

December 2020

Dear Parents and Carers

I hope this letter finds you and your loved ones safe and well in these challenging times.

I am writing to you to update you on where we find ourselves at this point as a school and to inform you of some changes we are going to make to the way we operate moving forward.

Firstly though, I'd like to thank you, sincerely, for the way you have supported the school through this term in trying to preserve as much normality for your sons and daughters as is possible at this most testing of times.

I know it has been far from easy and I think it is fair to say that, as we approach the end of term, a sort of 'Covid fatigue' is setting in for all of us. We are weary of it all and, when weariness sets in, so does anxiety; our guard drops a little and we find it difficult to see beyond the immediate future. I feel like that at times and it's important for you to know that you are not alone in struggling, sometimes, with this whole situation.

Current Situation

As you know, a significant number of year group closures have occurred here this term. Our procedures have protected contact groups from other contact groups but have not been able (nor were they designed) to protect pupils within a contact group from each other.

In line with the practice of other secondary schools across Wales, our contact groups have been year groups, the only difference being that our year groups are amongst the largest in Wales.

Swansea is not faring very well in terms of infection rates in comparison with other Welsh authorities, currently ranking fourth worst in Wales as I write.

These two factors taken together have meant that we have had a disproportionately large number of pupils sent home during this term. This has caused us huge frustration as a school, although there is little we can do about it.

We are also beginning to encounter, in line with other secondary schools in Swansea, a gradually increasing number of staff who are either testing positive for Covid themselves and having to self-isolate as a result or, more typically, staff who have to self-isolate as a result of family members falling ill or testing positive or after receiving notification via the App that they have been a close contact of someone and have to

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self-isolate as a result. We are not yet at tipping point, with about 18 out of 180 staff off school as I write (about twice the 'normal' level for this time of year). However, things can change quite rapidly in this regard. For example, three members of staff who arrived at school yesterday morning had had to go home before the day was complete, none of them Covid symptomatic. I know of a number of schools, both in Swansea and elsewhere, which are very close to not being able to operate due to the level of staff absence.

I can accept the random nature of the virus. It is outside our control. What I find more difficult to accept is the different ways that Test, Trace and Protect (TTP) has operated across Wales. I have very detailed knowledge and evidence of this as a result of my involvement with the Association of School and College Leaders in Wales. Put simply, schools in other areas of Wales have been 'allowed' to narrow their contact groups when a pupil is infected, giving information to TTP (in their area) which has convinced TTP not to isolate the whole year group. The same approach has not been adopted in Swansea.

Let me be clear here. In purely public health terms, I actually think that the Swansea (cautious) approach is the right one. What I am concerned about is the differential impact, particularly on exam age pupils, across Wales that flows from these different approaches.

I have taken this matter up with the Minister for Education, senior civil servants, the local authority and, this week, with Public Health Wales. So far, I have not had the answers or changes I would like. And so, 'we are where we are', as they say.

The main sticking point for TTP here has been our lunchtime arrangements. Despite our very careful procedures all through the day, including entry and exit from school, TTP always ask us whether we can 'guarantee' that pupils have not come into close contact with other pupils as they eat their lunch or queue for it. Of course, given our numbers of pupils overall and the fact that we are pretty much 'full' to physical capacity, the answer to that has to be 'no'. Every time, that has been the end of the conversation.

Before you think that we can separate pupils at lunchtime and that the school should already have done so, please remember that we have to feed upwards of 1400 pupils in two physical spaces over an extended period of one and three quarter hours. The two venues (our largest spaces in the school) can only accommodate 60 pupils between them if 2 metre social distancing is to be maintained. That would necessitate over 23 separate lunchtime slots within a 100 minute time slot. That would allow 4 minutes for each pupil to have lunch and that would include queueing time. As you can quickly see, this would be completely impossible, not to mention the logistics of keeping 23 separate queues apart from each other.

However, we cannot escape the fact that we have become concerned that too many pupils are missing school as a result of the lunchtime problem and have been looking afresh at our procedures to see if there is a way that we can minimise the size of the

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contact groups and avoid large numbers of pupils being sent home on repeated occasions, most of them (in the end) without need. We have looked at this long and hard. It has not been easy. Particularly, it has not been easy to strike a balance between what might work and what is actually practicable and achievable.

I'll outline our thinking below:

New Procedures and Protocols

Our new approach is outlined in our revised document, 'School Information: A Guide for Students and Families', **which you must take time to read carefully**. This document is attached to this email. The changes from current practice are highlighted in yellow to make it easier for you to focus particularly on these changed elements.

