

Portlethen Academy

Learn and Improve. Get Involved. Think of the Consequences. Respect All.

SQA Assessment Changes and Prelim Assessment Diet 2021

Dear Parent / Carer,

Apologies for what is a lengthy letter however the SQA situation regarding Higher and Advanced Higher has only just been confirmed. We wish to provide as much information as we can at this stage and to flag up some key considerations over the next weeks and months.

As you may be aware on Tuesday 8th December, the Deputy First Minister and Education Secretary John Swinney announced that there would be no formal examinations at Higher or Advanced Higher level in 2021. Earlier in the session, he announced that this would also be the case at National 5 level.

As a result of this, the SQA will award examination results based on evidence produced throughout the academic session.

To support teachers in making these judgements, we plan to hold an assessment diet during the time in which we routinely hold our prelim examinations. **We stress that this is not the only assessment that will be used to decide a young person's grade.** The full requirements have not yet been published but we know that the SQA require a holistic view of a pupil's performance.

Details of the Prelim Diet

Despite the recent announcements regarding formal examinations it is still our intention to run this assessment diet as planned. This will allow us to gather evidence of the stage young people are at now and give them a clear indication of the level of work and application required in the following months. In the following months we will provide further, in class, assessment opportunities to develop a full assessment of a young person's level. This is important for a number of reasons:

1. In case of illness or self-isolation at Prelim time. It is essential that young people in either, or both of these situations, do not attend as this could jeopardise the assessment diet for large numbers of pupils and we will provide catch up opportunities when they are able to attend again
2. A one-off assessment is not good evidence of a pupil's ability, particularly at this stage in the course when they have not been able to pull together all the learning. In the event of a poor assessment it will be important that pupils have later opportunities to demonstrate their abilities
3. While many of our pupils have been working consistently throughout the course some, despite advice, have fallen into the pattern of relying on a late push to reach the required level and they will have opportunities to remedy that.

Timetable

The timetable for this is currently receiving its final checks and will be with pupils on Friday. The information has also been added to the school website under the 'useful links for parents' section.

The assessment diet will run from Monday January 11th 2021 until Friday January 22nd 2021 inclusive. The assessment diet has been condensed into nine days with the final day being set aside for any catch up assessments for pupils who have a clash of assessments. Please note that National 5 History will be assessed out with this assessment period in class time at a later date.

As a result of this, there may be occasions where your child / ward will be expected to sit more than one assessment on any given day.

Pupils who have a clash of assessments should have received information regarding which examination they will be expected to sit on Friday 22nd January. If, however, this hasn't been communicated to your child / ward, please ask them to come and see me at their earliest convenience so this can be rectified.

Pupils with Alternative Assessment Arrangements will be accommodated in appropriate places and will have individual timetables.

As explained on the assessment timetable, pupils who are studying Music will have their practical assessment organised by their Music teacher during the assessment diet at a time which doesn't clash with their other examinations.

Study Leave Arrangements

Your child / ward will be allocated study leave during the assessment diet and it is essential that they make maximum use of the time allocated to them. Should your child / ward wish to come into school to study during this time, supervised classes will be allocated to allow them to do so.

Where possible, we ask that pupils complete their study time at home rather than in school and only come in for the assessments. We appreciate this is more complex for pupils who live out with Portlethen and particularly when they may only be in for the morning or afternoon. We ask for your support, where feasible, around this. If pupils cannot get home, we will expect them to work in the designated study area in the main corridor where they are asked to socially distance when feasible.

Health and Well Being of Young People

We are very conscious of the pressures on young people at this time and the uncertainty and changing situation only adds to that. Many young people have been working with the anxiety that any assessment they may be doing could be required as evidence. Prelims will provide a clear standard of their level and inform their next steps. Elsewhere in the letter we speak about the need to balance study, rest and other activities. Pupils are always welcome to speak to Guidance Staff, Year Heads or any teacher or member of staff regarding any pressures or concerns they feel. Our website also contains links to support services. The key message for young people if they have concerns, anxieties or even just basic question, is that we are here to help, and they can contact us or be supported to do so by yourselves or friends. The best route for this is in school through direct contact or by email from home to the school email address: portlethen.aca@aberdeenshire.gov.uk

Assessment Preparation

Given the importance of these assessments, it would also be advisable to encourage your child / ward to spend some of the festive period revising and working their way through past paper questions to ensure that they are as prepared as possible. This is a balance as they do need rest time, you will know how much effort they have put in to date and be able to support them in terms of appropriate amounts of study time. We have provided inputs in Personal and Social Education, Daily Briefings and subjects to ensure young people are aware of study techniques.

