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Dear Parent/Carer,

I hope you have all had a good week and are looking forward to the forthcoming Bank Holiday weekend, which appears to be set to be accompanied by more of the blue skies we have enjoyed over the weeks since school closed. Indeed, when we look back on this very sad and difficult time in years to come I think the weather will be one of the things we will remember more fondly and it has certainly made a challenging time slightly more bearable.

As the country slowly starts to begin the journey back to what we once knew as 'normal', it is the sad reality that schools will not be one of the things that return to how they were quickly. We know that our students in Years 7, 8 and 9 will not return to classrooms until the Autumn Term and these last two weeks have been characterised by considerable national debate and uncertainty over whether or not students in primary schools and Years 10 and 12 will return on 1st June as proposed by the Prime Minister two weeks ago. I will steer clear of speculation and opinion in this letter and try to provide a clear update on various aspects of our current work and indeed, in the last 24 hours, there has been a significant development in terms of plans for Year 10 and 12 students which I will share below.

Childcare Provision

Our childcare provision for children of key workers and vulnerable students will continue to be open throughout next week's half-term break. A large number of staff have kindly volunteered to supervise this provision - please contact us via contactportal@helsbyhigh.org.uk if you have any queries or wish to make use of our provision, either next week or when it continues throughout the next half-term.

Free School Meal Voucher Scheme

At present our understanding is that vouchers in lieu of Free School Meals currently not being taken in school will not be available for the half-term break next week and we then anticipate the scheme continuing again from the week beginning Monday 1st June. Should this position change then we will inform eligible families immediately by e-mail.

Learning From Home

I am sure that just because students have been learning from home for a number of weeks now and getting used to the concept, that won't mean it is getting any easier. Indeed, one of the challenges for all concerned is the inevitable lack of variety of learning activities in comparison to the range that can be planned and undertaken in classroom lessons in school. The Department for Education has this week published advice for parents with regard to what they call 'home learning', which can be accessed via the following link:

https://www.gov.uk/guidance/help-secondary-school-children-continue-their-education-during-coronavirus-covid-19?utm_source=1992819e-b988-439e-9846-d5d2ae5f5e22&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm_content=immediate

As always, thank you so much for all the support you have provided with this week's learning and also with the 'attending' of the Careers Festival, which we know has been popular with our students. Students have worked so hard over the last 5 weeks and have certainly earned a break so we will not be setting any new learning for next week. Hopefully this will give students a chance to rest, enjoy other activities and catch up on any work in advance of starting again on 1st June.

I have written previously about the challenge of providing work to suit all of the different circumstances that our students are trying to work in at home. As with all organisations, if schools had known this crisis was coming they would have been better-prepared, but instead they had to use the virtual learning platforms they already had in place, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. ShowMyHomework allows immediate interaction between teacher and students in a way which I know has been appreciated by students and parents and in a way that other platforms do not, but then it inevitably lacks some of the functionality of platforms being used by other schools. To switch at this stage would be very difficult given all of the log-in and password set-up that would be required to be done remotely.

The other challenge has been not knowing until recently the likely length of the school closure, which has limited our ability to plan further ahead. This is less the case now though as I will describe below. We have put a lot of work into planning our curriculum (ie what students will learn at home) over the past couple of weeks and are now exploring different ways of delivering learning to hopefully add a little more in the way of variety of approaches. There is an old theory in teaching though that students learn 20% of what they hear presented, 30% of what they see presented and 90% of what they work out for themselves so please do not under-estimate how much they are learning at home by having to work things out for themselves more than they might normally do in a classroom with their friends. If we could suddenly put their teachers' faces and voices onto their laptop and phone screens it may not mean that they actually learnt any better. We are though exploring how we can add more interactivity into next half-term's provision now we know that students will be working from home for a much longer period of time. This will include phone-calls to all students and the possibility of different types of lessons and activities.

Years 10 and 12

Students and parents will be aware that the Prime Minister proposed "face-to-face" contact with teachers for students in Years 10 and 12 over the next half-term. Although we have started planning how we could safely offer this as a school there has been no further detail provided on what this should look like and the Local Authority have in the last day or so stated that they "strongly advise" their schools not to open to more students and staff until Monday 8th June at the earliest. Please see their message for Year 10 and 12 parents at the end of this letter.