The key changes are:

- Slight changes to lesson times, break times and lunch times
- Shutting all school food provision and requiring pupils to eat their (packed) lunches in the classrooms in which they are taught during Lesson 4, before taking some exercise for the remainder of the break
- Our current 'zones' being sub-divided into groups of two classrooms **for the purposes of break and lunch times only**, with the yards being clearly marked with physical areas for those (narrower) groups to use exclusively
- The requirement to wear face coverings at all times, other than when in classrooms. This includes all outside spaces

In relation to lunches and who will provide them, the situation is this:

- If you are a parent or carer of a child who is **not eligible for a free school meal**, you will need to provide a packed lunch for your son or daughter every day
- If you are a parent or carer of a child who **is eligible for a free school meal**, you will be offered the choice **either** of a weekly food bag to be picked up from the school, **or** an electronic voucher, which can be used at any of the following major supermarkets: Aldi, Asda, Morrisons, Sainsbury's, Tesco

We have decided on the voucher system as an alternative to lunch bags rather than BACS transfers. This is to minimise the amount of sensitive personal data (in the form of bank details etc) that the school has to request from parents. More information about this scheme can be accessed via this hyperlink <http://help.wonde.com/en/articles/3843162-faqs-for-parents-supermarket-voucher>

Please be aware that lunchtimes will definitely 'feel' different. In an attempt to reduce the size of contact groups, pupils will eat their lunches in the rooms they were taught in during the lesson immediately before lunch. When they go outside to get some fresh air and exercise for about 20 minutes, they will not mingle with their whole year group (or 'bubble') as they have done up to now. They will, instead, mix with a maximum of their own class and one other, clearly directed to sub areas in our yards in order to ensure there is no cross contamination. Pupils who deliberately ignore the requirement

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not to mix with pupils outside their contact group will be sent home. Acting safely is a non-negotiable element during the time that a pupil is in school at the current time. I also need to say here that our new measures impose even greater levels of responsibility and pressure on staff of the school, who have to manage them. Out of respect to them, I expect all pupils to respond to our requirements (which are totally designed with their safety in mind) with courtesy and understanding. I will not have the staff of the school run ragged by the very few pupils who will not act responsibly. Put bluntly, we don't have the time to argue about the rights and wrongs of it all at the moment. We just need everybody to 'do their bit'.

These measures go further than measures in nearly every other secondary school in Wales. We know they require more effort and sacrifice, but they are driven by the need to try to drive down the numbers of pupils who end up getting sent home each time there is a positive case in the school. This way, although it is difficult to put a precise figure on it because there are some variables, I am optimistic that if one child tests positive within a year group, less than 50 pupils within that year group (and maybe as few as 20) will need to be sent home, rather than 280. This has to be a good thing and worth some temporary sacrifices.

Other Issues

I mentioned earlier the issue of what I termed 'Covid fatigue'. In the end, I guess it was predictable that, as the term wore on, we would sometimes lower our guard a little, albeit inadvertently, and tire of the sheer stress of trying to remember everything we have to do.

I'll be honest and say that there's a further element that doesn't exactly help here. It's seeing people outside school, including some of our own pupils and their parents, who are not observing the government's guidelines on Covid. Sometimes, if you're like me, you see this happening and ask yourself whether there's any point struggling to do things the right way and sticking to the rules when others, so evidently, are not. Several of you have written to me expressing the same frustrations, showing appreciation for the school's approach but frustration at the actions of the few when outside school.

And so I will remind you once more of the key public health messages, which in summary are:

- Wash your hands regularly
- Wear face coverings
- Keep your distance from others
- Follow to the letter any advice you receive from TTP or Public Health Wales and ensure that your children do so as well
- Follow the general national Covid guidance and ensure that your children do so as well
- Challenge, politely, any people who are not observing any of the above

In the end, there is no real option here. Tired or not, cynical or not, frightened or not (and we are all some of those things some of the time) we have to act in ways that continue to protect the safety and wellbeing of all members of our school community, as best as we are able to. This is the right thing to do.

Sixth Form

There will be significantly different arrangements for our Sixth Form, which throws up a unique set of challenges and issues. If you are the parent or carer of a pupil in the Sixth Form, you will receive a separate letter from the school outlining what the new arrangements are.

With Christmas fast approaching, I hope that you and your families manage to create an opportunity to have some meaningful time together over the Christmas break and that you keep safe and well whilst doing so.

It's been a uniquely difficult and challenging year and we are not out of the woods yet. Today's approval of the Pfizer vaccine is, maybe, the first glimmer of light at the end of a long, dark tunnel. Although it will be some considerable time yet before a full vaccination programme is rolled out, I'm hoping that a combination of warmer spring weather and gradually increasing numbers of immunised people will begin to make this virus threat feel substantially different by Easter time. We won't be back to normal, or anything like it, but hopefully it will feel different, in a positive way.

Thank you once again for your support and understanding at this time. Please be reassured that we continue to keep your sons' and daughters' health and safety at the very forefront of our mind in everything we do and in all the decisions that we make at this time.

With warm wishes



Hugh Davies