



St Mary's Catholic School

Benton Park Road, Newcastle upon Tyne. NE7 7PE

where everyone can succeed



Tel: 0191 2153260 Fax: 0191 2153279

admin@st-marys.newcastle.sch.uk

www.stmarysnewcastle.co.uk

18th December 2020

Dear Parents and Carers

Update on returning to school from 5th January 2021

You may have seen in the media yesterday afternoon, the Government's latest announcement. Schools rarely have any advance notice of such announcements and the latest guidance came into schools after 6.00pm yesterday. There were two key aspects to this announcement:

- From January schools will be able to offer rapid COVID-19 tests to students
- There will be a 'staggered start' for all secondary students returning to school in January

I believe that both of these aspects should be welcomed. The staggered start will mean that many fewer young people are travelling to and from school and mixing, following the Christmas holidays and the relaxation of regulations over Christmas. The extra week will also mean it will be two full weeks after the Christmas weekend when most young people return to school and so any COVID-19 symptoms will have developed before their return. Schools having access to regular testing for staff and testing for students identified as close contacts to avoid the need for isolation is also a positive development and should reduce the disruption to learning that we have seen since September.

I do feel, however, that the way the Government has made the announcement will create very unrealistic expectations of what is possible for schools to do immediately in January. Schools are expected to plan, recruit staff and physically create a COVID-19 Test Centre on site to carry out the tests. According to the Government's own guidance, one testing station (which needs its own member of staff) can carry out 11 tests an hour and so the number of stations and staff that will be needed at St Mary's will be significant. Unless the Government changes its expectations of schools and provides the staff to set up the facility and administer the tests, as it did in Liverpool, I do not expect there to be significant testing capacity in school in the first couple of weeks of term. This will take extensive planning and resourcing for all schools.

In terms of the staggered start to school in January, as you know, we have a staff INSET day on Monday 4th January 2021 and therefore no students will attend school on this day.

From Tuesday 5th January to Friday 8th January, as per government guidance, only Year 11 and Year 13 students should attend school. These students will attend lessons as normal.

All students in Years 7-10 and Year 12 should complete remote learning at home, via Teams, during the first week (Tuesday to Friday). As previously, all lesson resources will be uploaded to Teams by the end of each timetabled lesson. There is also additional work, if needed, in the Home Learning Resources tab in the 'Student area' of the school website. If you have any questions about any aspect of your child's work, please contact his/her Head of Year in January. **Years 7-10 and Year 12 students will return to school on Monday 11th January 2021.**

The Government have said that vulnerable students and children of critical workers in Years 7 to 10 can also attend school in the first week, if parents or carers have no other alternative (at St Mary's, that would be Tuesday to Friday due to the INSET day). I ask that, unless you have no other alternative, these students also work from home for this 4-day period. I trust you will understand the reason that I make this request: that, as mentioned above, I believe the real benefit of the staggered start is to significantly reduce the risk of students who may still be developing COVID-19 symptoms after Christmas, spreading the virus to other students. If you are critical workers and have no other alternative for the first week of term, please complete [this form](#) and email it to the school admin email address no later than 9.00am on Monday 4th January 2021. This will aid our planning for the week. For your information, any Year 7 to 10 students in school during the first week will not attend lessons; they will complete the same online work as the Year 7 to 10 students at home.

Vocational exams scheduled for the week of 4th January will go ahead as planned.

Further details re the plan for rapid COVID-19 testing, will be shared with parents and carers in January, once further government guidance has been received by schools and resources and planning have taken place.

Apologies for the short notice about these changes to the start of school in January but, as I hope you will understand, this was very much out of our control.

I wish you and your families a wonderful and very happy Christmas.

Yours faithfully,



Miss Patterson
Headteacher