

Inquiry report: An investigation into the erection of fencing at the Fallowfield Halls of Residence on 5 November 2020

(30 November 2020)

1. Introduction and context

This report was commissioned to investigate the erection of fences at the University's Halls of Residence on 5 November 2020. The inquiry's terms of reference are listed in the Appendix.

The investigation focuses upon the University of Manchester student residences site at Fallowfield (approximately 2.5km south of the main University campus), which houses more than 3,000 students across seven halls. It is bounded by Wilmslow Road and Moseley Road, with several pedestrian and vehicle entry points.

The 2020/21 academic year commenced in September 2020 with a phased introduction to the campus and residences for new and returning students. During the first semester a number of COVID-19 restrictions impacting on those resident at Fallowfield were introduced by the government. On 14 September the COVID-19 'rule of six' restricted social gathering; on 14 October Manchester was placed under COVID-19 Tier 2 restrictions, increasing to Tier 3 on 23 October. Notifications on staying safe, understanding the restrictions, sources of support and advice on self-isolation were sent to students by the University over this period, targeting both those in residences and those living in the community.

During the first semester of the academic year, the University was made aware through reports from its security officers and Greater Manchester Police (GMP) of a number of incidents at the Fallowfield site that broke the COVID-19 rules regarding large gatherings and mixing of households. There were reports of criminal activities, including drug dealing and assault. Concerns over safety were also raised by student residents and staff. The University responded through the deployment of six additional night-time security officers from 20 October. The University also reminded students about the need to adhere to COVID-19 restrictions.

On 2 November the Director for the Student Experience wrote to colleagues expressing alarm over an escalation of incidents at the Fallowfield site over the Halloween weekend, 30–31 October. An explanation offered to the investigation was that Tier-3 COVID-19 restrictions in Manchester led to people being attracted by the opportunity to meet and socialise at the Fallowfield residences, so ease of access to the site was a problem.

In light of the events on the weekend of 30–31 October there were increasing concerns over safety, security and criminal activity. Staff at the University sought to improve night-time security through the deployment of additional security officers and the erection of a temporary perimeter fence. Erection of the fence began at 9am on 5 November. Students began questioning security officers and those responsible for residences about the fencing as soon as it began to be erected. A protest of around 200 students began at approximately 8pm at the Wilmslow Road entrance to the Fallowfield site and spread across the site, with more than 1,000 students involved at its peak. The student protest ended around 10.30pm.

Concerns and comments raised by students over the erection of fencing include:

- They believed it to be linked to the English national lockdown requirements.
- They were not warned about the fencing prior to its installation.

- Their movement across the site was being restricted, i.e. it felt as though they were being caged in.
- They are struggling to deal with the pandemic restrictions and their wellbeing was not being considered.
- Student safety was compromised by the fencing.
- This was the last straw after a frustrating start to the academic year.

At approximately 8.30pm on the evening of 5 November [the University issued an apology](#) to student residents for the concern and distress caused by the erection of a fence around the Fallowfield Halls of Residence, noting that the intention was never to prevent residents from entering or exiting the site. The fencing would be removed the next day.

It was announced on 6 November that an independent inquiry would take place.

2. **The investigation**

The investigators undertook a series of Zoom calls and telephone calls, and received documentation. Meetings involved students and their representatives, University senior management and the staff directly involved in the issues as follows:

- All members of the Senior Leadership Team including the President and Vice-Chancellor
- Executive Officers of the University of Manchester Students' Union
- Fallowfield student residents
- The Director and other staff from the Directorate of Estates and Facilities
- The Director and other staff from the Directorate for the Student Experience
- The Director and other staff from the Division of Communications, Marketing and Student Recruitment
- The Director of Compliance and Risk

3. **Investigation findings**

3.1 **Chronology**

On Monday, 2 November, following an increase in reported incidents on the Fallowfield site over the previous weekend, and in response to a request from the Registrar, Secretary and Chief Operating Officer for an increase in the number of night-time security officers, a senior member of staff from the Directorate for the Student Experience approached colleagues from the Directorate of Estates, and sought advice on any further actions: *'the ask is to consider what additional measures could we take from a security perspective.'* It was noted that the English national lockdown was starting later that week. By Monday evening several options were presented to senior staff within the Directorates including *'the provision of temporary perimeter fencing around the Halls to restrict access points to grounds'*. It was reported in this response: *'given the timeframes we are just pushing on with the staff resourcing and perimeter fencing to try and get ahead of the next weekend and hopefully the first day of the new lockdown (5/11).'*

During the Senior Leadership Team meeting on Tuesday, 3 November, it was mentioned that colleagues were looking to take an 'event management approach' to the Fallowfield site by seeking

to restrict access for non-residents at night time. There is a mixed recollection of any reference to fencing. It is clear no discussion took place on the approach at Fallowfield; no detail was provided, including on risks, and no action was requested or taken. Approval for fencing was not sought.

