



from Tom Lawson MA (Oxon), Headmaster

5 February 2021

Dear Parents,

Having not written for some time, I wanted to keep in touch and thank you again for your forbearance during the pandemic. While the landscape is becoming gradually clearer we are yet to receive a definitive timeline from the government on when pupils will be permitted to return. I am hopeful that by the time I next write to you, probably in half term, we can expect greater clarity.

The UK vaccine rollout has been very successful and Eastbourne Covid rates in the last week have fallen by a staggering 43 per cent, having been higher in early January than the rates we have experienced through most of this pandemic. I cannot help but think that the surge in reported rates at the start of 2021 was only partly attributable to the variant strain, and more to do with the massive increase in testing that has picked up many more asymptomatic cases, especially as so many in Eastbourne work in health and social care where regular testing has been instituted. In any case, I am glad this wave seems to have crested and we have had no outbreak within the school community while we serve a small number of international pupils, critical workers' children and retain staff required on site.

We do not know for sure whether school will return on 8 March for all pupils or be phased; presumably this would favour exam year groups 11 and 13. Indeed, we cannot know for certain whether we come back after or even before 8 March and it is primarily this uncertainty which has led us to conclude, having carefully considered options, that last-minute changes to holiday / term time dates would be inadvisable. We are in the fortunate position of having already decided to maximise summer term time prior to the exam season by having a scheduled start a week earlier than most.

We remain flexible, but **expect us to stick to scheduled term dates**, having pupils back for a two-week burst of in-person schooling from (7/8-19 March, an Easter holiday where hopefully lighter restrictions and weather allow for some decent family time, and then an unprecedented seven-week stretch before half term of in-person summer term teaching from 13 April to 28 May.

To help keep the school community safe on return, we will be asking all pupils to make use of the Medatest kits purchased before Christmas and perform testing on Sunday and Wednesday evenings. The government-provided testing for pupils only allows for testing in the first week following return, which does not offer any ongoing means of identifying asymptomatic cases. Having risk assessed the government's proposal for mass testing pupils, we believe it would be safer to continue with the use of the Medatest kits. Furthermore, having piloted the government's recommended mass testing with staff on site, the scale required would necessitate the hire of a substantial number of extra staff, working out to be more expensive than the Medatest kits!

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Pupils in Year 11 and 13 can expect their mocks to be important **but not** overwhelmingly so, and we will aim to sit these only after pupils are properly settled into in-person schooling and with plenty of advance knowledge of the dates and time to revise for them. As soon as we get certainty on the system to replace exams, we will work backwards to decide the date of mocks and let you know as soon as possible. The summer term will provide ample opportunity for assessments to be made.

Indications from Ofqual are that the [proposed 'externally-set papers'](#) are not to be considered exams by the backdoor but opportunities for schools to choose standardised / externally set questions suitable for the pupils in their schools and mark them ourselves for external moderation. This moderation process will give some comfort that our pupils will not be disadvantaged by possible over-generous marking by other schools. The overall grade will be determined by schools according to an appropriate weighting of evidence including summer-term mocks and externally-set papers but also wider evidence. I can confirm that some IGCSE exams have been brought into line with this non-exam system and we hope those boards yet to declare their hand will do similarly.

I am sorry if the above seems complicated and I can assure you that, as soon as we have the formal decision from the government / Ofqual, which alas we do not expect for some weeks, I will let you know.

In the meantime, I have been very pleased by the children's adherence to and hard work with remote teaching, despite the inevitable screen-time fatigue. Our focus has been to alleviate this with wellbeing activities and advice, including everything from fun ideas from prefects to a new listener service for pupils, as well as exercise sessions and an increasing number of cultural activities. Pupils have been asked to contribute both to a survey about remote learning, so we can continue to hone our offer, and a [co-curricular / wellbeing survey](#). We have extended the deadline of the latter to enlarge the number of responses – please encourage your children to take part if they have not already. Listening to pupil responses on the first survey led us to move afternoon lessons earlier which has been well received.

As a last bit of good news for **overseas parents**, please note that the proposed new hotel quarantine rules for entry to the UK **will not apply to our boarders** who can come straight into the boarding house and serve any self-isolation there.

Whisper it softly, because we have had setbacks and reversals before, but it is beginning to feel now that the sky is clearing and the sun is rising over Eastbourne.

With very best wishes,

Tom Lawson
Headmaster

Cc staff, pupils