Here are some of our top tips when thinking about examinations for AAC users.

DO know that communication aids can be used in examinations and that refusing the use of one could be a discriminatory act!

DO aim high! Exam access arrangements are there so that students are not disadvantaged if the need to access the exams in a different way. Whilst exam boards have to consider exam security, they also have a duty through the Equality Act to provide reasonable adjustments.

DO start planning exam access arrangements and fine-tuning 'normal ways of working' at the earliest opportunity! We recommend this starts as soon as the young person joins the school as these arrangements should be used in daily classes, end of year assessments and practice papers. Getting the right arrangements takes time and trial and error.

DO ensure the student and the professionals working with them are consistent in their 'normal way of working'.

DO record 'normal ways of working' in everyday lessons, end of unit tests and mock exams.

DO collate and store evidence of 'normal ways of working'. Annotated lesson plans, mock exams, pieces of work can all count towards the evidence.

DO create a student summary detailing their needs and WHY they need to use specific equipment. Be specific and explain the how and why.

DO assume you will need to negotiate exam access arrangements. Typically, AAC users will need complicated access arrangements not in the JCQ handbook! Just because a specific arrangement is not in the handbook, doesn't mean it can't be asked for.

DO consider; stop the clock, rest breaks, low-tech supports, therapy breaks, extra time (beyond that given with an EHCP), early opening of papers (if needed to transpose them into an accessible format) and location of the examinations. Also consider if questions and parts of questions could be read out reducing fatigue through reading on screens.

DO ask for help from the working group if you need some guidance or support. We have a guidance document updated annually for both Key Stage 1 and 2 exams, and a second document for KS3 and above examinations.

DO understand that the exam boards main priorities include the integrity of the examinations. This means they may need help in understanding what you're requesting and why.

DO keep an extensive paper trail of discussions and messages between you and the exam board. Ask for confirmation in writing about something agreed on telephone or video calls. You may need this proof before, during or even after an examination has taken place.
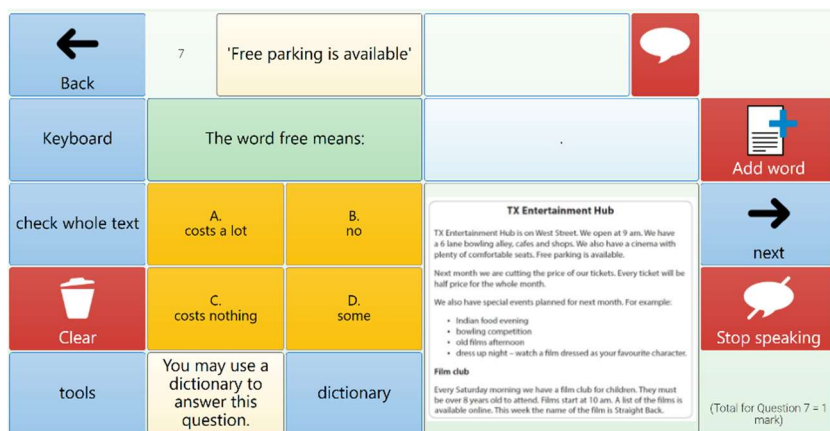
DON'T assume they can't use specific technology or approaches if you have not checked with the exam board first. Go with what they are using as their 'normal ways of working' and stick to it.

DON'T negotiate with exam boards too late! A lot of access arrangements that AAC users will need cannot be requested via the online portal.

DON'T assume the exam boards will approve all of your reasonable adjustments first time around. The exam boards may say 'no' because they don't know the student's needs.