

Portlethen Academy

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Dear Parent/Carer

Parent Update July 2020

As you will know The Deputy First Minister recently announced a plan to reopen schools fully in August if a number of health-related conditions are met. The Scottish Government's change in approach, as announced on 23 June in Parliament, has led to existing plans becoming contingencies with the focus now being on preparation for the full-time in-school learning. I held off from an immediate response in the hope that greater clarity would emerge and so that we could do some initial planning. A number of key points still require clarification however, as we reach the end of the session, I want to update you on a number of areas both related to school reopening and more generally.

School Reopening

The key issue for all is the reopening of schools and we are delighted that there appears to be a real chance of having all our pupils back in school in August. While John Swinney's announcement set the August date, he was clear that several conditions need to be met in respect of suppressing the virus. The final date for a decision on whether we can have all pupils back appears to be 30 July by which time the Scottish Government expect the conditions to have been met and key health information to be available to schools. This revised guidance will outline any adaptations required to school buildings and health and safety practices to ensure a safe return to school buildings for pupils and staff. As such we are planning for all pupils being back, but we also have to continue to prepare our Blended Learning Contingency plan as highlighted in my previous letter. I will cover the Blended Learning Plan then outline the full return scenario as we understand it at present.

Blended Learning Plan

The Blended Learning Plan is not ideal, and I stress it is one we hope not to use unless absolutely necessary. When we look at school and transport capacity, current social and physical distancing requirements and staff availability we are very limited in the offer we can make. Unfortunately, this would be on a basis of roughly once every three weeks with the other time spent on blended learning at home. So that we can support the blended learning we have built in time for teaching staff to do this. We appreciate that, if we must use it, it will cause difficulties for families and young people. Its key premise has been to allow contact with the subject teacher that each young person, in S3-6, would have in the main timetable. This is not possible in the other models we explored and would mean that the key link between class teacher and pupil would not be there for all and they could be taught by non-specialist teachers when in school. In case we cannot move to having all pupils back we will issue the Blended Timetable for each pupil later this week. We will also make available (via the school website) the whole school handbook which provides detail on the procedures and practicalities if we have to use this. These are complex and restrictive, and the handbook is a work in progress which we are constantly adapting as advice changes or new information comes in. I would ask that you read it in that context.

Full return of pupils in August

As highlighted above, we will only receive final confirmation of the full return on 30 July 2020. The detail of any health constraints or procedural advice are currently being worked on by the Scottish Government and Public Health Scotland. Without this advice we cannot finalise plans. It is unclear what the advice will include but it is highly likely that there will be restrictions on certain aspects of our day to day procedures such as hygiene, large gatherings, physical distancing from adults etc. We are also unclear on issues such as transport capacity, mask wearing and school catering arrangements. When the advice is published it will only leave a short period of time in which to finalise plans. This time is also in the school holidays and we will only have very limited capacity to amend plans and communicate with families. As such we are doing as much planning as we can and will use the two weeks before the school returns to put any new information into the procedures. We will communicate with you as quickly as we can to confirm arrangements. Fortunately, we have a full timetable prepared for all young people and pupils have received their copies for change of timetable at the start of June so that they could link to their subject teachers and new class teams. Our plan is to use this timetable. We also have two in-service days 10 and 11 August which will allow us to finalise plans and procedures with staff when they return from holiday.

Regarding pupils returning, Aberdeenshire have acknowledged that having the whole school community back (nearly 1,000 people in our case) at one time is likely to cause anxiety and confusion for some. As such, they have agreed that schools should have a “soft start” so that pupils can be properly briefed and reintroduced to school and the new situation. Our plan is:

- S1 and School Prefects from Wed 12 August to allow a proper induction to the school
- S4-6 from Thursday 13 August to allow induction, course work commencement, SQA appeals and any course changes resulting from results
- S2 and S3 from Monday 17 August for induction and resumption of courses.