To support this, pupils can access revision materials from the pupil area of the school website under the 'Home learning and pupil revision' section. They should also have access to a paper copy of the study skills booklet which was sent home earlier this session. If pupils need to contact staff for support this should be available through Microsoft Teams or Google Classrooms.

National 3 and 4

For pupils who are studying at National 3 or National 4 level, support sessions have been organised and we would encourage pupils to sign up and attend the sessions which are designed to consolidate their learning.

Pupils who currently attend North East of Scotland College are expected to attend classes as normal during the prelim diet if they don't have an assessment to sit. If an assessment clashes with a College class, it is important that the school is made aware in order for this to be communicated to the College.

Practical Arrangements and Considerations

Uniform: With regards to the practicalities surrounding the assessments, all pupils, for health and safety reasons, must wear full school uniform (with the exception of their tie) if they are coming in to school during the assessment diet, whether it is to sit an assessment, study or drop in to seek support from a teacher. Most assessments will be sat in the Games Hall and we are required to ventilate the space effectively. As such, we would advise that pupils come with a couple of spare layers as they will be sat for extended periods of time.

Face Coverings: Given the large number that will be gathered together during this assessment diet and to run these assessments in the safest possible way, we will require pupils to wear Type IIR fluid resistant face coverings while they sit these assessments. We will provide the pupils these at no cost. We will also require pupils to wear these in classes during the first 4 days of term after New Year. These will be provided in Period 1 and Period 5 classes on entry. This is to limit possible transmission/and outbreak that impacts on the exam diet and so that young people can experience just what it feels like prior to having to do so in an exam. It is also to allow safe invigilation of exams. We appreciate young people who wear glasses may encounter difficulties and we will allow leeway for them if required. While the decision is a school one based on risk assessment face coverings would be required regardless if Aberdeenshire were moved to Level 3.

Hand Washing/Sanitisation: so that exam scripts are safer for staff to mark we ask that all pupils observe the handwashing and cleaning protocols either with use of school facilities and materials and/or their own products.

Ill Health or Self Isolation: If your child / ward is ill on the day of one of their assessments, please alert the school office which will allow Mr Cowie to look into rearranging any missed assessments. We expect this will be required and have built this in to our planning. If the cause is self-isolation this is likely to be after the main 2-week diet. It is fundamental that young people who have any symptoms of Covid 19 do not attend to avoid transmission and the same applies to any that have been instructed to self-isolate. We prefer a cautious approach if there is any doubt about symptoms and would ask that young people consider the impact that transmission of Covid 19 could have on the exam chances of friends, other pupils and staff. Should a pupil display any apparent symptoms in an exam they will be immediately removed to our isolation area and parents/carers will be contacted to collect them.

Seating Plans: Pupils will be given specific seat numbers and will have to sit in these for Contact Tracing purposes.

Compliance with Covid 19 advice and Holiday Activities

The holidays are a key time for rest, recuperation and for family time. Elsewhere in this letter we have spoken about the need for young people to have a balance of time off and study time. When they have that time off it is crucial that young people consider the consequences of non-compliance with Covid 19 advice. A number of our young people experienced the consequences of a large house gathering back in August and were unable to start school until they had self-isolated and/or recovered. The prevalence of Covid 19 is much higher now and any spike caused by failure to follow the procedures could lead to significant groups having to self-isolate. In a recent planning scenario, we identified that one positive case in an S6 pupils could lead to an additional 42 people having to self-isolate. While this number would be lower during the exams due to no class attendance the 4 days at the start of term run this level of risk. In worse case scenarios it could prevent completion of the exam diet or, even, lead to school closure. While understanding the desire for more freedoms this is a critical time for all young people and adults and we must do all we can to ensure the exam diet is not interrupted for individuals or groups. We ask for your support in this.

Lateness and early departure from exams: In line with traditional examinations, no pupil will be allowed to enter an assessment if they arrive more than 30 minutes late. We would encourage all pupils to work to the time set for the paper and not to leave early. If a pupil does, we will note the time of departure on their paper so that we can communicate this home if required.

Please do not hesitate to contact the school via the main office if you have any queries regarding the above. Thank you in anticipation of your continuing support at this key time for our young people.

We will send out a more general letter before the end of term, however we would want to wish you a happy and a safe festive period.

Regards,

Craig Cowie/Neil Morrison

Depute Head Teacher/Head Teacher

10 December 2020