

Academy Transformation Trust share their initial approach to managing the unknown

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Please note: the information contained in this legal update is correct as of the original date of publication

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Here we speak to Claire Pritchard, COO at Academy Transformation Trust (ATT) on how they are responding to the ever-changing situation.

Browne Jacobson: There are still a lot of unknowns when it comes to COVID-19. What are the senior management at ATT doing to mitigate the potential risks of the virus?

Claire: In order to best protect our communities, one of the first decisions we communicated was that we would continue to pay colleagues full pay during any period of isolation – this enabled them to make sensible choices without worrying about the financial impact.

We have advised all of our academies to follow [Public Health England](#) (PHE) advice and have directed them to helpful resources, including the Department for Education (DfE) [advice pages](#).

I have been identified as a central point of contact for all related queries. This has enabled me to pick up on queries from one academy and disseminate pertinent information to all.

We have put a number of temporary measures in place, including asking visitors to sign a declaration on entry to our academies and restrictions around planning future trips and visits.

We have considered how appropriate it is to expect our colleagues to congregate in internal networks, nationally and regionally and have decided to use our IT capability to bring people together electronically instead of face-to-face for the foreseeable future. Our IT team are working swiftly on various 'how to' guides to enable staff to better access some of the IT functions that will, no doubt, assist distance learning.

As most of our major suppliers are centrally contracted, including catering and payroll, we have been able to have some really robust conversations about their response to coronavirus and what contingency plans they have in place. This has clearly eased the burden on our academy leaders.

Browne Jacobson: We're not sure how long the coronavirus will impact us for. The Government and NHS are preparing for cases to peak in summer 2020. What plans are you putting in place for ongoing curriculum delivery should the worst happen and you be forced to close your schools?

Claire: We have never been directive about which online resources and software packages our academies use to enhance their curriculum. However, we are all connected through Microsoft Office 365 with the ability to use Microsoft 'TEAMS' – we will be issuing guidance including how to record lessons and how students can download relevant apps to access them.

Each of our academies have been asked to produce a contingency plan, focussing their first priority on key year groups (i.e. exam years) demonstrating how they will continue to educate at a distance.

We have highlighted some fabulous offers from technology companies to provide additional resources for free, including Century Tech and Tassoumi.

We have considered that the national infrastructure network may fail us and therefore, asked for as much paper-based resource to be prepared in advance so that we can send this home with students in the event we have to close our academies.

Browne Jacobson: Is it too soon to be making alternative plans to accommodate this year's key exams?

Claire: The difficulty is we don't yet know what we are planning for - without some direction, contingency plans could be endless!

What we are doing is making sure all of our academies are retaining any information they can (including any mock exam papers that students have completed) as evidence to substantiate predicted grades should alternative means of assessment come into play this year.

Browne Jacobson: ATT is a large trust with academies across the Midlands and East of England, it's likely that you have access to more resources to help you plan and mitigate risk that smaller trusts and standalone schools. What would be your advice to them?

Claire:

1. Follow PHE advice and harness any support you can. There is plenty of trusted advice being issued by the DfE, local authorities and unions which are being updated daily.
2. Start planning now! If you don't have a comprehensive list of resources available to you then collate it quickly through department/faculty leaders. Ask them to draw up their action plans and consider how they all fit together at senior leader level within your school/trust.
3. Don't limit your plans to electronic resources buy extra stocks of paper!
4. Use your networks well – ask colleagues in larger settings to share their resources – there are already some excellent ones circulating through social media; use your Trustees, many of whom will be dealing with similar issues in their own environment.
5. Have your communication plan clearly set out. Review business continuity/contingency plans; make sure all of your home contact information is up-to-date for parents/carers and colleagues – consider how you would best disseminate important information from a distance and make everyone clear about your expectations for them to continue checking messages/emails.
6. Consider staff welfare – do you have access to employee assistance programmes? If not share details of free charities such as Education Support ... self-isolation and prolonged absence from work may be daunting for some!

Our thanks go out to Claire for sharing ATT's approach. The information and guidance including in this article is correct at the time of publishing.

If you or a member of your team would like to discuss your legal or HR responsibilities in relation to matters arising from the spread of coronavirus please contact us.

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