

GOV.UK uses cookies to make the site simpler. [Find out more about cookies](#)



Ofqual

[See more information about this Guidance](#)

Guidance

# Joint contingency plan in the event of widespread disruption to the examination system in England, Wales and Northern Ireland

Published 13 February 2015

## Contents

1. Background
2. Communications
3. Scenarios
4. Summary of responsibilities in the event of disruption to examinations
5. Useful Information

[↑Contents](#)

# 1.

## Background

### 1.1 Who owns the joint contingency plan

The plan is jointly owned by:

- the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual)
- the Department for Education (DfE)
- the Welsh Government
- the Department of Education, Northern Ireland (DENI)
- the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA)
- awarding organisations including AQA, City & Guilds, Oxford, Cambridge and RSA (OCR), Pearson, Vocational Training Charitable Trust (VTCT) and WJEC
- the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ)
- the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS)

While Scotland operates a different examinations system, the Scottish Qualifications Authority has been involved in the compilation of the plan to ensure its approach adopts the same principles of fairness, transparency, evidence and integrity.

### 1.2 Who the plan is for

The plan is designed for two audiences:

- staff from awarding organisations delivering examinations
- staff within schools and centres (including headteachers) who are

responsible for administering examinations

## **1.3 The purpose of the plan**

The purpose of the joint contingency plan is to ensure there is a consistent and effective response in the event of major disruption to the examination system.

All awarding organisations are required to have their own well-established contingency plans in place to respond to such disruptions, which have been used on numerous occasions.

This joint contingency plan takes these processes and procedures into account and is designed to complement them, not replace them.

## **1.4 The outcomes of the plan**

The overall outcome of the plan is to ensure that the interests of candidates are safeguarded while maintaining the integrity of the examination system and qualification standards.

There are three specific outcomes the plan seeks to achieve:

- delivering assessments to published timetables
- delivering results to published timetables
- complying with regulatory requirements in relation to assessment, marking and standards

## **1.5 Qualifications covered by the plan**

The qualifications covered by the plan are primarily large entry, externally assessed examinations delivered in schools. These include GCSEs, AS levels, A levels, Tech levels, BTEC National Diplomas and Cambridge Nationals.

## **1.6 When the plan would be triggered**

The plan would be triggered in the event of a major disruption to the examination system affecting significant numbers of candidates across several awarding organisations.

This could include severe weather, widespread illness, travel disruption, fires, logistical problems or system failures.

Any actions taken will be subject to the advice of the official agencies dealing with the specific circumstances being faced, for example the police, Environment Agency or Health Protection Agency.

## **1.7 If planned contingency actions are not sufficient**

If the contingencies set out in this plan are not proving sufficient to tackle the issue, Ofqual will convene an identified crisis management team consisting of representatives of all organisations involved, to agree the additional actions required.

## 1.8 Reviewing the plan

The plan was first published in 2006, and is reviewed and updated on an annual basis, each autumn term, by a contingency management group. A revised version is then published on [Ofqual's website](#). The last review took place in November 2014.

# 2.

## Communications

The scale of the exams, qualifications and testing system in England, Wales and Northern Ireland is huge, involving more than a million students each year and thousands of centres.

It is vital that a system of this size has robust and co-ordinated contingency plans in place to deal with any major disruption that may affect candidates.

In the event of a major disruption, communication is an important factor in ensuring an effective and consistent response across the agencies involved.

This includes communications between the organisations involved in the response, and communications to stakeholders such as centres, candidates, parents or carers and the public.

Details of whether specific contingencies have been agreed across organisations will be confirmed on [Ofqual's website](#) and proactively communicated to relevant stakeholders.

All organisations involved in this joint contingency plan are committed to:

- sharing timely and accurate information as required to meet the aims of the plan

communicating with stakeholders so they are aware of disruption to the exams, the contingency measures being implemented and any actions required of them, ensuring that any messages to the public are clear and accurate

In addition, the Department for Education (DfE), the Department of Education Northern Ireland (DENI) and the Welsh Government are committed to ensuring that relevant government ministers are informed as soon as it becomes apparent that there will be significant local or national disruption; and that they are kept updated until the matter is resolved.

