Dear colleagues,

In March 2020, the University established the Covid-19 Planning Group (CPG) to respond to the coronavirus pandemic and plan for the future, with the health and wellbeing of our staff, students and local community as our priority. The group met daily during the height of the crisis earlier this year and continues to meet regularly to plan, develop and agree programmes of action, working to official guidelines, advice and best practice from the UK Government, Public Health England, sector groups such as the Russell Group, Universities UK and local authorities.

Following the announcement of stricter Covid-19 prevention measures in the North East region, CPG has ramped up its response to increase its vigilance and responsiveness.

Returning to campus
We look forward to welcoming our students back to campus, where they can expect a world-class education and student experience that prioritises their health, safety and wellbeing as well that of our staff and wider communities. Our first term will involve innovative and flexible ways of teaching and learning. Face-to-face teaching and student services such as support and wellbeing will be combined with quality online delivery.

University buildings have been reopened in line with guidance from official sources. Before reopening, all buildings have passed our University five test approach and are made Covid-secure, providing safe working and learning spaces for all.

When students arrive in Durham, they will form new households with those they share a house with, or with an allocated group within College. Households within Colleges will operate as per government guidance for universities, but all students must adhere to the ‘rule of six’ and local Covid-19 regulations when outside of College.

Outbreak Response Planning
Working closely with Durham County Council Public Health team, we have developed an Outbreak Response Plan. The Plan outlines the process, roles, responsibilities, and terms of reference for responding to clusters or outbreaks of Covid-19 as well as any changes to local restrictions that might adversely impact upon our students, staff, operations or the local community.

The Plan is designed to provide detailed guidance, whilst being flexible enough to respond to any variations in size, severity and duration of an outbreak. The processes outlined are aligned with national policy, guidance and mechanisms including outbreak control and NHS Test and Trace. They are subject to continual development as the national coronavirus action plan and recovery strategy evolves.

Prioritising health and safety
To safeguard everyone on campus, we have developed effective and flexible health and safety plans, informed by guidance from the UK government and professional bodies. Key measures include:

Hand sanitisation
Washing hands regularly is one of the principal hygiene controls for the Covid-19 virus. To facilitate good hand hygiene, hand sanitisers will be available in all buildings, at entrances
and circulation spaces. The use of hand sanitiser is recommended in addition to regular and thorough hand washing.

Social distancing
We will continue to apply the 2m social distancing rule, as far as is reasonably practicable, in all teaching, learning, research, wider-student experience and work settings. Where social distancing is not reasonably practicable, tasks will be assessed, and risk mitigation measures must be applied.

Ventilation
In line with guidance from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), we are ensuring appropriate ventilation provisions are in place on campus and improving ventilation or limiting the occupancy of spaces that have inadequate ventilation. Part of our mitigation strategy is to ensure that as much fresh air as is reasonably practicable is brought into a building, using mechanical ventilation or natural ventilation, such as opening windows where possible.

Face coverings
Face coverings form a physical barrier. When used as part of a holistic approach to health and safety, they can help contain the spread of respiratory droplets when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or talks. All staff, students, visitors, contractors and members of the public* are required to wear face coverings inside University buildings.

*Not everyone can wear a face covering. Those with certain health conditions or disabilities may be unable to wear coverings.

Flu vaccination programme
To help support a healthy community, we are working with BUPA to offer free flu vaccinations to all staff and students.

Temperature checks
Infrared thermometers have been made available at reception desks in Colleges and main University buildings. Each College household will be provided with handheld infrared thermometers to facilitate regular temperature checking.

During arrivals weekend, students and accompanying family members will be encouraged to undergo a temperature check before entering University buildings.

Testing and reporting
Reporting symptoms of Covid-19 internally
We have developed internal processes to capture relevant information from staff and students who have symptoms of Covid-19 or who have tested positive. These processes will enable us to track any cases within the University and, where necessary, ask others within our community to self-isolate.

Mobile Testing Units
To increase access to coronavirus testing for our community, a mobile testing unit will be in place at Howlands Park and Ride for three weeks, commencing 28 September 2020, with the option of extending this timeframe if needed.

Communications
We are communicating regularly with staff and students via our Covid-19 Updates, providing operational updates and reinforcing Government guidance. Information and answers to
frequently asked questions are on our Covid-19 webpages: www.dur.ac.uk/coronavirus and we also share key information through our social media channels.

We continue to work closely with our partners in Durham including the County Council and local health organisations and GPs. Our Community Stakeholder Group aims to facilitate a dialogue with community representatives to support and communicate the development of plans to reduce the risks and mitigate the effects of the Covid-19. In addition, we provide regular updates via our Community Newsletter and dedicated Covid-19 webpage: www.dur.ac.uk/coronavirus/residents

Best wishes,

Stuart Corbridge
Vice-Chancellor and Warden