During Tuesday, 3 November and Wednesday, 4 November, colleagues in the Directorate of Estates and Facilities developed the plan for perimeter fencing and engaged with a contractor. A fencing location map was sent to the senior staff within the relevant Directorates at 4.41pm on Wednesday, 4 November noting: *'The enclosed plan outlines how the general access to grounds will be restricted in the most affected areas and this will go hand in hand with the deployment of staff, as we enter the new lockdown phase.'*

Planning for student communications began on Tuesday, 3 November. There were two actions: to develop signage and banners to be placed on the fencing, and to prepare a direct communication to student residents on the Fallowfield site. The email to all students was to be distributed via the Kinetics platform, which is used by the ResLife team within the Directorate for the Student Experience. The banners began to be installed on the fences from 3.30pm on 5 November.

Fire safety i.e. evacuation requirements was addressed through advice from the Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service who visited the site.

The message to student residents, ['Keeping our community safe: Increased security measures'](#), was finalised at 2.15pm on Thursday, 5 November. The sending of the message via Kinetics did not start until 3:20pm and took until 4pm to be sent to all students on the Fallowfield site,

The fence had started to be erected at 9am on 5 November. A protest of around 200 students began at approximately 8pm at the Wilmslow Road entrance and spread across the site, with more than 1,000 students estimated to be involved at its peak. The student protest ended around 10.30pm. At approximately 8.30pm on the evening of 5 November, the University issued an apology to student residents for the concern and distress caused by the erecting of a fence around the Fallowfield Halls of Residence, noting the intention was never to prevent residents from entering or exiting the site. The fencing would be removed the next day.

3.2 Decision making

Throughout the week commencing 2 November, when options including fences were considered, the stated intention in emails was for perimeter fencing to restrict access to non-residents of the Fallowfield site to aid with security: *'the provision of temporary perimeter fencing around the Halls to restrict access points to grounds (which can then be staffed)'*. The investigation did not find any stated purpose or intention to restrict student movement within the Fallowfield campus. However, the final fencing plan distributed on the evening of 4 November showed mission creep as the plan used fencing to target areas within the site where there had been large and illegal gatherings.

The fencing plan provided for additional security at vulnerable site entrance points as expected (for example, Moseley Road), which would be consistent with the intention of securing the site and limiting access to non-residents. However, these appear to be augmented by extensive fencing at Great Court, the main Wilmslow Road entrance. Great Court and the adjacent Tree Court are open-access areas that present challenges in ensuring site security from the main entrance. They are also areas where large gatherings had taken place. The erection of significant fencing at this location went beyond the original intention and fuelled student beliefs that this was to control movement on

site. The plan is also incomplete as it omits the new Unsworth Park residences where fences were to be installed.

The investigation considered whether and how authority or approval for this was granted. Authority to progress the erection of fences was assumed by those working on the detailed plan to derive from the exchange of emails on Monday, 2 November, which contain the following:

'Physical Measures

- *Installation of temporary fencing around the halls perimeter to further restrict and reduce entry points to halls grounds – perimeter patrolled.....agreed'*

The final fence plan was sent to senior staff within the Directorates at 16:41 4 November. The email notes, 'The enclosed plan outlines how the general access to grounds will be restricted in the most affected areas and this will go hand in hand with the deployment of staff, as we enter the new lockdown phase.' This email also refers to a 'revised tactical approach.' What was not explained in the email text was that there had been no engagement with students, there had been mission creep (the plans were no longer limited to perimeter fencing), and that communications were not ready. This was a missed opportunity to pause the project.

Consideration was given to other missed opportunities to put the project on hold. The deadline of 5 November drove the decisions of colleagues in Estates and Facilities. The need to act urgently is apparent in the email correspondence. There were concerns that incidents on Bonfire Night would repeat the challenges of the previous weekend. When colleagues in Estates and Facilities were first contacted on 2 November, there was reference to the new English national lockdown. While there was no instruction that all responses to improve student safety at Fallowfield should be taken by 5 November (indeed, some responses were to be later) in the agreed actions on Monday, 2 November, it was noted that additional security staff would be in place from 5 November and that colleagues would '*push on*' to meet this date for perimeter fencing. Concerns were raised by staff working at the Fallowfield site on 4 November, but this did not give rise to reconsideration of the plan. Colleagues involved in planning the student communications should have been given the opportunity to challenge the plan and to question the lack of alignment between student messages and the erecting of the fencing. However, it is clear to the investigators they approached the task as a service to other Professional Services and considered that their role was to implement the required communications, i.e. they did not feel empowered to challenge the schedule.

The project was based in the Directorate of Estates and Facilities but needed engagement with colleagues in the Directorate for the Student Experience, notably staff working at the Fallowfield site. Colleagues in the Divisions of Campus Life and Residential and Sport Services were copied into the initial Monday email on consideration of further measures, including the provision of temporary fencing. Colleagues in the Directorate of Estates and Facilities note they were not made aware of concerns at this time. However, some of those having a direct involvement in managing and operating the Fallowfield site, namely the Residences Senior Management Team and ResLife coordinators, informed the investigation they were not effectively involved in the project until the morning of Wednesday, 4 November. When the plan for fencing was circulated that evening, it was noted that there could be a backlash from students. There appears to have been a breakdown in how colleagues across Professional Services work together in this instance.

