

Exam contingency planning – Finding an alternative venue

JCQ regulations require a head of centre/senior leadership team to have a contingency plan in place to mitigate the impact of a series of events, including their centre being unavailable for examinations. Section 15.3 of the *Instructions for conducting examinations* publication states:

All centres must have a written examination contingency plan which covers all aspects of examination administration. This will allow members of the senior leadership team to act immediately in the event of an emergency or where the head of centre, examinations officer or SENCo is absent at a critical stage of the examination cycle. The examination contingency plan should reinforce procedures in the event of the centre being unavailable for examinations owing to an unforeseen emergency.

All relevant centre staff must be familiar with the examination contingency plan.

Consideration should be given as to how these arrangements will be communicated to candidates, parents and staff should disruption to examinations occur.

When devising an exam contingency plan, senior leaders should also consult Ofqual's [Exam system contingency plan](#) which requires a centre to review contingency plans well in advance of each exam or assessment series and to consider how, if the contingency plan is invoked, a centre will comply with the awarding organisation's requirements. The plan also requires centres to speak to the relevant awarding organisations as soon as possible if they are expecting any disruption that might affect the sitting of exams and assessments.

A future article will consider the actions which a centre may take to overcome the absence of an exams officer at a critical stage of the exam cycle, however, in this article we consider the factors which a head of centre/senior leadership team must take into account when deciding upon an alternative venue for examinations – and results day(s) – owing to an unforeseen emergency.

It should also be noted that for JCQ inspection purposes, any alternative venue(s) must be identified by name.

Factors to consider

The issues relating to acquiring an alternative venue that could be used in the case of an unforeseen emergency will be very much influenced by local factors. Some centres will have easy access to a nearby alternative venue, whilst for others it will be more challenging to find a suitable venue.

When sourcing an alternative venue, senior leaders must consider a range of factors, this may include arranging more than one venue as a contingency measure.

Some centres may find it difficult to source one single alternative venue within their vicinity for whole cohorts of Year 11 and Year 13 candidates, not to mention any Year 12 candidates taking VTQ units or AS examinations.

It is acceptable for contingency measures to include multiple named alternative premises such as several local primary schools. The decision to utilise multiple venues will depend on the size of the cohorts and the maximum space available at potential sites. Below are a range of alternative venues which centres may consider depending on their circumstances.

Local venues

Other schools/colleges

The first port of call for many centres will be to consider the option of utilising the facilities at a local school(s)/college(s) as they are more likely to have the accommodation and resources/equipment - such as tables, chairs, clocks, exam posters, etc. – to stage examinations.

However, it is also very likely that this school/college will also be staging examinations, have candidates sitting examinations and therefore the accommodation available may not be sufficient to seat all candidates. This will need to be considered when arranging examinations during the same session/day for both sets of candidates as one group of candidates will need to be supervised until they are able to sit their examination.

Centres within your academy chain/trust

If your centre is part of an academy chain or multi-academy trust (MAT), an obvious consideration for an alternative venue is a local centre within your group.

However, in this situation, several issues will need to be considered, including the location of the centre and the distance candidates – and invigilators – would need to travel to this as an alternative venue. If the ‘home’ centre has their own candidates

taking examinations, this will need to be taken into account when accommodating an additional cohort of candidates.

Primary schools

Many centres will have a primary school(s) within their locality. It is also likely that during an exam series a primary school will have space such as an assembly hall available for use.

However, the size of the accommodation – which will be designed to cater for smaller cohorts - may restrict the number of candidates who can sit an examination and, therefore, it may be that a local primary school may only be suitable for examinations which involve a smaller number of candidates and not examinations which involve the whole cohort, such as GCSE English and maths.

If a local primary school is the only option as an alternative venue then more than one primary school may be needed to stage examinations which involve the whole cohort.

Other options

When considering other options, there are no stipulations on the type of venue other than it complies with the conditions as set out in section 11.4 of JCQ's *Instructions for conducting examinations*:

Any room in which an examination is held must provide candidates with appropriate conditions for taking the examination. The centre must pay attention to conditions such as heating, lighting, ventilation and noise, whether internal or external, intermittent or continuous.

Therefore, the following type of accommodation may be considered as an alternative venue as long as the conditions are appropriate for candidates to sit their examinations:

- A marquee on the centre's grounds or a local site which can house such a structure. The marquee must be robust, and not impacted by bad weather and the temperature is optimal. The noise environment must also be considered.
- Training rooms on an industrial estate/space
- Conference centre/sports venue with conference rooms/space
- Village/church hall

Size of cohort

The number of candidates is a key factor in determining the requirements for an alternative venue.

Where smaller cohorts need to be accommodated, centres may have a greater number of options available as an alternative venue. As explained above, smaller cohorts may be accommodated in venues such as primary schools or training rooms on industrial estates whilst larger cohorts will require more substantial premises such as schools, colleges or conference centres/spaces.

The NAEO advises that senior leaders should meet with their exams officer and identify which examinations are taking place on each exam session/day and the number of candidates who will need to be accommodated on each of these sessions/days. Such an exercise will reveal those days when a smaller alternative venue may suffice.

