



Dear Parent/Carer

Firstly, my apologies for a delay in sending this letter to you. I had hoped to have it with you last week, however, rapidly changing information and the planning around the phased return prevented me. I hope, by delaying, I am able to give the most up to date and accurate picture. It is lengthy letter and will be the start of more communication around the phased return and other, linked, activities.

### **Reopening Schools/ Blended Learning**

When I last wrote to you, we had just received the initial guidance on the phased reopening of schools in August. Since then we have received further guidance and advice both nationally and locally. Advice for parents is available here <https://www.parentclub.scot/articles/reopening-schools-faqs> I have also added the various items of national advice from the Scottish Government below in Appendix 1. We also now have clarity on the start of term. Staff will return to the school building on 10 and 11 August 2020. On Wednesday 12 August, pupils will begin to return unless the wider situation changes. Details of this will be issued over the following weeks however the first 3 pupil days are likely to focus on new S1 pupils and a limited number of other pupils. Our phased return of groups of pupils across the various year groups will begin in full on Monday 17 August 2020.

We are aware that the phased return will be complex for families and you will need as much information as possible. We also understand concerns around what blended learning will be like and how effectively this will support young people, particularly those beginning certificate courses. We know childcare will be an issue for many and some young people and families will have health concerns associated with a return. These also affect some of our staff so give us an insight into the issues. You received a general letter from Laurence Findlay, Director of Education last week and I would now like to go into more detail on the planning process and the approach we are taking.

We have spent the last 2 weeks planning for the phased return and taking account of the emerging advice and changing picture. We have consulted with colleagues across Aberdeenshire and the north of Scotland to analyse and explore solutions. Mr Cowie, supported by Mrs Rinchey, has worked on a revised timetable. We are currently finalising that. We have also retained the original timetable as we would hope to move to this when the situation allows. The situation is complex and some of our key factors for consideration and solutions include:

- **Health and Well Being:** Our key priority is the health and wellbeing of pupils and staff. While most young people appear to be at relatively low risk some are not and may not be able to return. We also know that some young people have vulnerable relatives at home and there are concerns that young people could pass on infection to them and to other adults they meet. We are following the advice from the Scottish Government and Aberdeenshire and a key area is the need to ensure Social Distancing and hygiene will be effective in the school setting. As you will appreciate, this advice is changing, and we may have different information that we have to adapt to over the next weeks and months. It is also important to stress that a number of variables are still to be clarified. In addition to the broad health

advice we are encouraged to have pupils outside as much as possible (so breaks and lunchtimes) and to ensure classrooms are well ventilated.

In looking at the return to school we are also focused on supporting young people's mental health and wellbeing. The school setting will be very different from the one they left, and we will provide information to them before the return so they are clear on how it will look and the procedures they will follow. We will also make it clear how they can access support from Guidance and other support staff. The new S1 is a particular area which we are already placing emphasis on through an online induction however we will need to continue their induction in the building at the very start of session.

- **Room Capacities:** Current advice is based on a 2m social distance and this is hugely restrictive in the school setting. Examples are that our English, Maths and French rooms which would normally take 30 young people can only fit 9. Our computer suites can only cope with 50% capacity, so usually 10 pupils. Our workshops and kitchens can only accommodate 5 or 6 pupils and labs are 7 pupils. Clearly this is a huge limiting factor and means that the phased return is likely to only allow a third of pupils in the building at any one time.

We will also have to lay out the social areas and canteen so that all seating is 2m apart. This will create a very different environment and we are conscious that some young people will find this difficult. Connected to this, it will not be feasible to run the canteen in the usual fashion and we await clarification on that although it is likely to be in the form of pre-ordered "grab bags".

