**OPEN LETTER TO Sheffield City Council - November 2020**

Schools and colleges were pleased to welcome back children in September. In the absence of a staggered return, timetable, meaningful additional resources and/or any semblance of a contingency plan should we need to partially close, we have worked extremely hard to ensure their safety and to provide a quality education for them. University staff were also happy to welcome students to higher education, but in a safe and appropriate manner and not for the 'near-normal' educational experience that had been mis-sold under conditions of a global pandemic. Staff have worked extremely hard, under difficult conditions, to ensure students receive as valuable a learning experience as possible under current conditions. But we are now seeing Covid infection rates surging everywhere, including here in Sheffield.

The government’s planned new circuit breaker, or temporary lockdown would have been shorter and more effective if it had been implemented earlier and around the half term holiday.

The case for action is clear. The government is not including any educational institutions in the temporary lockdown, which we feel is completely irresponsible.

Schools are clearly important in the spread of the virus, with a 50 fold increase in secondary school cases and a 9 fold increase in primary since September. And as SAGE predicted, the mass migration of university students amplified outbreaks in Sheffield and elsewhere. Both SAGE and Independent SAGE have repeatedly recommended all teaching that can be done online should be done online in accordance with UCU *online by default* policy, but government and University senior managers have chosen to reject such advice.

We all want to keep our educational systems open as much as possible, but as Independent Sage argues a temporary lockdown without schools could take at least 9 weeks to bring infection rates down enough, whereas with schools, that time they say would fall to 3 weeks.

We believe schools (with key worker/disadvantaged/vulnerable children as an exception), colleges and universities should be part of any national lockdown to help bring virus rates back under control. We will of course do all in our power to provide support and education for our students while that happens.

And we believe that this time could and should be then used to work out detailed plans on how we can keep as many students in schools and colleges in order to move forward as safely as possible and without risking pushing infection rates back up too high. At Universities, planning needs to include keeping the numbers of staff and students on campus to a bare minimum in order to mitigate increasing the risk to those who have to work/study on site.

Following revised guidance that CEV staff should be working from home we believe this should happen immediately, and we think schools, colleges and Universities should be giving clinically vulnerable staff at higher risk the choice of working from home. If working from home isn’t possible, they should be given authorised leave for the duration of this and any future lockdown.

We believe that the council should be looking at ways of reducing crowding, in all schools, colleges and Universities moving forward. SAGE has repeatedly called for a default position where all University teaching should be online where practically possible. Independent SAGE is now recommending a gradual return of students to their parental homes with testing to ensure this is safe. Students should not be kept in university accommodation solely in order to pay rent to landlords and to justify full university tuition fees when this places the entire civic community at risk.

We also believe that

Some of the areas we feel need dealing with urgently are:

* In schools/colleges:
  + Immediate access is made available of laptops to disadvantaged children,
  + Looking at extra buildings to allow more social distancing,
  + Deploying pools of supply staff to allow smaller class sizes,
  + Reducing bubble sizes and mixing even further,
  + Rotas in many schools to allow them to operate as safely as possible.
  + Rapid tests are made available to schools and colleges before opening up from the lockdown.

There is much that has gone well in schools since September, but there have been great challenges for staff at all levels and this is having an impact on capacity, well-being and health - the current situation is simply not sustainable.

* In Universities:
  + All teaching to be moved online where practically possible,
  + Numbers of staff/students on site kept to a bare minimum and only if absolutely necessary in order to protect all those who have to work/study on campus,
  + Planning starts now for a gradual and safe return of students to their family homes, with testing in place,
  + Rapid tests are made available immediately to University staff and students.

Therefore, we are asking you, as chair, to meet urgently with all the educational trade union representatives to discuss implementing a plan for Sheffield schools, colleges and universities in order to protect our communities, students and staff from the virus and to ensure the best possible education provision for all.