

Access to Testing by University and College Students in York

Introduction

This paper updates the Outbreak Management Advisory Board on the options being pursued to enable HE and FE students to access routine symptomatic Covid testing once term begins in September. In reviewing these options, the Universities and Colleges Covid Sub Group have agreed five key criteria for testing provision:

1. **Capacity** - any option must have enough supply to support the approximately 40,000 HE and FE students across the University of York, York St John University, York College and Askham Bryan College. FE students elsewhere in the City are covered through the wider support provided to local schools.
2. **Accuracy** - test provision must provide results with a high degree of accuracy, limiting the risk of false negative and false positive results.
3. **Speed** - in order to encourage students to use the system, and to prevent lengthy stays in self-isolation caused by freshers 'flu, tests should return results to students as quickly as possible, at the latest within 24 hours
4. **Access** - testing should be easy to access, noting the current site at Poppleton will be inaccessible to any student without access to a private car.
5. **Consistency** - provision should be consistent across institutions

This report sets out the current situation, options under consideration, and a recommendation to the Advisory Board

Current Situation

The current local arrangements for testing follow the national testing programme where:

- Pillar I: swab testing in Public Health England (PHE) labs and NHS hospitals for those with a clinical need, and critical NHS workers.
- Pillar II: swab testing for the wider population, as set out in government guidance

Any resident living in York who develops symptoms of Covid-19 can access testing through either attending the Pillar II testing site in Poppleton (or other nearby local options), or if unable to attend, can request delivery of a home-test kit for postal return to obtain Covid-19 results. Some mobile testing units accessed by foot are also available to local authorities, but these are stationed in different locations on a rolling basis depending on local need.

Pillar I testing is allocated for those with a clinical need and health and care workers who meet the inclusion criteria. Tests are processed locally at York Teaching Hospital Foundation Trust (YTHFT). Pillar I testing would also be made available for wider use in an outbreak scenario.

Access to Pillar 2 testing sites currently requires a mobile telephone with credit, or internet connection to book a test, an NHS number or a national insurance number. Access to the test site is restricted to private motor vehicles only, with attendance by taxicab, public transport, walking, or cycling, not supported.

This limits the accessibility to this site for many students, especially those overseas students who do not have access to a private motor vehicle. The needs for an NHS number or NI number is also a potential barrier to international students and is being explored by the Council's Public Health Team

There are currently limited options to increase physical access to Pillar 2 testing sites for those students who are unable to meet the requirements to attend.

Options Being Considered - Pillar I

1. Partnership With York Hospital

Pillar I testing is currently locally available through York Teaching Hospital Foundation Trust (YTHFT). Primarily, the capacity of Pillar I testing has been established to test those with a clinical need, and critical NHS workers. As a group, students do not fall within this criterion and so any Pillar I option comes with a risk that if demand increases, any local solution for student testing that is aligned to Pillar I resources would not be able to be met.

Discussions are on-going with both York Hospital (who host the lab which conducts Pillar I tests) and NHS Regional colleagues (who could provide access to swabs, via the Department for Health and Social Care). Test kits/swabs are made available through the DHSC's national testing programmes. Currently only specific settings and scenarios are being provided with a routine supply, and this does not include universities. Latest discussions indicate that this will continue to be the case.

If this access to swabs could be solved, in principle the logistics of getting students swabbed on campuses and returning these to York Hospital for testing would be solvable through support from individual institutions. The University of York would also be able to provide additional capacity to the labs at York Hospital (both personnel and equipment) if this was necessary to ensure sufficient testing capacity.

Options Being Considered - Pillar II

1. Deployable tests

Currently the Director of Public Health has up to 500 swab kits available for distribution to City of York residents (which would include students). This process is already established for use within local care homes and has the potential to be extended to include other communities / venues / locations that are classed as high risk within the York Covid-19 Outbreak Management Control Plan. Universities and Colleges would fall into this high risk category

A process to identify the number of swabs required on a daily basis would need to be established and detailed logistics would need to be worked through, including how the swabs themselves would be delivered to students and then returned to the Pillar II labs. We judge that these logistical challenges are solvable.

Further discussions between HE/FE institutions and the Council are on-going but this solution, for students who cannot access tests via other routes, could provide a viable source of tests on a daily basis. As with any local Pillar I solution, a spike in demand may temporarily limit supply: these swabs would, rightly, need to be prioritised according to need across the City's high risk environments, so an outbreak in a care home would necessarily limit the amount available to Universities and colleges.

2. Home Testing Kits

Students can (like any other resident in England) request a home test-kit. There are concerns about the accessibility, timeliness, and effectiveness of this process when compared to accessing a test at a testing centre, which mean it might not be the ideal solution for all students in the local area. Particularly, the time taken to order, take delivery and return a home test will mean students would be waiting for significantly longer than 24 hours for their results. There are also concerns about the rate of false negative tests from home test kits which is assessed to be higher than other forms of testing due to the requirement to self-administer.

City Council colleagues are also requesting further details from PHE on how accessible tests are to newly arrived residents as delivery is dependent on an online credit check process. Whilst this credit check process is not assessing accessibility criteria based on credit score, it does require an individual to be known at that address. There are potentially a significant number of students who would not be verified at their term-time accommodation and therefore not meet the hidden inclusion criterion to access a home test kit.

Were a supply of home testing kits made available, the logistics of ensuring these could be delivered to on-campus students who needed them would be relatively simple to arrange by each University and College.

Options Being Considered outside of Pillar I and II

Members of the group are also continuing to engage with colleagues across the region and at a national level to investigate any testing options or new methodologies (for example, LAMP¹ based testing) which might supplement symptomatic testing under Pillar I. Should viable options emerge from these interactions, they will be tabled for discussion through the Universities and Colleges Sub Group and Council colleagues.

¹ Loop-mediated isothermal amplification

Recommendations

Reviewing the five criteria agreed by the Universities and Colleges Sub Group, the current most viable option to ensure students in York can access a Covid test is the use of Pillar II swabs, available through deployment by the Director for Public Health as a supplement for students unable to access either Poppleton Park and Ride or a home test kit. Logistics for this option are being worked through in detail with the Council and while it would be a slower method of testing than Pillar I, it is less susceptible to interruption from the internal demands on Pillar I testing capacity inside the hospital.

We are also continuing to explore a York based solution under Pillar I which would appear to present the best level of accuracy, availability, speed and consistency. However, the capacity of this system is not entirely within the gift of the City, HE/FE institutions or the Hospital, given its dependence on the availability of swabs. The Universities and Colleges Sub Group recommends that the Advisory Group ask the Council to write at a senior level to DHSC requesting support to ensure that a consistent supply of swabs is made available to support this testing.

Finally, as a fall back option, ensuring a supply of home testing kits that institutions can deliver to their students (and then arrange for onward delivery to the PHE testing systems) would provide a welcome backstop to other, quicker, testing methods. The Outbreak Advisory Group might also wish to note this as a reserve option, and note the importance of ensuring access to home testing kits to students within the City, given the inaccessibility of the Poppleton drive through site for most students.

On behalf of the University and Colleges Covid-19 Sub Group
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