

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

Summary

This regular report from the Universities and Colleges sub group provides updates for the Outbreak Management Board on how we have been handling the recent increase in cases across the un-vaccinated population in the City; work to get students vaccinated; and looks ahead to next academic year.

Detail

1. Cases in FE and HE institutions.

At the time of writing the University of York has 174 students who are isolating with a positive test for Covid (either LFD or PCR). As a result of household and other contacts a further 350 or so students have been required to isolate, taking the total number of students in isolation to just under 525.

The University's in-house contact tracing team has been working hard to track on-campus cases, working in close collaboration with the City Council's own contact tracing team who track off-campus activities. We continue to see no evidence of transmission of covid within teaching and learning spaces on campus, although as a precaution have asked some individuals to isolate as a result of potential contact with covid-positive students.

Generally the drivers behind this rise in infections appears to be increasing social activity - in line with the stage three unlocking since May. However, while cases across the student population have risen rapidly, we have not so far seen a linked rise in the number of University staff testing positive. This is in line with data we have seen both locally and nationally where the rising number of cases is focused on the unvaccinated population, making city-wide efforts to get students vaccinated all the more important.

Term has already finished for York St John University and as such they have seen a smaller number of students testing positive, reflecting the smaller number of St John students still in York. Cases continue to be at a low level across both York College and Askham Bryan College.

2. Response to rising cases

In response to the rising cases, University colleagues have continued to support students in isolation through a range of measures including food deliveries and support for mental health and wellbeing. Evidence from contact tracing calls suggest these packages make a significant

difference in both encouraging students to come forward having tested positive, and in remaining in isolation for the full ten day period.

We have worked closely with public health colleagues and communication teams in both the University and city council to reinforce messages around covid-safe behaviours including the key hands-face-space and fresh air measures. The University has also asked students to consider carefully the contacts they are making as cases rise, and to continue testing regularly via either the on-campus testing centre or home test kits.

Communication of key information to York residents - including students - is also being developed in collaboration between communication leads in our institutions and CYC to ensure that the correct information about the rates of virus in the city are available to people. This includes a welcome continued focus on ensuring that rise in rates is not blamed on the student population noting that, both locally and nationally, case rates are increasing primarily in the age groups of those who have not yet been vaccinated. The overwhelming response from those in the city testing positive or identified as contacts is one of responsibility to follow the correct behaviours to keep themselves and others safe and to prevent onward transmission.

Work has also been taken forward to increase access to testing, including a quick and targeted response within halls settings where key safety and risk prevention messages, along with distribution of testing kits to students in halls, and promotion of regular symptom free testing to students in private accommodation was implemented. Continued encouragement and access to test kits continues to be promoted as well.

Public health colleagues in CYC have also moved quickly to ensure access to the walk-in PCR testing centre on the University of York campus is extended to increase capacity and ease access to testing for those unable to access the Poppleton Bar test site.

3. Vaccine roll-out

Through a highly effective partnership with both the city council and Nimbuscare (who run the mass vaccination centre at Askham Bar) we have run three successful pop up vaccine clinics on the University of York campus, vaccinating over 1,000 students as well as members of the general public who also accessed the site. More clinics have also run across the City including three based at York St John University (which will include some slots for walk-in appointments). Further clinics are planned for this coming week.

Feedback from the sessions has been very positive with students offering enthusiastic and vocal support for the clinic and the staff who ran the sessions on campus. Interest in the sessions has also been very high, as has participation and attendance rates, demonstrating how enthusiastic our students are to get vaccinated. A number of students on the day talked about their relief at being offered a vaccine.

Alongside the pop up clinics all institutions are encouraging eligible students and staff to take up vaccine appointments as soon as possible whether on campus or through one of the national vaccine centres. We have also put in place programmes to ensure students without NHS numbers (e.g. recently arrived international students who have not yet registered with a GP) can also get vaccinated.

4. Look ahead to September

At the time of writing we do not yet have guidance for the Department of Education for what measures may need to remain in place in either FE or HE environments. Absent this guidance we are all collectively planning for a range of potential scenarios from no restrictions to needing to maintain social distancing and other protective measures in teaching and learning spaces at our institutions.

Once guidance has been issued we will be arranging exercises over the summer to test our response plans and how we would react to spikes in infections or a rise in new variants that may require us to deploy enhanced measures or surge testing.

We have also - with thanks to the city council - confirmed plans to continue on-site testing at both Universities over the summer. We expect LFD testing to feature in DfE September plans for both FE and HE. We expect to continue to work in partnership throughout the summer period to ensure our plans, actions and responses are coordinated and coherent.

Universities and Colleges Sub-Group
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