

OLCHFA SCHOOL - ARRANGEMENTS FOR RETURN TO SCHOOL IN JANUARY

Dear Parents and Carers

I am writing to you to inform you of the school's arrangements for the start of next term.

As you will know, the new Omicron variant of Covid is causing very significant national and international concern. The scientific evidence points to its markedly higher transmissibility than the existing dominant Delta variant and everything points to a very challenging Christmas and New Year. Olchfa will not escape this tide of Omicron. In fact we were notified yesterday of our first case of this new variant within the school community.

Yesterday, schools received a letter from the Minister for Education and, later in the day, another from the Director of Education for Swansea. The second letter has been sent to you at the request of the Director.

Essentially, the letters say pretty much the same thing, as you would expect. In the Minister's letter, he directs us to do certain things, asks us to consider others, and allows us an element of discretion.

All schools in Wales are advised to use two **Preparation Days** at the start of term. These will be days when teachers and other staff prepare for the strong likelihood of at least a partial return to remote learning at some point in the new year. **Pupils will not be taught on those days, either remotely or in person.**

Most schools have scheduled INSET days for the start of January. Olchfa is one of them. The Minister and the Director of Education ask schools whether they can shift these days to later in the year, but they acknowledge that arrangements may have already been made that cannot easily be altered. That is the position we find ourselves in. This is, therefore, a third day when pupils will not be in school and will not be taught remotely.

The dilemma we really face as a school is whether to open (physically) for pupils on Friday, January 7th or to open on Monday January 10th. We have taken the decision to open on Monday January 10th, with learning taking place remotely on Friday January 7th, for all pupils.

I fully appreciate that this will divide opinion. However, for clarity, I am giving you my reasons here. I am obviously no better placed than you are to guess how events might pan out over Christmas but it is my strong feeling that Omicron cases will surge to massive levels quickly. This might cause further government advice at that point, which we will look at. However, it seems to me that, for the sake of one school day (Friday January 7th) where learning can take place remotely, pupils, their families and staff at the school will have three days more (namely Friday, Saturday and Sunday) where their own safety can be better guaranteed, should they wish to take sensible precautions.

As a very large school, we are also trying to protect the interests of examination candidates who have examinations in January. You are probably aware, but I will remind you here

anyway, that any child identified as a close contact of an Omicron case by TTP has to isolate at home for 10 days, even if they have a negative PCR test, owing to the fears around Omicron. You can work out the implications of this for yourselves. Large numbers of pupils could be taken out by TTP, which I know was something that understandably frustrated parents earlier in the pandemic. I repeat here, in passing, that the decision to require any child to stay home is made by TTP and not by the school. The initial nightmare that we are trying to avoid here is allowing 1900 pupils back to school on Friday and, given the new rules around isolation, finding that, even if quite a small number of them (say 15-20) have the Omicron variant, hundreds of pupils might end up not just being sent home but having to fully isolate for 10 days.

So, for this reason, I have taken the decision to try to give us a fighting chance of staying open in January by delaying the **physical return of all pupils until Monday January 10th**.

On that day, school will operate normally, by which I mean that there will be no changes from the current structure of the school day.

The small number of Year 11 pupils who have an external examination scheduled for Friday January 7th should come into school for that examination. Arrangements will be made for this exam to be sat safely.

I trust that this letter clarifies the school's position. I hope that you manage to enjoy some sort of decent Christmas with your families and that you try to stay as safe as possible. We had all hoped that this Christmas might have marked a positive turning point in this dreadful pandemic, but I guess that Covid still has some further challenges it intends to throw at us. I hope, sincerely, that things will begin to improve in the spring.

With warm wishes

Hugh Davies

Headteacher