

19th November 2020

Dear Parent/Guardian

The Government has recently announced quite significant changes to the guidance for boarding schools relating to Covid-19. I am therefore writing to advise you of these changes and how they will affect the boys at Brymore. The key changes are:

- a) If a boarder displays symptoms, then the whole 'household' must self-isolate for 14 days or until the boy with symptoms returns a negative result and is symptom free. At Brymore this will mean the boarding 'pod' that he is in will need to self-isolate.
- b) Self-isolation can either take place at school, or the boy can be picked up and taken home. If this is the case, then the family at home must also self-isolate for 14 days or until the boy with symptoms returns a negative result and is symptom free (Results are currently coming through within three days.)
- c) Self-isolation at school means that boys will be confined to their boarding house and will complete online learning in their dormitories or in the isolation room. Meals will be delivered to them and all recreational time will be carefully monitored and will be away from the rest of the school. They will not be allowed home at the weekend during this time.

At the time of writing we still have not had a confirmed case amongst staff or students at Brymore. The guidance for dealing with a confirmed case in a boarding house remains unchanged and is similar to dealing with a confirmed case in a domestic household. With a confirmed case everyone within the 'house' should self-isolate. Therefore, to minimise the spread of the disease we have divided boys into separate 'households' or pods which would also reduce the necessity to send everyone home. This has not changed.

What has changed is how we are expected to deal with a boy with symptoms. We are now being asked to treat this as you would in a domestic household - the boy and the others within the pod would need to self-isolate for 14 days. This can either be self-isolating here or at home. If a boy within the pod, who remains at Brymore, develops symptoms whilst self-isolating then the 14 day self-isolation period would need to start again for all the other boys in that pod. In theory, this could mean that self-isolation continues for a much longer period than 14 days, with each new boy who develops symptoms triggering another 14 days and so on.

Since September, over 30 boys have developed symptoms, six of which have been boarders. All have subsequently returned a negative test result. At this time of year many boys develop coughs and colds, which can easily spread within a boarding house and so I have the obvious concern of asking lots of boys to self-isolate, which may prove to be unnecessary. I am therefore proposing two key changes, one is who we ask to self-isolate and the second is where the boys should self-isolate.

Decision making and self-isolation

As already stated, in eight school weeks over 30 boys have had to self-isolate at home with symptoms and all returned a negative test result. The most common symptom was having a cough. In order to guard against unnecessarily forcing large quantities of boys to self-isolate indefinitely, we will risk assess every individual case to determine whether self-isolation is necessary. Essentially, we will be distinguishing between 'Covid-like' symptoms such as a cough and 'Covid-specific' symptoms such as a new and continuous cough. If a boy has 'Covid-like' symptoms, then parents may take their son home to self-isolate but the rest of the pod will not need to self-isolate. If they have 'Covid-specific' symptoms, then the pod will need to self-isolate.

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Risk assessing

Cough

In order for a cough to be judged 'Covid-specific' it must be:

New and continuous - this means coughing a lot in one hour OR three episodes in 24 hours.

Additional factors that will be taken into consideration will be whether it is a dry cough and whether the boy has a shortness of breath. An occasional 'phlegmy' cough would not be judged Covid-specific.

Temperature

A temperature of above 37.8 C would be considered a 'Covid-specific' symptom. Feeling hot to touch on the chest or back would also be a 'Covid-specific' symptom. A slight temperature would not.

Loss or change to smell or taste

A 'Covid-specific' symptom would be not being able to smell or taste anything OR things smell or taste different to normal.