# 3.

## Scenarios

Twelve specific scenarios are set out in this plan relating to widespread disruption of the examination system where contingency plans would be invoked.

The scenarios are set in sequence, following the way in which an examination would be planned and delivered, from issuing scripts to offering post results services.

Each scenario sets out the following information:

- the type of scenario
- who the scenario affects
- when to implement the plan
- one example of the scenario
- recommended actions for various stakeholders to take
- specific communication – if there is specific communication that should be undertaken with one of the stakeholders
- success criteria – what a successful resolution of the issue would look like

- where to get further information and advice

For the purpose of the scenarios, stakeholders include candidates, teachers, centre staff, parents, carers, awarding organisation staff, courier staff and scanning centre staff.

Please note that centre staff in these scenarios refer to members of staff who are administering examinations and may include headteachers, teachers and administration staff.

### 3.1 Scenario 1 – Disruption of teaching time – a significant number of centres are closed for an extended period

Type of scenario	Disruption to candidates <a href="#">1</a>
Impact on	Teachers, candidates, parents and carers
When to implement the plan	In the event that a significant number of centres are closed, and candidates are unable to attend for an extended period during normal teaching or study supported time, interrupting the provision of normal teaching and learning
Example of scenario	Severe flooding closes a significant number of centres in a region
Recommended actions	<p>Where there is disruption to teaching time and students miss teaching and learning, it remains the responsibility of centres to prepare students for examinations as usual</p> <p>It is recommended that centres:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- have contingency plans in place to facilitate alternative methods of learning, alternative venues or both</li> <li>- prioritise candidates who will be facing examinations shortly</li> <li>- advise candidates, where appropriate, to sit examinations in the next available series</li> </ul>
Specific communication	The centre to communicate with parents, carers and students about the potential for disruption to teaching time and plans to address this
Success criteria	Students continue to be taught either through an alternative method of learning or at an alternative venue

---

Further advice and information	<p>Guidance on emergency planning, with <a href="#">advice on severe weather</a>, is available from the Department for Education</p> <p>There is also <a href="#">statutory guidance on school closures</a></p> <p>Further advice from the Department of Education Northern Ireland can be found in the Useful Information section of this document</p>
--------------------------------	---

---

## 3.2 Scenario 2 – Candidates unable to take examinations because of a crisis – centres remain open

Type of scenario	Disruption to candidates
Impact on	School and college staff, teachers, candidates, parents and carers
When to implement the plan	In the event that candidates are unable to attend examination centres to take examinations as normal.
Example of scenario	A sickness bug means that a number of candidates are not able to attend a centre to take an examination.
Recommended actions	<p>It is recommended that centres:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- liaise with candidates to identify whether the examination can be sat at an alternative venue in agreement with the relevant awarding organisations</li> <li>- offer candidates an opportunity to sit any examinations missed at the next available series</li> <li>- apply to awarding organisations for special consideration for candidates where they have met the minimum requirements</li> </ul> <p>Please note: candidates are only eligible for special consideration if they have been fully prepared and have covered the whole course but are affected by adverse circumstances beyond their control. If a candidate chooses not to sit an examination for other reasons they should be aware that special consideration rules will not apply</p>
Specific communication	The centre to communicate with relevant awarding organisations at the outset to make them aware of the issue. The centre to communicate with parents, carers and candidates regarding solutions to the issue.
Success criteria	Candidates are able to sit examinations with minimum disruption or additional stress to them.

---



Further advice and information	JCQ's guidance on special consideration and alternative site arrangements can be accessed through the <a href="#">JCQ website</a> .
--------------------------------	---

---

### 3.3 Scenario 3 – Disruption in the distribution of examination papers

Type of scenario	Transport or delivery
------------------	-----------------------


---

Impact on	Awarding organisation staff, teachers, candidates
-----------	---

---

When to implement the plan	In the event that there is a disruption to the distribution of examination papers to centres in advance of examinations.
----------------------------	--

---

Example of scenario	A courier delivers a wrong set of examination papers to a centre. 
---------------------	---

---

Recommended actions	<p>It is recommended that awarding organisations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- source alternative couriers for delivery of hard copies</li> <li>- provide centres with electronic access to examination papers via a secure external network</li> <li>- fax examination papers to centres if electronic transfer is not possible.</li> </ul> <p>Please note that the examinations officer would need to ensure that copies are received, made and stored under secure conditions</p>
---------------------	--

