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Dear Parents and Guardians,

We are pleased that yesterday the Prime Minister announced that schools will be able to reopen from 8 March. The operational guidance¹ published by the government yesterday is extensive, running to 67 pages. In short though, there are only a few significant changes from that guidance which applied to all schools in the Michaelmas Term, before the Christmas break:

Firstly, all members of the school community should wear face coverings wherever *'social distancing cannot easily be maintained'*². The recommendations go on to say that face coverings should be worn in classrooms. The guidance on face coverings in schools has evolved significantly over the past term and a half. You'll recall that here at Prior, we have insisted on face coverings since the start of this academic year, at least in all areas where different year group 'bubbles' interact. The step that the government has now advised is one that we will be following, insofar as it is practicable. Our face coverings' policy undoubtedly helped to limit the incidence of the COVID-19 virus in our community last term and this seems a sensible step for now to allow us to return to school safely and limit the risks to our community.

Secondly, asymptomatic testing is now recommended by the government. You may recall that on the last day of the Michaelmas Term, asymptomatic, lateral flow testing was heralded by the government as a step that schools would be able to take in January. That plan was then rendered moot by the national lockdown imposed on January 4. Public Health England then announced a suspension of daily contact testing using lateral flow tests on 20 January 2021³. Now, schools are being asked to volunteer to test all students three times and at least once before their actual return to school. It is fair to say that the use of lateral flow tests has been a saga and one that has provided much confusion.

Perhaps the most peculiar aspect of the Prime Minister's statement yesterday was when he said, *'two weeks' from today (8 March) pupils and students in all schools and further education settings can safely return to face-to-face teaching.'*⁴ The government's operational guidance though recommends that schools who choose to engage with the totality of their lateral flow testing plans should ensure that students have a negative lateral flow test before they return. Those tests can only begin to take place

¹ [Schools coronavirus \(COVID-19\) operational guidance \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/90441/schools-coronavirus-covid-19-operational-guidance)

² Ibid., 11.

³ [Position statement regarding daily contact testing in schools from PHE and NHS Test and Trace - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/position-statement-regarding-daily-contact-testing-in-schools-from-phe-and-nhs-test-and-trace)

⁴ [PM statement to the House of Commons on roadmap for easing lockdown restrictions in England: 22 February 2021 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-statement-to-the-house-of-commons-on-roadmap-for-easing-lockdown-restrictions-in-england-22-february-2021)

from March 8. In fact, were we to insist on a voluntary lateral flow test for every student before they returned, we would not be able to get all students back into the classroom for at least a further week and possibly longer than that.

We have been running lateral flow tests in school since the start of this term for staff and for the children of critical workers. We have then been conducting hundreds of tests a week. Irrespective of the controversy that surrounds the accuracy of lateral flow tests, young people respond to having been tested in a very interesting, and perhaps understandable way. Once tested, they are less good at continuing with all the other aspects of the COVID preventative measures than they should be. We know that the 'hands, face, space' mantra is vital, and lateral flow testing has led to our students being less diligent in following this. Lateral flow tests are not 'passports' for students to behave differently. An excessive reliance upon them by government and schools is worrying. They are an effective means of monitoring the incidence of the virus in a given community but are certainly not a panacea. When using them alters student behaviour and weakens our preventative measures, then we should question how they are used.

We know that the incidence of the virus in our community is low. Currently, we have 76 cases of COVID per 100 000 in Bath and North East Somerset and 58 cases per 100 000 in the local wards around the school site⁵. The virus is not rampant in our local area and we know that our measures to control the spread of the virus within Prior Park College itself have been very effective. There is no doubt that small classes, on a large site, with plenty of space and well organised and structured consistent groups for lessons and activities, have helped us. Most of all though, we have been helped by the compliance of our students with our preventative measures and the good sense shown by parents in ensuring that their children do not come into school if they are displaying any symptoms of the virus.

Taking all the guidance into account then, the plans at Prior Park College for the coming few weeks are as follows:

- All students will continue to be taught remotely until Thursday, 4 March.
- Friday, 5 March will be an INSET day, in school, for all staff to be tested and to prepare for the physical return of students to the classroom. There will be no teaching for students that day, other than peripatetic music lessons, which will continue as scheduled.
- All students will return to school **on** Monday, 8 March. All lessons will take place in person, and a full programme of pastoral and co-curricular activities will take place as normal.
- **From** Monday, 8 March, all students will have one lateral flow test in school. This will allow us to monitor the incidence of the virus within our community. However, it will also mean that we are able to teach young people, in person, in the classroom.
- Students who are symptomatic must continue to remain at home. Please do not send your child to school if they have any symptoms.
- Those students in school should adhere to all the guidance that we have in place, including the wearing of face coverings, regular washing of hands, and attempting to stay socially distanced wherever possible.

⁵ [Prior Park College | COVID-19 Map for schools \(schoolcovidmap.org.uk\)](https://www.priorparkcollege.co.uk/covid-19-map-for-schools) 23/02/2021 at 09.00

From the start of this pandemic, we have done all we can to get your children into school. The plans above continue to pursue that goal in a sensible, measured, and safe manner. We know that the best place for your children to be learning is in school. We know that we have a range of measures in place to ensure their safety when they return to school, and we know that their compliance with those measures is the most effective mechanism we possess to limit the spread of the virus in our community. We will use lateral flow testing in a proportionate fashion, and we will continue to push the message to our students that face coverings, hand washing, and social distancing are the best things they can do to fight this virus.

This is the big picture of our plans to return to school. Your child's Tutor and HSM will be in touch with more detail about the practicalities of what that first week back looks like over the coming days. My assembly to students on Friday will deal with the practicalities of the return and we'll be sure to have a link to it in this week's Prior Knowledge. If you have any questions, then do please let me know. Otherwise, I look forward to seeing your children back at school on Monday, March 8.

Best wishes

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ben Horan', with a long horizontal flourish underneath.

Ben Horan