

Universities and Colleges Sub Group - Report to Outbreak Management Advisory Board

Overview

Universities and Colleges in York have seen a significant number of Covid-19 cases now that the Autumn term is well underway for all of us. At the time of issuing this report we have 404 active positive cases across staff and students at our four institutions, resulting in around 3,000 students needing to self isolate in either their University or college accommodation, or in private homes across the City.

Throughout this time all four institutions have maintained a strong and close relationship with the City Council's Public Health team, jointly working through our established case and outbreak procedures which are now thoroughly tested and working well. Each institution has also invested considerable staff capacity in our in-house tracing teams, meaning we are contacting our students and staff who have tested positive considerably faster than the national Test and Trace service.

These Test and Trace teams discuss cases daily with public health and our shared analysis across all four institutions and the City Council is that all but a very few cases are derived from household to household transmission. We have had no direct evidence of transmission in learning and teaching settings.

Support for Students

All institutions with a resident population have had support for students in self-isolation as a top priority over the past few weeks. The exact support is of course tailored to each individual institution's circumstances but all have common themes, including:

- Regular welfare checks on students who are isolating by phone and email
- Practical information on other resources available to support students' mental and physical wellbeing
- External partnerships to provide access to 24/7 support for mental health through organisations like TogetherAll
- Food delivery services, including a partnership with Morrisons to deliver groceries to students across the city
- Laundry services for students unable to access on campus communal facilities because they are self isolating
- Delivery of medicine, parcels and other key supplies

Across our institutions we recognise that self-isolation can be a significant hardship for our students and we want to put on record our thanks for their support in what is a fundamentally selfless and community spirited act. Our experiences are that our students are taking isolation seriously and compliance with both national and institutional rules is high.

Testing

Since our last report to the Outbreak Management Advisory Board access to testing has improved considerably. The City's walk-through testing centre has opened on the University of York's campus, open to all York residents via the national testing system ([online](#) or by calling 119). Our students are reporting few difficulties in accessing a test via this service or home testing kits.

We are also, in conjunction with the Council's public health teams starting to roll out targeted asymptomatic testing to specific sections of both Universities' residential communities where we have seen clusters of positive cases. We are still in the evaluation stage of this kind of testing, but where it proves useful at helping to trace outbreaks we will roll out further if testing capacity is available to do so.

Further Education

The above holds true for both HE and FE institutions, but it is worth underlining that there are particular capacity issues within colleges. Specifically the challenges and impacts on staff resources on contract tracing and needing to manage twin reporting lines that vary for FE and HE students in their settings.

In addition, a relatively small outbreak can have a disproportionately large impact on cohorts of students where either teaching staff or learning support staff are required to self-isolate taking out interlinked bubbles of students (bubbles for cohorts are not used in HE). The largely transient nature of the cohort (with very few who are residential, and many of those who are tend to travel home at weekends) also presents complexities as we move between local area tiers or for students arriving from an area in a different tier.

Policy Response

The Universities and Colleges Sub Group has considered carefully at its recent meetings various potential responses to the rising number of infections in the city. Our consensus position is that established patterns of transmission (in the vast majority of cases within households and through social interactions) mean that existing powers give few policy levers through which we believe we could affect transmission rates. In particular:

- Our shared analysis with the City Council Public Health team does not suggest that face to face teaching is a source of transmission and so moving all teaching on-line would

not, we believe, have a meaningful effect on the spread of the virus but would compromise the learning experience of students.

- Closing down regulated student social spaces (student societies, sports clubs, social venues) may in fact increase rates of infection in the student population if - as seems plausible - it pushed students to gather in less well regulated spaces where social distancing was less likely to take place, so we do not recommend it at this stage.
- And - while student compliance with public health practices remains high - we know we will need to continue to work hard to maintain student trust and adherence to public health messages and measures. Measures perceived as unjustly targeting the student population which did not also apply city or region wide would likely damage this currently very positive approach by student communities.

Discussion Points

The Outbreak Management Advisory board may like to consider

- How the city, Universities, and colleges respond to the City of York moving into Tier 2 (“High”); particularly how citywide messaging can support the restrictions on household mixing which now apply.
- The interaction between the Department for Education Tier system (at which all four institutions, and education across the city, is currently at level 1) and the new national tier system.
- The current measures already in place for Universities and Colleges (targeted whole site testing, communications and reinforcement of public health messages, student support in isolation, in-house tracing systems) are sufficient or if further city wide or targeted interventions are necessary.

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