---

Specific communication	The centre to communicate with awarding organisations to organise alternative delivery of papers.
------------------------	---

---

Success criteria	Students are able to proceed with taking examinations without having to reschedule examinations.
------------------	--

---

Further advice and information	not applicable
--------------------------------	----------------


---



### 3.4 Scenario 4 – Disruption to the transportation of completed examination scripts

Type of scenario	Transport or delivery
Impact on	Courier staff, centre staff, awarding organisation staff
When to implement the plan	In the event that there is a delay in normal collection arrangements for completed examination scripts
Example of scenario	A courier contacts a centre to report a problem about picking up scripts on time
Recommended actions	It is recommended that centres: - in the first instance, seek advice from awarding organisations and their normal collection agency regarding collection - do not make their own arrangements for transportation without approval from awarding organisations - ensure secure storage of completed examination scripts until collection
Specific communication	The centre to communicate with relevant awarding organisations at the outset to resolve the issue.
Success criteria	Scripts are stored 'securely' in line with JCQ guidance. Scripts are collected and delivered to awarding organisations with the minimum of delay
Further advice and information	JCQ guidance regarding the 'secure storage of scripts' is available on the JCQ website under <a href="#">Instructions for Conducting Examinations 2014-2015</a> <a href="#">Guidance on the 'Life of a script'</a> is also available on the JCQ website

### 3.5 Scenario 5 – Centres are unable to open as normal during the examination period

Type of scenario	Disruption to centre
Impact on	Candidates, teachers, centre staff, parents, carers and awarding organisation staff
When to implement the plan	In the event that centres are unable to open as normal for scheduled examinations.
Example of scenario	A fire at the centre means that it is  closed when examinations are due to take place.

Recommended actions	<p>It is recommended that centres:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- open for examinations and examination candidates only, if possible</li> <li>- use alternative venues in agreement with relevant awarding organisations (eg share facilities with other centres or use other public buildings if possible)</li> <li>- apply to awarding organisations for special consideration for candidates where they have met the minimum requirements (see Scenario 3)</li> <li>- offer candidates an opportunity to sit any examinations missed at the next available series, if possible</li> </ul>
Specific communication	<p>A centre which is unable to open as normal for examinations must inform each awarding organisation with which examinations are due to be taken as soon as is possible</p>
Success criteria	<p>Students are able to take examinations in alternative venues in a timely way</p>
Further advice and information	<p>Centres should cover the impact on examinations as part of their general planning for emergencies</p> <p>The responsibility for deciding whether it is safe for a centre to open lies with the head of centre. The head is responsible for taking advice, or following instructions, from relevant local or national agencies in deciding whether they are able to open.</p> <p><a href="#">DfE guidance on school closures</a> is available on the GOV.UK website</p>

## 3.6 Scenario 6 – Assessment evidence is not available to be marked

Type of scenario	Marking
Impact on	Candidates, teachers, school and college staff, parents, carers and awarding organisation staff
When to implement the plan	In the event of large scale damage to, or destruction of, completed examination scripts or assessment evidence before it can be marked
Example of scenario	A fire at the centre destroys completed examination scripts
Recommended actions	<p>It is recommended that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- awarding organisations generate candidate marks for affected assessments based on other appropriate evidence of candidate achievement, as defined by the awarding organisations in consultation with the regulators</li> </ul>

- candidates retake the assessment that has been affected at a subsequent assessment window, if possible

Specific communication	It is the responsibility of the head of centre to communicate this immediately to the relevant awarding organisation(s) and subsequently to students and their parents or carers
Success criteria	Candidate marks are able to be generated (if possible) from existing assessment materials
Further advice and information	To be sought from the relevant awarding organisation

### 3.7 Scenario 7 – Disruption to the scanning process – where completed examination scripts are being scanned in preparation for on-screen marking