Hence we will continue to set work via ShowMyHomework for Year 10 and 12 students after half-term and it looks increasingly likely that learning from home will be the main way of working for Year 10 and 12 students across the country until the summer, with any access to school likely to take the form of 'tutorials' with teachers to assist them with their work. The first step to this happening of course is for the national coronavirus alert level to be such that the re-opening of schools can proceed when it is reviewed next week (on Thursday 28th May). There is also speculation that Ofqual (the regulatory body in charge of examinations) is considering how next summer's examinations will need to take into account the disruption to learning and progress of Year 10 and 12 students this year and I will update parents on this as any proposed plans become known.

Years 7, 8 and 9

As I described last week, being clearer about the probable length of absence from school has allowed us to re-plan our curriculum for the next half-term. We will be moving on to new learning in all subjects but will ensure that we don't cover any key topics and concepts in such a way that any understandable failure to fully grasp them whilst learning from home would affect future learning and progress. In many ways, our teachers' biggest contribution to the global crisis is only just beginning. They have already re-planned their curriculum to take into account the school closure and will be checking on learning, looking out for common misconceptions and filling in gaps in knowledge and understanding for many months after students return to school. It is the combination of students' hard work at home with their parents' support and the expertise of Helsby staff that gives me confidence that the long-term progress and success of our students will not be affected by what has happened over the last two months.

From Monday 1st June we will continue to set learning activities as described above using ShowMyHomework, with each teacher setting and supporting work for their own classes. This would only change if we moved to a position where some staff were in school working with Year 10 and 12 students and others were working from home supporting remote learning. We have made plans for this eventuality though and will share them if and when necessary.

Summer 2020 GCSE, A-Level and Vocational Qualification Results

Although promised very soon, the final outcomes from Ofqual's consultation regarding the determination of this year's external examination results have not yet been published. With a 12th June deadline for the submission of our data to inform the awarding process, Subject Leaders have been working over the past few weeks in anticipation that the consultation proposals will be upheld. As soon as it is confirmed by Ofqual (which I expect to be over half-term) we will share with Year 11 and 13 students and parents details of the process and the work we have been undertaking. We are also aware that there are students in Years 10 and 12 who were entered for external examinations in vocational subjects this Summer and we will also be in touch with them and their parents regarding arrangements as these examinations were cancelled in the same way that they were for Year 11 and 13 students.

Staffing News

This half-term marks the end of Mrs Penney's time at Helsby. She joined the school in 2000 and has been a stalwart of the Social Sciences department for the last 20 years. Over the years many students will have enjoyed and benefitted from the expert teaching, care and support that Mrs Penney has provided and she will be sadly missed, particularly her work in the Sixth Form where she has most recently been teaching. We wish her well as she moves away from the area and wish her all the very best for the future. She isn't the first colleague to leave us during these current strange times and as a staff we look forward to hopefully being able to say goodbye to Mrs Penney in person one day in the future.

Apologies for the length of this letter, but I wanted to provide you with a little bit of the thinking as well as the detail behind what we are currently doing to try and support our students (and parents) in difficult circumstances. All of us, staff, students, parents and headteachers, will look back one day and see that we got some things right and some things wrong over the last few months - that's the benefit that hindsight brings, especially after a situation which nobody had ever been through before. What I am sure of though is that all of us have done our very best and students, parents and staff should be very proud of that. Please do let us know if you have any queries, suggestions or feedback about our current provision - it's not always easy to see and know what is happening when everybody is working in relative isolation in their own homes.

Thank you for your support, especially of your children during what will have been such a difficult time for them, and I hope you continue to keep safe and well and are able to enjoy a well-deserved rest and family break over the Bank Holiday weekend and half-term holiday.

With very best wishes,

Martin Hill
Headteacher

MESSAGE FOR YEAR 10 AND 12 PARENTS FROM CHESHIRE WEST AND CHESTER LOCAL AUTHORITY:

Dear Parents and Carers

As you will be aware the government have set out an ambition that schools are to re-open from 1st June.

As a Local Authority, we have been consulting closely with schools and other partners about the best and safest way to re-open schools, at the earliest possible date.

As a result of these discussions the Local Authority is strongly advising schools not to widen their re-opening until, at the earliest, 8th June and that will, of course, be subject to any further developments in national advice and guidance. Schools will, however, continue to follow national guidance in offering places to children of key workers and vulnerable children.

We would also ask you to understand that not all schools will be able to re-open at the same time or for the same eligible year groups. This will be for a variety of reasons, such as staff availability (due to Covid-19) and the possible challenges around school buildings that may make social distancing more difficult to achieve when following the national advice and guidance.

Your school will keep you informed as to their decision about re-opening and when this will take place, and for which children. The schools have been undertaking rigorous risk assessments and the Local Authority will support schools with the decisions they make.

In the meantime, we would like to thank you and our schools for their patience, understanding and hard work during these very difficult times.