

Message to parents from Torfaen Education Service

Dear parents and carers

Happy New Year - I hope you and your families are well and you had an enjoyable Christmas.

Over the Christmas period, there have been a number of Welsh Government decisions which will impact all schools in Wales and your child's headteacher will be in touch to explain how they will affect you.

Some changes will affect all pupils and I thought it might be helpful to set these out ahead of the return to school.

Testing

There will be far greater use of lateral flow tests (LFT) this term. Secondary aged pupils and all school staff will now be asked to test every Monday, Wednesday and Friday. If they have a positive LFT result they will be required to book a PCR and isolate.

If your child is identified as a close contact of a positive case, they will be required to do a LFT every day for 7 days. If the result of the daily test is negative, they should continue to attend school.

If you are a parent of a primary aged pupil, you can obtain LFT tests online by visiting <https://gov.wales/get-rapid-lateral-flow-covid-19-tests-if-you-do-not-have-symptoms> or from participating local pharmacies, a list of which can be found in the link. If you are unable to do this, primary schools have a very small supply available for emergency testing.

Staff Shortages

The impact of Omicron has meant there are increasing numbers of staff in businesses and public services across Wales that are required to isolate after contracting the virus. Over the Christmas period this has been impacting the Health Service and many parts of the economy. Before Christmas we were able to keep almost all of our schools open to all learners consistently, but we must now face the possibility that some classes, or year groups may have to close over the coming weeks.

Headteachers are assessing the situation in their own schools but, as you can imagine, the situation on positive cases changes on a daily basis. Our school staff have been spending the first two days back in school planning on how they can maintain face to face learning in school whenever possible. The council and head teachers are also keen to keep breakfast clubs and planned after school activities in place too.

One challenge facing headteachers is the time they have to make decisions following the result of a positive test from staff. This may result in you receiving really short notice that your child cannot attend school that day. We appreciate this can be very difficult and we ask your patience and understanding through this very disruptive period while the virus spreads extensively.

Schools are considering changing the start and finish times of school to allow more time in the morning to contact parents should learners need to stay at home. Your school will contact you as early as physically possible if they need to make such a change so it will be vital to check for messages from the school.

Free School Meals

The intention is that the school catering service will continue to operate as normal through this period. Systems are in place to ensure children who cannot attend school because they have Covid will receive a direct payment as per previous arrangements. Although we aim to maintain catering services in school, it is possible we may also experience staff shortages in these teams and if this happens we will again aim to provide notice and make direct payments to the families affected.

Testing and Tracing

Anyone with a positive test result should follow the isolation rules set out at [gov.wales/self isolation](https://gov.wales/self-isolation).

As you're aware, there has been a huge rise in case numbers over the last few weeks and the Test, Trace and Protect (TTP) service is very busy at present. You may be contacted by text message and asked to complete a form online. This online form gathers data about who your child has seen and where they have been during their infectious period. Unfortunately this is a standard form so will ask a series of questions which do not naturally fit your child's circumstances. For the questions on the form listed below – we would be grateful if you provide the following information:

- Are they employed? Please answer YES
- What is their employment status? Please select STUDENT
- What is their main place of employment? Please add your child's SCHOOL.

This information is very important as it helps advise the school of a positive case quickly and helps provide advice to contacts identified by you and your child. If this information is missing, there will be significant delays in us providing advice to the correct peoples so your cooperation would be gratefully appreciated.

Please be assured that we will do our very best to minimise disruption to learners and to you throughout this period.

Yours sincerely

Dermot McChrystal

Chief Officer, Education & Lead Director for Children and Young People