- **Social Distancing:** This creates challenges around travel to school (bus capacity is about a quarter), entry to the school, movement around the building, use of toilets and canteen. Our technician team has done some tremendous work around solutions and we are working to bring these into use. Again, capacity is limited and many actions that we take for granted will take much longer. We only need to look at the widespread procedure for going to the shop such as ASDA and the Coop and translate this to entry to school and classrooms to see the difficulties. We do have concerns that some young people are not effectively social distancing at present. While the guidance may change between now and August it will be essential that young people adhere to whatever the current guidance is for their safety and that of staff when attending school in the new session. Where young people choose not to adhere to the guidelines, they may have to be limited to home working for the safety of others.
- **Reduced movement:** we have been advised to limit movement as much as possible and this requires a restructuring of the school timetable. This will not affect choices but will impact on the structure of delivery. We are working on a plan that will allow as much time per pupil in their subjects but within the other constraints we need to work to. Practical work is a particular issue as we know it is crucial to so many courses and we are using the advice to establish how best to carry this out safely. Our plan is for extended periods in subjects which will allow for some practical work, but I must stress that this will be on a rotational basis of about a third of each pupil's normal school time. It is likely to be spread over 3 weeks. We appreciate the difficulties that a part time blended learning offer will create for families however the other constraints mean it will not be possible to offer full time schooling. The details of pupil's in school timings is hugely complex and we are working hard to get this to you as soon as possible and, certainly, before the summer holiday.

- **Maximising contact time with pupils;** Within the limits above we are working to ensure pupils in the Senior Phase are taught by their subject teacher when they are in school. This will be much harder to achieve in the Broad General Education. If we are to provide as much contact as possible with actual subject teachers, it means we are unable to ensure siblings are in school on the same days. We appreciate the difficulties this can create for families however we want to be in the best possible position to establish and maintain contact with the timetabled teacher both during the phased return and, hopefully, as we move to a full return to school. In maximising contact time in school for all pupils it does mean that all pupils will only attend for part of a 3-week block. We know this provides significant childcare issues, but we are unable to provide full time in school learning for any pupils at this stage.
- **Sustaining Blended Learning:** Our planned changes to the timetable mean staff will be heavily committed to delivery of learning when pupils are in school and the time, they require to support young people who are not in school will be significantly affected. As a consequence, we are planning to use Friday's to support home learning and will not have any pupils in school.
- **Staff Availability:** We still await clarity from Aberdeenshire around the position of staff and any Shielding or Social Distancing that is required. Clearly this is confidential information, but it is likely to impact on both teaching and the wider running of the school as our non-teaching staff are fundamental to our work. Currently we look to be in a fairly good situation but it is undoubtedly the case that, under current guidance, some staff will have to work from home and will have to support the work of the school from there. This impacts on the number of pupils we will be able to have in school at any one time.
- **Timing of the school day:** We are currently exploring slight changes to the school day so that we can ensure pupil movement around the building is done within guidelines. We are likely to extend break and may finish the school day earlier to allow staff some time to support home learning. As this is clarified we will communicate the details to you.
- **Other Factors:** I have touched on issues with **bus capacity**, above, and we will carry out a survey this week to ensure we have the best data on your circumstances. We know some parents are reluctant to have young people travelling on the buses and the capacity will also limit how many we can bring into school at one time. If parents are able and decide to transport their child, this may increase numbers by a small amount. This should not be an issue for pupils living in Portlethen itself. We also need to explore basic procedures around the school including **Fire drills, pupils out of class procedures, behaviour policy, uniform** (pupils will not be able to use the changing rooms if they have PE), **First Aid provision**, etc.,

My apologies for presenting such a complex position but feel it is best that you are aware of the factors and I am sure it will raise more questions than it will answer. We discussed the bulk of the above with the Parent Council last Thursday and this letter now takes the process forward by communicating it to all. Over the next 2 weeks we will provide as much information as possible so you know when your child will be in school. We do understand that you will have concerns and need as much clarity as possible. We will endeavour to answer the many questions you will have both through the general information we put out but, also, by establishing a set of Questions and Answers. I do need to stress that these may need to be fluid as advice changes. Our goal, as ever, is to provide the best learning and support that we can within the constraint upon us.

**Scholar**

Last week Mr Cowie sent out the Scholar passwords to all senior pupils. This is a fantastic resource that uses distance learning that they have refined over many years. We would encourage all senior pupils to sign in and follow courses where they are available to reinforce learning and build new knowledge. Details of all available courses can be found here <https://scholar.hw.ac.uk/>