We understand that this will cause inconvenience for some families, however we firmly believe that it is essential to manage the return of pupils so that we can focus on their well being at a time that will be potentially difficult after 5 months away from the building. Assuming we can open with this plan it means all pupils will be back in school before our term would have started in our original calendar.

In conclusion, once the decision has been made by the Scottish Government we will communicate with all parents regarding the details of the return to school.

Health and Wellbeing

The health and wellbeing of all members of the school community is a key goal when we return. This is a large part of the rationale behind the “soft start” as it will allow us the time to ensure young people and staff are clear on procedures and have time to refamiliarise themselves with the school. Some young people will not have any issues with the return while we know others will be anxious and require support. Some will be concerned that they have lost ground and we do know there will be variation in the progress young people made while out of school. This will add pressure to catch up and means the range of learning in lessons is likely to be broader than normal. Our Guidance team have the oversight of pupil wellbeing and will use Personal and Social Education lessons to help young people reintegrate to school. This will be backed up by the Daily Contact Time with pupils’ tutors and the general support provided by all staff. Guidance will also work with Class Teachers and Principal Teachers to identify issues around gaps in learning and to address these with young people through our usual interventions process. Where pupils know they have fallen behind we would encourage

them to make up that ground before the start of session and this is particularly crucial for certificate courses.

We also know some young people will struggle to return and a small number will be unable due to health issues. Guidance will work with our other support staff to get young people back into school or to provide work if at home. Where you have concerns about your child please do not hesitate to contact their Guidance Teacher either directly or via the school office/email.

Uniform and Class Materials

We have been asked several questions around our approach to uniform and class materials as summer is the usual time when families buy these things. While the situation may change depending on Public Health advice our position is as follows.

Uniform: Our school dress code is part of our Portlethen Academy identity. Overwhelmingly our pupils wear a good standard of uniform and your assistance in this is greatly appreciated. Visitors always comment on the positive impression this gives. The summer holidays are always the time when the shops stock school wear and we would ask that you stock up as well for next year as your child grows. The school dress code is as follows:

- Black trousers/Black skirt
- White shirt/blouse
- Black knitwear
- School tie
- Black shoes

While we know that leggings are affordable and practical, we would prefer black trousers as they are more in keeping with a working environment. We ask that pupils do not wear jeans. With regard to shoes, we ask that they are black however these do not have to be formal shoes. We do not allow hoodies in class and require that pupils do not have hoods up in the building for safety purposes. We also ask that pupils have a change of both clothing and footwear for PE and will confirm arrangements for this after summer.

Class Materials: On our return we will need to be very aware of health and hygiene issues and the sharing of items is something we will actively discourage. On current advice pupils will not be able to borrow items from staff therefore it is essential that all pupils bring all the materials they require for each lesson with them. Our Learning and Teaching Group has provided the following list of items that we would ask you provide.

Pencil Case	Recommended
Pencils	Pack of tissues
Pens	Water bottle (filled as possibly no access to fountains)
Rubber	Hairband (for PE, HE and D&T)
Ruler	Hand sanitiser
Sharpener	Headphones (small jack to fit PCs, not Bluetooth)
Scientific Calculator	
Compass	
Colouring pencils	

Some online options: https://www.amazon.co.uk/Helix-Q92010-Oxford-Exam-Kit/dp/B008F8KX60/ref=sr_1_5?dchild=1&keywords=helix+pencil+case&qid=1592822598&sr=8-5

https://www.amazon.co.uk/Oxford-Helix-Maths-Set-Storage/dp/B000J66XPG?ref=ast_sto_dp

Asda: <https://groceries.asda.com/product/stationery-sets/staedtler-stationery-set/910001720998>

Bring Your Own Device (BYOD)

You and your child should have received a link to a user agreement for BYOD. Please complete this as we need a high uptake to be able to take this forward. BYOD gives young people the opportunity to use their own devices in school and on the school's Wi-Fi network. If we have to use the Blended Learning Plan this would be crucial so that young people can combine schoolworking with home working. We already have a significant number of devices out with families on loan. Until we have a stable period of time in school we would want this to continue. This does mean our in-school resources will be limited. While we are currently purchasing a number of Chromebooks to increase our capacity, the ability for young people to use their own devices opens up tremendous opportunities. We have already had this to a limited extent through the Library Services My Aberdeenshire Wi-Fi and senior pupils have used this effectively in and around the library. BYOD makes this facility available across the school site. While pupils can use phones, the ideal is a laptop or tablet device that can access GLOW and which has a keyboard facility. We appreciate not all pupils have access to devices but having that option will broaden the range of options for our young people and also mean we are better able to use technology to support teaching and learning.

