

Universities and Colleges Sub Group - Update for the Outbreak Management Advisory Board

Summary

This paper provides an overview for the Outbreak Management Advisory Board from the Universities and Colleges Sub Group. This paper focuses on how Colleges have responded to the return to face to face tuition from 8 March; our participation and feedback in the peer review process; and how the sector has continued to support city-wide testing initiatives.

Detail

1. Return to study for Colleges

Colleges have adopted a phased return of students largely in order to facilitate the on-site testing process. FE Residential students at Askham Bryan College returned on Sunday 7th and day students from Monday 8th March. At York College the phased return of students commenced on 8th March running over a two week period.

While supplies for testing have been challenging, both Colleges received supplies of on-site testing kits in time for testing to start ahead of the return of students, along with a supply of home test kits for staff, the majority of whom had been onto site to go through the on-site testing process in the week prior to Monday 8th.

Colleges are due to receive home test kits for students this week, with a view to rolling those out to FE students from next week. At Askham Bryan, HE students are due to return from 14th March, which helpfully coincides with the beginning of their third Trimester. As Askham Bryan are, for testing purposes, designated as an FE College with HE students (as opposed to an HEI with FE students), the College are part of the 'Schools Mass Testing Programme' and as such, whilst the guidance is as yet silent on continued testing (including home testing) for HEIs beyond 31st March, the DfE expectation is that Askham Bryan will test all of our students (FE, HE, Adults), both initially on-site and supervised and then via home test kits.

Generally, students and staff are required to report the results of the home tests via the NHS App or online and, in addition, to the college directly. Both Colleges are collecting results on a 'by exception' basis, i.e. individuals will only be required to report positive results (so we can undertake any necessary Test and Trace activity) or inconclusive results (to enable us to identify potential patterns with batch numbers of kits or individual capacity to conduct the tests effectively). To date the number of positive test results has been very low.

In addition to on-site testing, a number of students local to York have also taken advantage of the community testing and Colleges are grateful to those responsible for the provision for that offer. Generally students from both Colleges travel in from a large geographical area and not all students had access to a community test site locally, so to have the burden of testing for us relieved even in a small way for those who could access York sites is much appreciated. The large geographical area that students are drawn from also presents logistical challenges should any of them test positive and have traveled in on coaches / need to travel some distance home to isolate.

The setting up and running of testing continues to impact on college resources. We are fortunate that we have had enough volunteers to manage our site here in York but this has consumed a considerable amount of management and staff time, and physical space on campus.

2. Peer Review

The initial peer review feedback undertaken by the Local Government Association and Regional Public Health leaders reported finding a range of positive good practice in our citywide outbreak response. The partnership approach, early engagement, and creation of the Universities and colleges sub-group of OMAB was positively highlighted, as was the collaborative approach between colleges, universities, and local authority Public Health, particularly in connection to the joint approach to testing within the city. Effective communication that used a range of methods and which promoted a city-wide response to Covid-19 inclusive of students as residents of the city and which allowed ability to focus on the positive contributions that students make to our city and the Covid-19 response was also recognised as important.

Areas for consideration were provided through the peer review process, and those of particular interest to the University sub-group include: developing plans to support organisational resilience; continuing to focus on addressing inequalities that affect particular groups of people within the city; and considering how to embed the benefits from closer partnership working into the local system more routinely. More general feedback included a recommendation to clarify the role of public health within the city and to consider how we can use public health intelligence more effectively.

3. Testing for York schools

Finally, the community LFD testing sites across the city, including those run in conjunction with the Universities have played a key role in supporting the mass testing of school pupils ahead of their return to school with several thousand tests being conducted in the run up to the wider opening of schools.