### **Pupil Engagement**

While fully appreciating that the current learning environment is far from ideal, we are concerned that a number of our pupils have still not engaged with the learning in their new timetables. The SQA have still to set out their procedures for next session's exams and there is much debate about how it will look. While the SQA still appear to be making plans for an exam diet in May 2021 it seems highly likely that they will also require evidence of pupil work from throughout the course. This would be the case for any young person who cannot sit the final exam and would be essential if there were further waves of Covid -19. We have seen the importance of that evidence this year and, for this reason, it is particularly crucial that senior pupils engage with learning from the start of courses. We understand it can be difficult for young people to be motivated at this time but would encourage that engagement to prevent further stress in the future. Another side of this equation is that some pupils still feel overwhelmed by the amount of work and are struggling to get through it all or lose motivation because they find it too daunting. A further obstacle to engaging with learning for some young people has been in the form of paid work. This requires a real balance and must not prevent young people from engaging with learning and exam courses. Where young people encounter difficulties and require advice and support we will do all we can to help. If pupils or parents identify difficulties please make contact via the relevant Guidance Teacher or the school email [portlethen.aca@aberdeenshire.gov.uk](mailto:portlethen.aca@aberdeenshire.gov.uk) ensuring you highlight the nature of your query in the subject line.

Considering the above, it is our intention to use the last 7 days of session to allow academic consolidation. **Staff will not set new work after Wednesday 24 June** and this will allow pupils to complete the work already set and ensure it is submitted before summer. Staff will be able to provide feedback to pupils in the remaining time and any planned online delivery will continue as communicated to pupil through Teams or Classrooms. Where pupils do complete all tasks and require further consolidation staff will signpost them to suitable activities.

### **Learning and Teaching**

As you will be aware, we have been surveying pupils and parents to review our approaches to teaching and Learning in the online environment. We want to establish what is and isn't working so that we can target areas for development. We are also working hard to maintain the current arrangements (including the new timetable) along with carrying out the planning and preparation for the blended learning approach we will have to move to after summer. In this context we are upskilling all staff and building confidence in use of online learning tools as this is new to some. The safeguarding protocols around some online learning approaches also need to be resolved locally and nationally. Additionally, Education Scotland have said they will provide materials for online learning to support the blended learning. This has not arrived yet and we will incorporate this where appropriate when it does. We also understand we will get clarification on the SQA arrangements for next session in August and will build these in as soon as they are clear. They should clarify expectations around assessment and course coverage.

In response to particular questions.

1. Neither Google meets or Microsoft teams are fully functional, as they have blocks on pupil interaction. Until these are removed we cannot do proper live lessons. We have lobbied consistently for these to be made fully functional and it is a national issue rather than an Aberdeenshire one. We hope this will be the case with Google before summer (though our main platform is Teams). Teams should follow. Currently we can run some live sessions without proper interaction and narrate Powerpoints. Tutorials are not currently feasible for the above reasons. 1:1 is unlikely to be feasible as a teacher could be responsible between 120 and 200 pupils in a week. Some would see more. In looking at our blended learning we will have to have small groups of pupils in and this will allow the tutorial model to work to an extent.
2. We are working with all subjects that have practical element to establish how we can deliver any sort of practical lesson. The constraints are significant due to room capacity and cleaning of equipment between uses. At this stage much will have to be by demonstration, and we hope that we can structure our blended learning offer to provide opportunities for experiments. The Phased return timetable model we have opted for creates long blocks of time when pupils are in school to allow some practical work and was one of the key factors in the decision.

### **School Trips**

I know families are keen to have the school trip payment situation resolved and we feel this is essential as a school. We understand that this is hugely frustrating for families who paid money in good faith which we then passed on to the travel companies through a contractual arrangement. It is money that many families need. I am disappointed that all the companies who hold money are reluctant to move matters forward and return money. We are working with Aberdeenshire Council's legal team to challenge their lack of action and any position they have taken in regard of returning payments. We are also pursuing the matter through the council's insurance expert however the lack of response from companies is slowing this process as insurers do not want to commit to a payment when there may be a solution from the travel operator. As previously mentioned, I attend the Aberdeenshire group that is seeking resolutions to the situation across Aberdeenshire and our Director feeds into the national picture as this appears to be an issue in most local authorities. I can only apologise for the delay and assure you a resolution is a key priority for us.

In conclusion, I'm sorry this has been such a lengthy letter. It reflects the complexity, number of issues and uncertainties we are all facing. We understand that this letter may only add to the uncertainty but would want to assure you are working through the issues. We will do our very best within that context to provide a good experience for young people and to communicate to you. We value the way you are supporting young people and ourselves and want to thank you for that.

Yours sincerely,

Neil Morrison

Head Teacher

Portlethen Academy

June 2020

Appendix 1

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-re-opening-schools-guide/pages/overview/>

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-curriculum-for-excellence-in-the-recovery-phase/>

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-support-for-continuity-in-learning/>