Therefore, senior leaders may have to consider more than one alternative venue to address the contingency requirements on each exam session/day.

Access arrangements

A further consideration when planning contingency measures is to consider any smaller environment which may be required for candidates granted access arrangements.

Senior leaders should meet with their exams officer/SENCo to identify any alternative rooming arrangements which may be required. This may require several additional rooms for one-to-one facilitation, or rooms where a small group of candidates with similar needs can be accommodated.

These requirements will need to be considered when assessing the suitability of an alternative venue.

Exam room equipment

Depending on the type of premises utilised as an alternative venue, there may be a need to transport a range of exams-related equipment.

In addition to exam room posters, general stationery, clocks, boards to detail examination information, there may be a need to move exam tables and chairs to the alternative venue. Consideration will also need to be given to the secure movement or acquisition of question papers, modified papers, examination stationery, etc.

If a centre is unavailable and secure electronic materials need to be downloaded, the relevant awarding body/bodies must be contacted for advice and guidance.

As highlighted below, time may need to be built in to organise/transport this equipment to the alternative venue and, therefore, there may be an unavoidable delay until

examinations can be staged at the alternative venue. If there is a such a delay, the relevant awarding body/bodies should be contacted as a matter of urgency.

Informing candidates, parents/carers and centre staff

Should disruption occur and the centre becomes unavailable for examinations owing to an unforeseen emergency, candidates, parents/carers and relevant centre staff (e.g. invigilators) will need to be informed as a priority. If the use of the alternative venue is then confirmed, details of the location and any other relevant arrangements that have been put in place must also be communicated as soon as practically possible.

Time delay

Any contingency in relation to an alternative venue will also need to consider the time it will take to organise a range of factors to ensure that examinations can be taken in compliance with JCQ regulations (see above – *Exam room equipment*).

If the need arises to utilise an alternative venue senior leaders will need to assess the time it will take to arrange the relevant logistics and inform candidates and centre staff.

If there is a delay in implementing the contingency plan for an alternative venue, advice should be sought from the relevant awarding body. The centre could then explain their circumstances and explore options with the awarding body - one of which could be, if all other avenues have been exhausted and candidates meet the published criteria, special consideration.

Conclusion

There is no simple and/or standard solution when considering an alternative venue if your centre is unavailable for examinations.

Below are seven steps, as recommended by the NAEO, which a centre should take when considering an alternative venue:

Step 1

It is the responsibility of the head of centre/senior leadership team to decide upon the strategy – and the implementation of this strategy - for acquiring an alternative venue(s).

Step 2

A meeting should take place between the senior leader, exams officer and SENCo to ascertain when examinations are taking place, cohort size on each session/day, and

rooming requirements (including any alternative rooming arrangements required for candidates granted access arrangements).

Site staff should also be involved in this meeting if exam furniture will need to be transported to the alternative venue.

The exams officer will also need to be consulted over the required arrangements for securely transporting confidential examination materials.

Step 3

The relevant senior leader should decide if one large venue, or several smaller venues, will be sought as a contingency measure. Another option is to acquire particular venues for specific days, for example, a local primary school during sessions/days when smaller cohorts are sitting examinations, and a local conference centre when a larger (or the whole) cohort is taking an examination (e.g. Maths, English, etc.).

Step 4

The relevant senior leader should visit potential venues to assess suitability and confirm the process if the centre's contingency plan ever has to be invoked and the alternative venue is used.

Step 5

The senior leader devises the contingency plan which confirms the centre actions to mitigate the impact of the disruption where the centre may not be able to open as normal for scheduled examinations. As the focus must be on the options that enable candidates to take their exams, this will include the name(s) of the premises which will be used as the alternative venue and details such as the time it will take for the venue to be arranged to serve as fully functioning examination accommodation. The contingency plan should also highlight the actions which will be taken if there is a 24/48 hour delay whilst the venue is set up to accommodate examinations in line with JCQ regulations.

Step 6

The senior leader, exams officer and SENCo meet to confirm the process for informing candidates, parents/carers and centre staff of the use of and location of the alternative venue if the contingency plan needs to be invoked.

It is recommended, as part of the pre-examination briefing/assembly, it is highlighted to candidates how they will be informed if any changes to the exam timetable or to the venue need to be made due to an unforeseen emergency during the examination period.

Step 7

The senior leadership team, in conjunction with relevant centre staff (e.g. exams officer, SENCo, site staff etc.) review the alternative venue arrangements on an annual basis.

Useful resources

The Exams Office Exam Contingency Plan template:

<https://www.theexamsoffice.org/exam-policy-templates/> or

<https://www.theexamsoffice.org/policy-generator-tool/>

JCQ Joint Contingency Plan: <https://www.jcq.org.uk/exams-office/other-documents/>

JCQ Preparing for disruption to examinations: <https://www.jcq.org.uk/exams-office/general-regulations/>

Ofqual Exam system contingency plan:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/exam-system-contingency-plan-england-wales-and-northern-ireland>

The contents of this article were correct at the time of publication (End of February 2024)