Type of scenario	Marking
Impact on	Scanning centre staff, awarding organisation staff
When to implement the plan	In the event that there is disruption to the scanning process
Example of scenario	A scanning centre reports technical problems with scanning machines leading to delays
Recommended actions	It is recommended that awarding organisations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- awarding implement their existing contingency plans for disruption to on-screen marking process</li> <li>- revert to traditional forms of marking, recruit, train or re-standardise qualified new markers</li> </ul>
Specific communication	None
Success criteria	Deadlines for marking schedules are met
Further advice and information	To be sought from the relevant awarding organisation

### 3.8 Scenario 8 – Markers unable to mark examination scripts according to marking schedules

Type of scenario	Marking
Impact on	Awarding organisation staff
When to implement the plan	In the event that a significant number of markers are unable to mark examination scripts, resulting in a risk to the delivery of results by scheduled dates
Example of scenario	Significant numbers of markers withdraw from a specific qualification at short notice
Recommended actions	It is recommended that awarding organisations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- reallocate scripts to available markers</li> <li>- recruit, train or re-standardise qualified new markers</li> <li>- contact each other to 'share' markers for specific qualifications</li> <li>- prioritise marking based on results dates, UCAS deadlines, qualifications that require further study (eg maths and English)</li> </ul>
Specific communication	None
Success criteria	Deadlines for marking schedules are met
Further advice and information	not applicable

### 3.9 Scenario 9 – Difficulty in meeting planned schedule or unable to issue results

Type of scenario	Issuing results
Impact on	Awarding organisation staff, candidates, parents and carers
When to	In the event that an awarding organisation (including the case of a single

implement the plan	awarding organisation) is unable to meet a planned schedule for issuing results, due to a catastrophic process or systems failure
Example of scenario	A process failure delays both the preparation and issuing of results
Recommended actions	<p>If awarding organisations face delays in meeting the planned schedule for issuing results, it is recommended that they:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- establish priorities for processing results in line with UCAS and Central Applications Office <a href="#">2</a> (CAO) deadlines</li> <li>- implement existing contingency plans for disruption to the schedule for issuing results</li> <li>- in consultation with regulators, assess the level of disruption and consider alternative options for issuing results, dependent upon the nature of the issue</li> <li>- in consultation with regulators, liaise with relevant organisations (eg UCAS, CAO) regarding candidate progression to further and higher education</li> </ul>
Specific communication	Awarding organisation(s) to brief schools and colleges about potential delays to issuing results
Success criteria	Deadlines for issuing results to candidates are met
Further advice and information	not applicable

### 3.10 Scenario 10 – Awarding organisations unable to issue accurate results

Type of scenario	Issuing results
Impact on	Awarding organisation staff, school and college staff, candidates, parents and carers
When to implement the plan	In the event that a catastrophic system error, failure or attack on systems means a significant number of results cannot be validated as accurate, or are issued and found to be inaccurate
Example of scenario	An IT system failure impacts upon the accuracy of results
Recommended	It is recommended that awarding organisations:

actions	- revalidate results - reissue results, via an alternative format if necessary
Specific communication	Awarding organisations to inform schools, colleges and candidates of any incorrect results Awarding organisations to advise UCAS and CAO about any issues with incorrect results that may impact on their deadlines
Success criteria	Results are revalidated or reissued in a timely way for candidates
Further advice and information	not applicable

### 3.11 Scenario 11 – Centres are unable to distribute results as normal

Type of scenario	Issuing results
Impact on	Awarding organisation staff, school and college staff, candidates, parents and carers
When to implement the plan	In the event that schools or colleges are unable to access or manage the distribution of results to candidates
Example of scenario	A school or college is closed and therefore candidates are not able to visit to find out their results
Recommended actions	It is recommended that schools and colleges: - make arrangements to access results at an alternative site - share facilities with other schools and colleges if possible
Specific communication	Centres to contact awarding organisations about alternative options
Success criteria	Candidates receive results in a timely way
Further advice and information	not applicable

