

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

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## Summary

This paper provides an overview for the Outbreak Management Advisory Board on how Universities and Colleges have been working with the City Council during this latest lockdown; how we have been working jointly to support the further roll out of mass asymptomatic testing across the City; and a look at the wider challenges facing staff and students at our institutions

## Detail

### 1. Mass Asymptomatic Testing and Cases

Both University sites are now operating jointly with CYC and processing thousands of tests a week for the wider community, alongside regular testing for staff and students. The Department for Education has also now confirmed that twice weekly testing of all staff and students will be extended until at least Easter (something we were already able to provide our staff and students thanks to this partnership with the Council). Testing sites are also operating at both Colleges for staff and students who are on-site, alongside the use of home testing kits where appropriate. Trialing satellite testing sites at some University of York Colleges situated further away from established testing sites is also now underway, aimed at further encouraging testing uptake.

Testing is now regularly enabling us to find cases early and break chains of transmission. At the time of writing there are under 35 positive cases within the staff and student University communities in York, far lower than at a similar point in the first term of this academic year. We are also working on targeted communications to students who have returned to York to encourage a further increase in the numbers taking advantage of regular asymptomatic testing.

### 2. Lockdown policy changes

Since the initial lockdown announcements on 4 January, the Department for Education has continued to publish further guidance for [higher education](#) and [further education](#) settings. At present we know that no further groups of students will be returning to in-person teaching before 8 March.

We await further guidance from government on the pace and shape of the resumption of in-person teaching. Absent this, all institutions have been working hard to provide as much certainty as possible to staff and students. We have also been working closely with colleagues in public health to ensure any large scale movement of students to and from university accommodation is well managed across the city. The likely initial relaxation of restrictions for

universities on 8 March is close to the end of term at the University of York (19 March) and York St John (26 March). Given that, it is likely that we will see only a limited resumption of in-person teaching at that point, focused in particular on students who need access to specialist facilities to complete their studies. It would not appear wise on public health grounds to prompt a larger-scale movement of students from family home to university and then back again within such a short period.

### **3. Impacts on students and staff**

Over the course of the pandemic all the HE and FE institutions in York have, collectively, committed millions of pounds in increased support for staff and students, recognising the profound impact that the pandemic has had on - particularly - mental health. Support provided includes a new wellbeing role at York St John, acting as a point of contact for students and new wellbeing champions throughout YSJ to support continued emphasis on students and staff wellbeing. The University of York has also increased its student facing wellbeing roles and increased significantly the resources available to support student hardship.

There is also an increasing body of evidence reporting on the mental health impacts of the pandemic: the latest [publication](#) of the UCL Covid-19 Social Study highlights that some of the groups who have had their mental health most significantly affected by the pandemic overlap with large groups of our student population. For example the study shows that more negative experiences are associated with those in lower income categories and younger age groups.

These mental health challenges can also be exacerbated by the financial challenges posed by the pandemic - particularly with far fewer opportunities for paid work. As well as expanding the amounts provided into our student hardship funds, both Universities and their Students' Unions have also [lobbied government](#) for greater financial support for students. As yet there has been a much more limited response for universities in England than we have seen in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. As we noted in our last report, it is also particularly welcome that the Council has ensured that working students are eligible for the [financial support](#) for members of the city community who have to isolate.

### **4. Ongoing support**

The Universities and Colleges sub group are also keen that mental health provision across the city continues to be accessible and responsive to students. There are some service / condition specific diagnostic and support need gaps that are being identified with colleagues in HE and FE (including ADHD; eating disorder; self-harm; suicide risk; autism) that may require joint review and joint assessment of with providers within the City to improve access and support. Our local NHS Mental Health Trust (Tees Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Foundation Trust) have recently developed a modelling tool that predicts increased demand across the board for mental health support.

We would encourage the Outbreak Management Advisory Board to draw on these developing analyses and note the importance for these groups - working through existing fora like the Mental Health Partnership - to explore the continuing impact of the pandemic on student and staff mental health across the FE and HE sector and ensuring there is well resourced, joined up resources in place to support this in the months and years ahead.

Universities and Colleges Outbreak Management Sub Group  
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