

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 covid measures and mitigations across HE and FE institutions in the city, including our collective response to omicron, access to testing, and vaccination access.

Detail

1. Omicron and Case Data

Since our last report to OMAB the emergence of the Omicron variant of Covid has had a substantial impact on our institutions.

As we have seen across society there has been a significant increase in the number of cases across the staff and student populations. However, rates have not risen in a direct proportion to overall rates in the city and are generally lower across university and college settings than comparable local, regional or national rates.

At the time of writing, the University of York had 90 active student cases within York, down from a peak of over 100 in early January. There continues to be a steady number of new cases per day, but currently total levels of infection across the student community are substantially lower than previous peaks. The University of York has also seen an increase in staff cases too, although the vast majority of these are in staff who were already working from home as a result of Plan B measures.

At York St. John University there are currently 97 students isolating due to a positive test result, again down from a peak of 125 earlier in the month. Many of these students have not yet returned to York from the holiday and are reporting positive tests from their home addresses. York St John also continues to see a number of staff cases across the University

Across both Universities we continue to see no evidence of transmission within teaching and learning spaces or significant clusters of infections or outbreaks on our campuses. The fact that rates across the student population are tracking well below regional averages is also, we believe, a good indicator that our current mitigations, especially high levels of testing and vaccination are having an impact.

2. Plan B

The government announced on 8 December 2021 that they would be implementing “Plan B” contingencies across England, as described in the national covid response policies. In line with these measures, a number of colleagues at all institutions are now working from home although face to face education continues to be delivered and a large number of staff in all institutions continue to work in person to provide critical frontline services, research, support for students and, of course, teaching.

All institutions have also reviewed and revised policies on face coverings in line with the Plan B measures and continue to provide regular reminders to staff and students of the importance of face coverings as a mitigation against covid transmission. All institutions also continue to hold their own local outbreak response plans which could be deployed in response to a rise in local cases independent of the national introduction of Plan B.

3. Testing and Vaccinations

All four Universities and Colleges are continuing to work closely with city partners to ensure high vaccination rates across our student population. We continue to see good uptake and little to no sign of vaccine hesitancy across our communities. At York St. John University Student survey data this month shows around 65% of the student body have been boosted, with 93% either boosted or double jabbed . At the University of York data also suggests a good uptake of boosters, with 70% of respondents to a recent survey indicating they had already been boosted. To date 83% of students at the University of York are reporting that they are either double or triple jabbed.

All institutions are continuing to regularly promote uptake of vaccinations to our students using our own communications material; locally coordinated messages and collateral from national campaigns. Further pop up clinics targeting our student communities are also planned, particularly to drive up booster uptake further still.

The University of York also hosted a satellite booster clinic in partnership with Nimbuscare as part of the pre-Christmas national booster campaign, where several thousand members of the local community were vaccinated.

Use of LFDs continues to be widespread across institutions, with large numbers of home testing kits being collected regularly by both staff and students. CYC testing sites at both Universities also saw considerable demand in late December and early January, but we remain assured by DHSC and UKHSA of future availability of LFD kits.

Universities and Colleges Sub-Group
17 January 2022