Self-isolation at school or at home

There is a clear balance to be had between safety, education and the help needed to ensure families can continue to work. The safest place is clearly at home because at school they will be self-isolating with around 20 other boys who have been in contact with someone with symptoms. The reality is, with a large group of boys 'isolated' together, we could in fact be encouraging the spread of the disease and creating a 'domino effect', where boys who would not have caught Covid catch it and spread it among themselves during isolation. The latest advice asks schools to consider carefully what is the best option for the health, wellbeing and safety of all students and staff and advises students who are self-isolating to be kept as far away from other students and staff as possible. This is why I am asking parents to choose to take their son home where possible. The educational (learning) experience will be broadly similar whether a boy is isolating in school or at home. This is because we have to limit the number of adults working with the boys in self-isolation at school to an absolute minimum and also because teachers would not be available anyway as they would be teaching. Boys will be supervised in their boarding house but not taught face to face. In both instances most of the learning would be online. Government guidance says that if a boy in a boarding house is sent home to self-isolate because someone in his pod has symptoms, then the family at home also have to self-isolate until the test results are returned (usually within three days). If the test is positive, they will need to isolate for fourteen days. I appreciate this could put undue pressure on families especially the self-employed or those who have working commitments. Other factors to consider will also include the age of the boy and whether there is anyone at home who is clinically extremely vulnerable. We are therefore able to accommodate boys who are unable to go home to self-isolate. However, we are more able to keep boys safe if we have fewer boys, as opposed to large numbers - which is why we ask that boys go home where possible. The final consideration is, that if a boy remains at school to self-isolate and someone develops symptoms within the pod towards the end of the self-isolation period, then that 14-day self-isolation period will need to start again. As we approach the end of term this could result in boys needing to self-isolate over the Christmas period.

Proposals

1. If a boy develops symptoms as described above, then he is sent home to self-isolate for 14 days.
2. All boys in the dormitory also have to go home to self-isolate.
3. All parents of boys within the same pod will be contacted and asked to collect their son for self-isolation. We will accommodate those that are unable to do this.

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Dealing with a suspected case

Boy presents with Covid-specific symptoms	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Temperature taken and arrangements made for Covid-19 test immediately• Parents contacted to agree next steps and asked to collect their son• Parents of boys within the dormitory also contacted and asked to collect their son to self-isolate• Parents of other boys in the pod contacted and informed (no names given) - given option of self-isolation at school or at home• If boys self-isolate at home then their families must self-isolate until there is a negative test result, or for 14 days if the test is positive• If a boy with symptoms is to remain in school, he will be isolated in an isolation dormitory in his boarding house and all social contact will be restricted• Food is taken to the boy; lessons are completed remotely and he is to have a separate bathroom/shower• All boys in the pod who are self-isolating must remain in their boarding house and complete work remotely. Food will be delivered to the boarding house and all social time kept separate
Test proves negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Boy returns to school or normal dormitory, unless he still has symptoms, in which case he needs to stay at home or in the isolation dormitory. If no symptoms he will be monitored• All parents are contacted and all boys to return as normal
Test proves positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Boy is picked up by parents where he will remain for 10 days and until all symptoms other than a cough and loss of smell/taste has gone• Positive test must be reported to PHE• All boys in the dormitory to be tested• Arrangements should be made to test all boys in the pod if advised by the public health team• All parents of boys within the pod contacted and all boys will need to self-isolate at home for 14 days or until results are known• Families of boys sent home will need to self-isolate for 14 days• Boys who shared the dormitory should be housed in the isolation dormitory until they can be picked up. These boys need to be isolated from others in the pod• Deep clean of dormitory, communal areas and isolation dormitory required

In order for you to make a fully informed decision I attach the detailed plans outlining how the boys will be cared for if they are in self-isolation. We will do everything that we can to ensure the boys are well looked after, however we also need to ensure that those in self-isolation are kept well away from the rest of the school. This includes the majority of staff as we have to limit the number of staff in contact with the boys to a minimum.

If weekly boarders are forced to self-isolate at school, then over the weekend additional charges will not be levied. However, if boys are forced to go home to self-isolate then boarding fees cannot be refunded as the school will still incur normal costs and indeed additional ones.

I appreciate that the pandemic has affected us all in many different ways and I thank you once again for continued support. The intention, as ever, is to work with you as parents which is why I am offering parents the choice so you can make a decision based on your individual circumstances. I am, as always grateful to parents for listening to our considerations and for helping us to do the best we can under difficult circumstances to keep all boys as safe as possible.

Yours faithfully

MARK THOMAS
Headteacher