

To: Marvin Rees, Mayor of Bristol
Christina Gray, Director of Public Health, Bristol

Cc: Hugh Brady, Vice-Chancellor, and Lucinda Parr, Registrar, University of Bristol
Steve West, Vice-Chancellor, University of the West of England

From: Andrew Waller, The Noise Pages (www.thenoisepages.com)

BY EMAIL ONLY

12 August 2020

Dear Mayor and Director,

Need for Scrutiny of University Reopening Plans

I am writing as a Bristol resident to ask you, as leaders of the city's response to the coronavirus pandemic, to scrutinise the University of Bristol's plans to reopen its campus in October and, specifically, to determine whether reopening can be accomplished safely for students, staff and the wider community.

There are two areas of concern which put the safety of these plans in doubt, especially in light of reports that many young people do not comply with social-distancing guidelines:

- In response to a paper on university reopenings by the Sage advisory group, Dr Richard Tyler, coordinator of the National HMO Lobby, suggests Sage erred in focusing on end-of-term student migrations back to parental homes as potentially the main route of infection in the event of coronavirus outbreaks in university communities. He suggests, and I concur, that there is a significant risk of coronavirus transmission into the host communities in which many students reside. I live in Redland, north Bristol, in an area which has a large student population, and there are clearly several routes by which infection could be passed between students and the wider community:
 - Large numbers of students shop at some of the local supermarkets
 - Students also use local corner shops, where social distancing is difficult
 - Residents and students mix at coffee shops, restaurants and the like
 - University staff who will share campus space with students live locally with their families, who are part of the wider community

I have attached a copy of Dr Tyler's submission to this email.

- There has been plenty of evidence in recent weeks—detailed below—of unrestrained mixing among students in Bristol of the sort that we are told would be likely to promote the spread of coronavirus. If this behaviour continues through the summer, and/or is replicated when the full student body returns to the city in the autumn, there will be unavoidable questions as to whether the university can safely function. I suggest, for reasons I will set out, that it is already clear that the university cannot rely on students to comply with whatever measures might be put in place to try to ensure safe operation.

Background and Evidence

I set up my website, The Noise Pages (www.thenoisepages.com), two years ago to try to seek redress for the impact on residents of night-time noise from parties and other activity in rented student houses in North Bristol. Among other things, I collate noise reports sent to me by residents.

(Usually, these are copies of complaints they sent to the University of Bristol.) This year has seen a dramatic change in student behaviour that has led to an unusual surge in noise complaints, and in the process sheds light on how students have responded to the pandemic:

- For reasons indirectly connected with the coronavirus lockdown, large numbers of students began returning to Bristol in late May and June. Most residents expected this would cease at end-June, when students normally leave for the summer break. Instead, student houses vacated by one set of tenants almost immediately began filling up with new ones.
- Many of these students held gatherings on a nightly basis, with the result that I logged many more noise complaints in June than a year earlier, while for July the numbers exploded. (There are typically zero complaints in July because students are usually no longer here.)
- For July alone, I received 74 noise complaints — which is as many complaints in one month as in the first six months of academic 2019-20 combined. It was also roughly double the average for September-October, the “party season” that usually greets a new academic year. Additionally, many complaints mentioned multiple incidents, so the incidence of noise events significantly exceeded 74. (The majority of complaints came from areas east of Whiteladies Road, particularly from the Chandos area and Hampton Road.)
- Most complaints received since late May have also expressed residents’ concerns about a lack of social distancing at the events they observed, coupled with potential breaches of the law restricting household gatherings. I have personally observed students entering houses in which they were not resident, at a time when the law banned indoor meetings; students packed into living rooms of rented houses (with the curtains open, so on public view); large groups on the street; and much hugging and embracing when friends meet or disperse.
- There have been several sizable events with large numbers present, including a party in Abbotsford Road in the early hours of Sunday, 12 July, attended by 50-100 people who were cleared from the house by police.¹
- This partying took place despite two public warnings by UoB that students must comply with coronavirus guidance and restrictions. The first of these was issued by Prof. Sarah Purdy, Pro Vice-Chancellor for Student Experience, in March; she warned that UoB would issue fines of up to £800 per student in the case of non-compliance.² The second was published in July as a joint statement³ by the vice-chancellors of both UoB and UWE⁴. In light of the increase in

¹ “Police shut down party held despite warnings from university VCs on virus risks”, 12/07/2020. <https://www.thenoisepages.com/single-post/2020/07/12/Police-shut-down-party-held-despite-warnings-from-university-VCs-on-virus-risks>

² “Coronavirus: Bristol University to fine students up to £800 for ignoring social distancing rules”, 25/03/2020. <https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/coronavirus-bristol-university-fine-students-3983955>

³ “University bosses shame Bristol students for 'putting lives at risk' with behaviour” BristolLive, 9/07/2020. https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/university-bosses-shame-bristol-students-4309645?utm_source=bristol_post_newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_content=tbc1&utm_campaign=daily_newsletter

⁴ I have focused on the University of Bristol because my evidence comes from an area populated mostly by UoB students. I have less information about students of the University of the West of England, but it’s quite likely these concerns apply to UWE as well. Its participation in the joint statement supports this view.

noise complaints in June and July, these warnings were clearly ignored. The Abbotsford Road event occurred three days after the VCs' appeal. The obvious disregard of these warnings is a major reason to question whether UoB can give any assurance that students will cooperate in a safe reopening of the university campus.

- I understand that the police officer who works on the UoB campus visited more than 40 complained-about addresses during this period, sometimes with local beat officers, and gave "words of advice" to the student tenants. Yet some of these later reoffended.
- UoB is not doing everything it could to influence student behaviour. A representative told a Zoom meeting with Chandos residents on 27 July that while complaints are being recorded, none will go to disciplinary hearings under the university's code of conduct until October. If action is deferred until then, the full student population will have been back in the city for several weeks before the university's resolve is demonstrated. These first weeks of term are usually the worst of the year so far as parties and noise complaints are concerned.
- The university doesn't publicise the results of disciplinary hearings, so there is no deterrent effect to dissuade others from misbehaviour. The reason given, data-protection, would be easily resolved by withholding the names of the students involved but publishing sufficient details of the case to show the basis of the penalty. If it sticks with past practice, the university will fail to reflect the urgency and seriousness of the present situation.

I acknowledge several caveats: (a) infection levels in the South West are low, (b) many gatherings have been in gardens, which reduces risks of transmission, (c) complaints have slowed in August (to date), which may indicate some students have now gone home, and (d) direct contact between students and the host community is limited, so if a coronavirus spike were to occur in the student community, its wider transmission is not automatic.

Against that, the university will be reconvening as we enter the cooler months, when there may be higher risk of a coronavirus resurgence. The start of a new academic year is normally a time of frenetic socialising, which requires some assurance that students will cooperate, from the outset, with whatever precautions are put in place. Unfortunately, if noise complaints are used as a proxy measure of compliance, July's extraordinary burst of partying demonstrates the opposite. For these reasons, I urge you to examine the university's plans and ensure they keep the city safe.

None of us wants to be exposed to higher risks of infection. It also would not take much of a spike in new coronavirus cases to plunge the city back into lockdown, with all the personal and economic misery that would entail.

I would be grateful for an acknowledgement of receipt of this letter and the attachment. I will be happy to publish your replies.

Regards,

Andrew Waller

Publisher, The Noise Pages
Resident, Hampton Road, Bristol
thenoisepages@gmail.com