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Dear parents,

Once again, I am writing to you in relation to the spread of the coronavirus through the community, and the recent decision to move schools to remote learning. Once more, it has become necessary to close our school buildings to the majority of students, and teach and learn as an online community until the half term break at the earliest. In this letter, I would like to address some of the issues that have arisen in the first period of remote learning.

Our journey in faith

In my letter to you in March, I wrote “We are a Catholic school, and, at this difficult time, we trust in God to take care of those we love, and to help us maintain an appropriate perspective on the events and actions which we see around us. It will be difficult to maintain our role as a faith community, and you as parents have as important a role to play in this regard, as you do in educational terms.” The situation now requires the same commitment to your children’s faith as was required in March, and I urge you to maintain a link with your parish through attendance at Mass, either in person or via a live stream.

Remote learning

We have retained the two longer lessons each day, so that students do not become confused between learning on site and at home. Work is usually set at the start of each lesson, and therefore students should be online at that point (9.05am and 1.30pm) wherever possible. However, students and their parents must be mindful that teachers are working from home and face the same difficulties in terms of domestic challenges and responsibilities (e.g. ill or self-isolating family members) as the rest of the population, and therefore there may be times when the work is set earlier or later.

In the past, St Bernard’s has rarely used live lessons for remote learning because, in a live-streamed lesson, there is a chance of vulnerable students being seen on camera. There is also the risk of the footage being distributed more widely than was intended – teachers may use copyrighted resources for which there is no permission to distribute more widely; moreover, some homes lack the equipment or broadband width for live-streaming, and some children have to share one device. For these children, it may be easier to access written resources and tasks at a convenient time, and email their teachers with queries.

However, staff do understand the benefits of live teaching, and there will be some live lessons where we believe it is safe to put this provision in place. To paraphrase the recent advice from Mr Galton: staff have taken a blended approach between setting independent work and some elements of live or recorded teaching. The approach that a teacher adopts will be based on the subject and topic that is being delivered and will vary from lesson to lesson. Students can access these recorded resources on the school VLE via a variety of devices, including smartphones, tablets, laptops, desktops, PS4 and Xbox.

Regardless of the teaching strategy or device used, we ask that you check on a daily basis in order to see what work has been undertaken by your daughter or son. From a safeguarding perspective, we would also ask you to be vigilant in terms of what your child accesses on YouTube and other platforms.

Increasing data allowances on mobile devices to support disadvantaged and clinically extremely vulnerable children

A new government scheme temporarily increases data allowances for mobile phone users on certain networks. This is so that children and young people can access remote education if their face-to-face education is disrupted. Schools, trusts and local authorities can request mobile data increases for children and young people who meet all 3 of these criteria:

- do not have fixed broadband at home;
- cannot afford additional data for their devices;
- are experiencing disruption to their face-to-face education.

Children with access to a mobile phone on one of the following networks might be able to benefit:

- EE;
- O2;
- Sky Mobile;
- SMARTY;
- Tesco Mobile;
- Three;
- Virgin Mobile;
- Vodafone.

Other providers may join the scheme at a later stage.

Please ask your daughter to email Mrs H Barnes, if you are eligible for such a request. For each request, we need to know:

- the name of the account holder;
- the number of the mobile device;
- the mobile network of that device (for example Three).

Each provider will vary in how quickly they process requests.

Once a network provider has processed a data increase, they will send a text message to the account holder.

Communication with staff

Please remember that teachers now have a very different teaching day, with longer lessons and fewer occasions when they have non-contact time. Therefore, their responses may be a little slower than usual. I have also reminded staff that they should not be responding to email queries in the evenings and at weekends, as their wellbeing is important, and their focus when working at home is on the preparation of work for their classes. All school responses should be expected during the working day only.

I would also ask parents not to contact staff via their child's Teams account, as this is used for communication between student and teacher. Please use email if you have a query.

In addition to the remote learning conducted by our teachers, the considerable and often unsung work undertaken by our support staff continues. They too are experiencing different pressures and patterns of work. This could lead to slower response times than usual, and we ask for your patience in this regard.

Public examinations

As you will likely be aware, the government have announced a cancellation of GCSE and A Level examinations this year (the external January exams in Health and Social Care, Applied Science and Information Technology are still taking place). We have been advised that Ofqual, the examinations regulator, are considering a number of options to ensure the fairest possible outcome in the circumstances.

In light of this information, I would like to advise you that staff will not be commenting on predicted grades but that we will do our professional best to ensure that students receive the right grades and qualifications.

Please be aware that, particularly for Years 11 and 13, staff will be able to comment only on where your daughter is in her learning as of January. Her engagement with remote learning will likely have a bearing on any final outcome. Staff may refer to your daughter's target grade. This is an aspirational target rather than a predicted outcome. With 6 months learning to come, any reference to your daughter's current working grade is based on work completed so far. The final outcome could, of course, be higher or lower as there are still six months of learning ahead. It is worth pointing out that the engagement of Year 11 and 13 students in remote learning (especially if this continues for a significant number of weeks or months) will be a major factor in the grades that the school puts forward to the examination boards.

This last point is especially pertinent as the scheduled Year 11 mock examinations cannot currently take place in school. We hope that we can provide these in school, in some form, if/when students return. No recent online assessment is classed as a mock examination for either Year 11 or 13. The outcomes of any online test is used to assist progress rather than to determine grades.

We will continue to provide further information as we receive it.

Ofsted

You will recall from my letter in December that St Bernard's was chosen for an Ofsted visit which looked at the provision for remote learning. The resulting letter is rather bland, as we were told it would be, but it was pleasing to discuss our provision with inspectors, and their appreciation of our strategies was clear. You will be able to read the letter here, when it is published in the next few days: <https://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/provider/23/137312>

Testing for Covid19 in school

You will be aware of government announcements regarding the onsite testing and repeat testing of students and staff using Lateral Flow Devices. This creates acute logistical difficulties for St Bernard's, as we are so limited on space when the school is fully open. Therefore it is likely that, when the school fully reopens, students will be asked to use the community testing facilities close to home, rather than being tested in school; moreover, the contacts of students who test positive will be asked to self-isolate as before (there will not be a daily testing programme in school for these students). This is the approach endorsed by Southend's Public Health team and, with these thoughts in mind, we advise all families to fully utilise the community testing facilities which are available.

We hope you and your family keep safe and well.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'AS', written in a cursive style.

Mr A Sharpe
Headteacher