that online teaching, no matter how high quality it is, cannot make up for lost hours in the classroom and we will need to address this. However, some of the current speculation is unhelpful. Once there is a firm set of expectations set out by central government, we will respond to this, rather than wasting time and energy on worrying about rumours and conjecture. We will prioritise the well-being of students in any plans we make, and will continue to push for this planning to be led by educational professionals, rather than politicians.

## **Examinations**

For those families with children in Years 11 and 13, we await further information and details from Ofqual and the DfE regarding how students will be assessed and grades will be awarded. We will give further details as soon as we are able. In the meantime, it is essential that students in these year groups continue to revise and learn the subjects they are studying in order to give themselves the best chances of securing the highest grades they are capable of.

## **Free school meals**

We now know that the national voucher scheme for children who are at home but are eligible for free school meals will continue until at least 5 March, i.e. until the earliest that schools might reopen. A £30 voucher will be issued for the half term holiday for all eligible children. The reason for this difference is that it is coming from a different funding stream.

## **On-site provision**

We continue to have Year Group bubbles in college every day for children of critical workers and those deemed vulnerable. If your child is accessing this provision, please remember that the college will be closed next week for the half term break.

## **Keeping our community safe**

It is great to see Covid rates reducing in Torbay. However, it is really important that we all continue to take every precaution possible so that schools can open and stay open. If your child is attending our on-site provision, please do not send them in if they, or anyone in your household, childcare or support bubble, has any symptoms that may be Covid-19. Please take a cautious approach to this.

The current situation is difficult for everyone. All of our usual pastoral support is still in place, just working in a different way. Please do contact us if you are worried about your child's well-being. Don't forget, advice and guidance about online safety can be found through <https://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/>

Students can email [keepingchildrensafe@thespirescollege.com](mailto:keepingchildrensafe@thespirescollege.com) if they have any safeguarding concerns. Our Designated Safeguarding Lead is Tracy French.

Other sources of support include:

- ▲ Childline - 0800 1111 / [www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)
- ▲ KOOTH online counselling - [www.kooth.com](http://www.kooth.com)
- ▲ SHOUT/ Crisis Text Line - free text 85258

I hope you all get some screen free time over the coming week and are able to enjoy some time with your children. Once again, thank you for all you are doing to make online teaching work. I am very grateful for your support. Please stay safe.

With best wishes

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alex Newton', with a stylized flourish at the end.

**Alex Newton**  
**Principal**