

How to survive (and thrive) during a pandemic

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As the Deputy Director of Library Services at the University of York I have led on our pandemic management. Here I share my top 10 tips for not only making it through a pandemic but actually coming out of it stronger than ever before.

York was one of the first UK HE libraries to physically re-open our library buildings and to offer new services such as Click and Collect, Direct Delivery as well as resuming and enhancing other services such as Postal Loans, Scan and Send, Intersite delivery and making study space available.

As all librarians will tell you - the Library never closed. It is very easy for many people to think of the Library only as a physical building holding physical items and providing study spaces. We were able to continue to offer most of our services even when the physical building itself was closed during the national lockdown in March.

So, without further ado, here are my top ten tips:

1. **Have a plan.** Having a plan for how you'll manage your services through the pandemic: what services you need to stop, start or continue, is important. We packaged service opening up into phases from July through to the start of term at the end of September. This allowed us to have a framework we could share with staff (but also our University community so we could communicate effectively).
2. **Implement your plan.** For us what was key was to work through the phases in sprints. While this is extremely common in IT departments e.g. software development, it is used less in libraries. Sprints allowed a clear focus and understanding of what needed to be done. People understood what they needed to deliver in what timeframe. Tasks were broken down to allow them to be achieved with a tangible result, allowing a level of accomplishment and further motivation for staff. When sprinting, ensure you remove all obstacles for staff - they can't be distracted or pulled in multiple directions.

3. **Ensure people rest.** You can't sprint forever. People need time to refresh themselves and come back with renewed energy. Ensure staff take leave and have periods which are less-intense or you risk them burning out.
4. **Connect.** Find out who you need to help you, it's not good to work in a bubble - none of us work in a vacuum. Other people want to help and I was overwhelmed by the generosity of colleagues from across the University including those in Health and Safety, Estates and Biology - many of whom I had never met before - as well as those who were also managing their own service reopening across the global HE library sector.
5. **Set the bar.** Being one of the first places to reopen on campus brought a number of challenges. We needed to figure things out quickly and often before any guidance from the University had been produced. While this sometimes felt like we were operating in a void, it meant we were seen as pioneering and a good place to test things out. We also helped colleagues to produce guidance that would actually work in practice and had a seat at the table for many policy decisions.
6. **Adapt.** Being able to adapt our services, having staff who were adaptable and were willing to learn new skills, pick up new processes and work across teams has been critical to our success. Regularly reviewing our services and processes, and iterating these is important.
7. **Be pragmatic.** At the end of the day you can't eliminate risk. You need to mitigate it but be pragmatic and trust people (who are all adults) to be sensible. This approach has allowed us to re-open more areas, and to do this more quickly than others - for example, access to the physical collections, student kitchen etc.
8. **Staff and student wellbeing are paramount.** This for us was at the heart of *how* we reopened. We took time to understand the individual circumstances of our own staff and started by only asking a handful of people to come back onsite. We set up a staff wellbeing working group who have acted as a critical friend to ensure our guidance has been thorough and we have acknowledged the anxiety that staff feel when they first come back onsite. Our wellbeing group also focused on the wellbeing of those coming in to use our services and ensuring equity of provision by continuing to offer remote alternatives. We increased the frequency of our conversations with our staff and students' union ensuring they were part of the discussion.
9. **Build confidence.** We grew staff confidence in *how* we did things. The first week we had a small number of staff in to clear the decks and get things set up, week 2 was about launching new services e.g Click and Collect and finally a couple of weeks later we were able to open study spaces to University staff and students. This meant that staff became comfortable and familiar with processes and were able to reassure each other and other staff as they returned onsite for the first time. It also meant that the confidence from our staff and student community also grew as we introduced new services based on their feedback and needs.
10. **Don't forget to tell people what you're doing.** Communication is crucial - both your own internal comms but also your outward facing comms. We are lucky to have an incredibly talented social media team who have kept our communities updated with relevant content throughout e.g. [welcoming tweets](#) at the start of term, and [engaging videos](#). Feedback from over lockdown highlights how our online voice has become even more important. The positive feedback we received pre-lockdown has been amplified over lockdown. Our internal communications have also been critical to keeping staff updated. Operating in such a fluid environment has meant that we don't always get things right. We invite and seek out critical feedback, listen and implement change to evolve and improve our services and processes.

These views are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect the views of UKSG.



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