

Exams officer blog

Despite the current uncertainty, this is a time for exams officers to 'stick to their plan'...

This month's blog is written by Lisa Longstaff, exams officer at Dunottar School, who considers the importance of focusing upon key tasks during the current period of uncertainty

During this challenging time, the best we can all do is to stick to our exams plan and deal with tasks that we know need doing, including policy updates and preparation for mocks. Thankfully, exams officers are known for their resilience and resourcefulness so we will all adapt to any further changes. A very useful [Annual Exams Plan](#) template can be found on **The Exams Office** website.

Policies are key to a successful year. I find myself looking at these differently following the events of 2019/20 academic year. **The Exams Office** now have most policies available on their [Online Portal](#), and once you have set these up this year it will be a breeze for next year! It is a great feeling to know that we can finally save some time with what is very often a long and daunting task.

Policies are no longer just a box-ticking exercise but a valuable guide for us to follow, and in particular, the Contingency Plan which, incidentally, JCQ Inspectors have been asking to see during the recent virtual inspections.

It is no coincidence that this is at the top of **The Exams Office** [Policy/Procedures Checklist 2020/21](#), as it has been for the past couple of years, and now we know why! This checklist is my starting point for updating policies and it also includes the escalation process, as mentioned in *JCQ General Regulations section 5.3*. This supports the Contingency Plan, and should be discussed with your SLT to ensure that if a key member of the Senior team is absent, eg the Head, or perhaps the Deputy Head who has overall exams' responsibility, then there is a nominated person who is well equipped to deal with an issue in their absence.

Many exams officers only have administrative and practical support at certain times of the year, so it is vital to consider what will happen if you are absent or need time off. The current health situation could make this a real issue, and whilst it hopefully will not happen to you or in your centre, it is best to have a firm plan in place. In my centre, I am fortunate that I have several colleagues/senior leaders who are familiar with aspects of my role, including the IT department, SENCo, school secretary and our lead and senior invigilators. It makes sense that if I was absent for any reason, not only are there members of staff who could deal with the various aspects of my role, but that there is a senior leader who could co-ordinate staff to ensure that every area is covered. Over recent years, I have also forged good links with exams officers at other schools and have a list of their contact details, along with all the exam board contact numbers.

It should also be noted that the same issues can apply for the SENCo, and therefore they should also confirm that contingency is in place in the event of their absence or that of their line manager. I recommend that this is added to your Contingency Plan

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An 'exams instruction manual' is also very useful as a contingency measure. I have a folder which is labelled 'EXAMS – How to.....' which contains useful information about monthly tasks, templates, guides and checklists which I use, as well as an invaluable iSAMS Exams Manager folder which I have annotated. Therefore, I am delighted that **The Exams Office** are planning to launch an *online centre exams handbook* in early 2021 which exams officers can personalise to include the materials used in their centre. I will most certainly be using this tool (which will be located on their Online Portal) and updating it on an annual basis to ensure that it is relevant for each academic year.

Your school leadership team will most likely have updated the main school contingency plan so you can keep a copy of this with the Exams Contingency Plan as well and you may find it useful to cross-reference from this to produce the exams version.

One of my 'big' moments last year was getting a second screen for my PC, this has made it so much more efficient to produce policies, I can check against the personalised areas in the previous year and other documents. Also useful for timetabling and most other tasks, I do not know how I managed without it!

As I write this, DfE and Ofqual have confirmed the dates for the Summer 2021 exams series, which will no doubt impact us all in a variety of ways and become a hot topic. Do ensure that you are receiving the exams updates from the awarding bodies, you can request these. Email alerts from Ofqual <https://www.gov.uk/email-signup?link=/government/organisations/ofqual> and JCQ <https://www.jcq.org.uk/subscribe/> will help you keep abreast of the latest information available and **The Exams Office** provide an invaluable *Coronavirus (Covid-19) Updates* page <https://www.theexamsoffice.org/coronavirus-advice/> which gives you an 'at-a-glance' view of the latest sources of information.

Make good use of any awarding body webinars, **The Exams Office** [online training videos](#) and your own network. If you are new to the role you will find the awarding bodies helpful, I used to contact them daily when I was first in role, several times a day during exams! You may find that the exams officers at schools in your area belong to a [Network Group](#), which are run by OCR, virtually at present. Never have such groups been so vital to our role, we all need to network and keep in contact, there is help and support aplenty!