### 3.12 Scenario 12 – Awarding organisations are unable to offer post results services

Type of scenario	Post results services
Impact on	Awarding organisation staff, centre staff, candidates, parents and carers
When to implement the plan	In the event that awarding organisations are not able to provide post results services, with centres and candidates unable to access services such as enquiries about results and appeals
Example of scenario	A systems failure shuts down an awarding organisation’s online post results service
Recommended actions	It is recommended that awarding organisations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- make arrangements to provide post results services for centres and candidates through alternative methods (eg paper, Excel spreadsheets, traditional re-marking)</li> <li>- prioritise candidates going through UCAS or CAO</li> </ul>
Specific communication	Awarding organisations inform centres and UCAS or CAO about the implications of not providing this service
Success criteria	Candidates are offered a post results service using alternative methods in a timely way
Further advice and information	not applicable

# 4.

## Summary of responsibilities in the event of disruption to examinations

**Awarding organisations are responsible for:**

**Examination centres are responsible for:**

Offering advice regarding communication with candidates, parents and carers

Communicating with candidates, parents and carers

Preparing plans for any disruption to exams as part



	of general emergency planning
Ensuring centres receive examination materials for scheduled examinations	Preparing candidates for examinations
	Ensuring examinations and assessments are taken under the conditions prescribed by awarding organisations
	Ensuring, where relevant, that assessment materials and candidate work are stored under secure conditions
	Deciding whether the centre can open for examinations as scheduled and informing relevant awarding organisations if the centre is unable to open
Advising centres on possible alternative examination arrangements and declining or approving proposals for alternative examination arrangements	Exploring the opportunities for alternative arrangements if the centre cannot open for examinations and agreeing such arrangements with the awarding organisations
Evaluating and declining or approving requests for special consideration	Judging whether candidates meet the requirements for special consideration as a result of any disruption and submitting these requests to the relevant awarding organisations
	Assessing and liaising with awarding organisations in the event of disruption to the transportation of papers
Marking, moderating and grading candidate work	
Issuing results to centres on scheduled dates	The distribution of examination results to candidates
Advising UCAS and CAO about any delays that may impact on their deadlines	
Making a post results service available	Offering a post results service

## Useful Information

# 5.

## 5.1 Organisations

- [AQA](#)\_\_\_
- [CCEA](#)\_\_\_
- [City & Guilds](#)\_\_\_
- [Pearson](#)\_\_\_
- [OCR](#)\_\_\_
- [VTCT](#)\_\_\_
- [WJEC](#)\_\_\_
- [JCQ](#)\_\_\_ (Joint Council for Qualifications)
- [Ofqual](#) (Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation)
- [DfE](#) (Department for Education)
- [DENI](#)\_\_\_ (Department of Education, Northern Ireland)
- [UCAS](#)\_\_\_ (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service)
- [CAO](#)\_\_\_ (Central Applications Office, Ireland)
- [Welsh Government](#)\_\_\_



## 5.2 Links



- [JCQ: A guide to the special consideration process](#)
- [JCQ: Instructions for conducting examinations](#)
- [JCQ: Instructions for handling scripts](#)
- [DfE guidance on dealing with disruption to teaching and learning](#)
- [DfE guidance on school closures](#)
- [DENI guidance on exceptional closure of schools due to adverse weather](#)
- [DENI checklist for principals when considering opening or closure of school](#)
- [NI Direct advice on school closures](#)



1. Please note, this relates to widespread disruption on a regional or national basis with a significant number of centres being closed. [\\_\\_](#)
2. Central Applications Office (CAO) processes applications for undergraduate courses in Irish higher education institutions. UCAS provides the same service for higher education courses in the UK. [\\_\\_](#)

[Is there anything wrong with this page?](#)

## Services and information

---

[Benefits](#)

[Births, deaths, marriages and care](#)

[Business and self-employed](#)

[Citizenship and living in the UK](#)

[Crime, justice and the law](#)

[Disabled people](#)

[Driving and transport](#)

[Education and learning](#)

[Employing people](#)

[Environment and countryside](#)

[Housing and local services](#)

[Money and tax](#)

[Passports, travel and living abroad](#)

[Visas and immigration](#)

[Working, jobs and pensions](#)

## Departments and policy

---

[How government works](#)

[Departments](#)

[Worldwide](#)

[Policies](#)

[Publications](#)

[Announcements](#)

[Help](#) [Cookies](#) [Contact](#) [Cymraeg](#) Built by the [Government Digital Service](#)

**OGI** All content is available under the [Open Government Licence v3.0](#), except where otherwise stated



© Crown copyright