School Trips

I am very sorry but for some trips this still remains unresolved. We have managed to gain refunds for some trips, partial refunds for others and none for one. Where partial or no refund has been made, we have made a claim against Aberdeenshire Council's Travel Insurance, who tell us there is a 6-8 week processing time. For trips where we have secured a full or partial refund, we are now in a position to make refunds and cheques will be being sent out this week. I am extremely disappointed that we are not able to make refunds for all trips, as I know families are keen to have any funds we can secure returned as soon as possible. As soon as we have responses from the insurers, we will communicate the outcome for each trip to you.

Staff News

When I wrote to you at this time last year, we had a number of staff leaving and 15 new members of staff joining us. I have been hugely impressed by the way our new staff have settled into the school, its ethos and procedures. All have made a significant positive contribution. They have been supported by all staff, some acted as Mentors, and by our pupils. This year we have fewer changes and that stability will be a huge asset as we welcome young people back to school. Amongst last year's new staff were several probationary teachers. Mr McCall, in Design and Technology, has now completed his probation and we are delighted he will remain with us on a permanent basis. Our other 3 probationers are undertaking what is called the Flexible route, where the timing is slightly different, and they are on track to complete this successfully in September.

We do have some staff leaving us either this week, or just after the start of session. Mr Turner, in English, has decided to retire and his experience and rapport with young people will be a loss to the school. Mrs McKenna will also leave English for a new job, she has only been with us for a year but has really made her mark with great relationships with young people and a very high level of ICT skills which she has been able to share. We are looking to fill these posts as quickly as possible and are delighted that Mrs McIntosh will increase her hours to fill part of these vacancies. We are also sad to have Mrs Edwards leaving us. She leaves her role as Principal Teacher of Guidance for Downies House on Friday 21 August for a similar post in Fife. Her energy, enthusiasm and commitment to supporting young people will be missed. Her post is currently being advertised and, in the interim, Miss Jewell will pick up the Acting PTG role for Downies from Monday 24 August 2020. I'm sure you will join me in thanking them for all they have done for our school community and in wishing them the very best in their new situations.

Pupil Achievement

This week would have seen us enjoying the usual end of term achievement events and celebrating success over the year. Now that we are looking forward to a return to school we have decided to hold off on these events as virtual celebrations and our plan is to celebrate pupil success when we are back in school as part of that reintegration process. We are also hopeful that the S6 leavers can also join us early in the new session to pick up their yearbooks and say a proper farewell. Details of this will follow in the new session. I was reflecting that we would miss the amazing work of the various school musicians and the Instrumental Music Instructors, however the link below arrived in my inbox this morning to provide a taste of what we are missing. I hope you enjoy it.

https://youtu.be/nSaF-G7L_qc

In conclusion, the last few months have been a real challenge for all in the school community. We are delighted with the way so many pupils have engaged with online learning and we are looking forward to having them back in the building. Our staff have done a tremendous job of adapting to online learning and their commitment to our young people has been tremendous. I also want to acknowledge the support and help you have provided for us as parents and carers. We are looking forward to having our pupils back in school though some aspect of it will undoubtedly be different. As soon as we have clarity on the many issues that are still outstanding and on the specifics of the timetable, we will be returning to we will alert you. Please have a safe and healthy summer and we hope for a positive start to session 2020/21.

Thank you.

Yours sincerely,

Neil Morrison

Head Teacher, Portlethen Academy

1 July 2020