

Responding to the invasion of Ukraine

As we all look on at the invasion of Ukraine with shock, anger and compassion for the millions of people impacted, schools are thinking about how they should respond.

Some initial actions undoubtedly sprang to mind on day one of the war, such as protecting the welfare of any Ukrainian or Russian pupils you may have, but a thoughtful response to the situation will involve some deeper thinking over the coming weeks.

Here we explore four areas to consider: putting people first, financial implications, sensitive fundraising and future risks.

People always come first

When disaster hits, the immediate reaction must always be focused on the people who are affected within your school community. This includes pastoral support for pupils, especially any with connections to Eastern Europe and those who are finding their wellbeing challenged by their first experience of seeing war play out day by day on their devices.

Also, think about the impact on people connected to your school: are there alumni, former parents or partners you could reach out to support? The detail of this will look different in each school, depending on the makeup of your community and whether you have any formal connections in Eastern Europe.

When you write or speak to your school community don't be afraid to take a strong stand. There is a clear aggressor in this war, so this is not the time for ambiguous statements. If you have Russian pupils it is especially important that you communicate that it is not the Russian people, but the Russian state that is invading its democratic neighbour.

Standing with Ukraine is about action as well as words. Once you have ensured you have the support in place that your community needs, consider how you are going to help those directly impacted through fundraising for a recognised humanitarian charity.

Financial implications

There are a number of ways your school could be financially impacted by the war in Ukraine. This is never the first thing we think about or communicate - people always come first - but as guardians of our schools for future generations it is imperative that thoughts turn to the financial implications.

Each school is different, but here are some factors to think about.

The economies of Western countries will be hit over the coming months by rising energy and food costs, as well as knock-on impacts from the sanctions on Russia. This will increase both the running costs of schools and the cost of living for families, which for some parents will affect fee affordability.

In the UK this will compound the existing cost of living crisis. Until now, this was having a limited effect on affluent families paying full school fees, but this may change as more families feel the squeeze in their disposable income. The impact will equally be felt in EU economies, especially in Germany and Italy with their greater reliance on Russian gas and their close trading links to Russia.

Schools with endowments may also see their investment returns fall as the world financial markets adjust and investors attempt to withdraw from Russia. It may also impact fundraising income in the short term as donors switch some of their philanthropy to disaster relief charities.

So what does all this mean for schools? There are three assessments schools can make to anticipate the impact they will feel.

First, are you reliant on pupil recruitment from countries which are either directly affected by the war or by economic challenges? If so, diversifying into new international recruitment markets is likely to be an urgent activity.

Secondly, are your parents or potential parents feeling stretched by fee affordability? If so, it is likely that further cost of living increases will impact recruitment and retention. These schools should be considering their brand positioning in the marketplace and taking action to attract families likely to be less concerned about fee affordability.

Finally, do you rely on investment interest, fundraising or income from international schools to cover core running costs? It is always good to have diversified income streams, but some of these may have downside risks attached. Making a full assessment of the impact on each of these income streams will help schools predict the financial implications of the war.

For all schools, this is also the moment to be looking carefully at your costs and continuing to find efficiencies where possible to protect against future financial shocks.

Sensitive fundraising

I have been asked this week about whether UK schools should stop fundraising for their own projects in order to focus on fundraising to support Ukraine. Assuming you've publicly put people first and your fundraising is sensitive to current events as they evolve, I do not advise schools to stop fundraising for themselves.

So what does sensitive fundraising look like? It sits alongside messages about the action you are taking to help the people impacted by the crisis, and it doesn't swamp those messages with asks for the school fundraising project. It communicates in a compelling way the positive impact of the school project you are raising money for, explaining why school leaders believe in its importance (as all good fundraising should).

In some situations, it may be appropriate to pause active asking for a few weeks to assess and adapt to the situation. However, to stop fundraising completely could be seen as an acknowledgement that the project you are raising money for isn't really necessary after all.

Future risks

This is a moment when schools should be reassessing all the risks they face. For example, now we have seen how quickly the international security situation can deteriorate, more detailed contingency plans for geopolitical events near any international schools should be urgently addressed. Do you know the actions you would take in the first 24-hours of a similar crisis in China or elsewhere? If not, now is the time to plan.

As we watch Putin turn to ever more extreme measures, it is clear we are in a fast-moving situation with potentially uncertain future impacts on independent schools. It is important to discuss and anticipate what these might be. I'll be exploring this in future episodes of my weekly [Independent School Podcast](#) - sign up to my [email newsletter](#) to make sure you hear about these as they are released.

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