On student engagement, there were several opportunities during the week to consult and engage with students and their representatives over the plans for Fallowfield, but students were not included in the decision making nor made aware of the plan.

3.3 Communications

The problems with timing of messages to students have been presented in Section 3.1, i.e. fencing started to be erected at 9am on 5 November before messages were sent to students. It is clear that the decision to erect the fencing was not aligned with student communications and this has been explored in Section 3.2, i.e. the impact of an enforced deadline, how and when decisions were taken, and the lack of collaborative working.

[The message sent to Fallowfield student residents](#) on 5 November commenced with reference to national restrictions and a four-week lockdown. It noted there would be additional security measures at entrance points to accommodation and main pedestrian routes. It further noted the installation of fencing would highlight main entrance areas and help avoid the mixing of households. It is clear, therefore, that by the time the communication was drafted and issued, the term 'perimeter fencing' and the understood intention had been lost. Early reference to lockdown is in hindsight problematic, as was the intention to avoid the mixing of households. Later in the same message it was noted the reference to the mixing of households was not about preventing movement of residents on the site. However, the mission creep referred to above clearly influenced the student communication. An apology and clarification on the purpose of the fencing and associated media messages were issued on the evening of 5 November but the impression that fencing was intended to restrict movement prevailed among many students.

There are then two related problems with student communication: the timing and content, which relate to how decisions were taken, and the lack of engagement with students and effective engagement with some colleagues in the project.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

The investigation has identified a number of failings in process and decision making. The approach was an incident response, a reactive project with a sense of urgency which led to rushed decision making, which in turn led to poor execution and communication. There was mission creep, with the final plan of fencing going beyond the original intention. Students were not consulted leading up to the erection of fences and there were lost opportunities to engage with colleagues across the Professional Services.

An explanation of the mission creep lies with no project documentation stating the intent; followed by well-intentioned but overly rapid development of the plan; an augmentation of the plan to address on site behaviours; a lack of effective challenge before implementation.

There has been strong and constructive engagement with this investigation, an openness to discuss what went wrong and how to prevent a recurrence. The staff we interviewed acted in good faith to address incidents at the Fallowfield site impacting upon student safety. Many of the staff interviewed in this project are working on the 'front line' in key areas such as security and residences, and have had to bear a disproportionate burden as a result of the pandemic.

This report references campus incidents and unacceptable behaviours which need to be balanced by acknowledging the vast majority of students are fully engaged in their studies, are not breaking rules and are dealing with unprecedented challenges while studying away from home.

i. Student engagement needs to be made more effective.

Establishing student trust in University pandemic responses through better engagement should be a priority. The rush to complete the project meant students were not included in the decision making, nor were colleagues in student-facing teams. The timing was unfortunate as a key opportunity – the Campus Reopening Group meeting on Mondays – could have helped raise awareness. A recommendation on raising awareness of pandemic responses is suggested below, but in the longer term there is already a University team working on enhancing student engagement based in the Institute for Learning and Teaching and this would be a good starting point.

ii. The Registrar, Secretary and Chief Operating Officer ensures there is tighter definition of delegations and project management within the Professional Services.

There is a need to ensure greater collaboration and partnership going forward. The implementation of the fencing project was led by the Directorate of Estates and Facilities, but there was involvement and potential for involvement from many other parts of the University. What started as a project reacting to site-security concerns developed into an issue which resulted in a major student protest. There was no single meeting where all those involved were brought together. Students and those dealing closely with them were not consulted. There is no project documentation. The need for collaborative working is paramount during a crisis, yet colleagues felt they had not been sufficiently made aware nor given the opportunity to engage.

The failings of process and decision making across the Directorates and Divisions resulted in a rushed and siloed approach coupled with a lack of challenge on the timeline; mission creep; and a lack of alignment with communications and consideration of the impacts on student wellbeing. Recommendation (iii) suggests a formal mechanism to ensure there is challenge to pandemic responses, but this must also be an individual responsibility.

The normally good working relationships across Directorates appear to have broken down in this instance, particularly between colleagues working in Student Residences and Estates and Facilities. Some of the reasons for this breakdown are in the approach of treating this as an urgent and responsive project, the unprecedented pressures of work during the pandemic, the high and continuous sense of urgency, plus the impact of remote working. The latter refers to the formal nature of online meetings and the need for regular and informal opportunities for discussion with colleagues and key networks.

iii. To configure the Campus Management (COVID-19) Group to facilitate greater integration for all responses during the pandemic, facilitate challenge and enhance student engagement. Student residences should be included.

The Campus Reopening Group has now ceased its work but in any case, did not include consideration of student residences because they were already open. It is believed its replacement, the new Campus Management Group, could be configured to address the shortcomings in decision making identified in this investigation. The aim would be to aid student engagement; enable collaborative working between staff from residences, estates and security; clarify lines of authority; and provide more effective challenge.

iv. The University continues to work with students and staff to address Fallowfield site security, reinforce the need to stay safe and to address unacceptable behaviours.

The unacceptable and antisocial behaviours by some students at the Fallowfield site continue to cause alarm over student safety. Reports of large gatherings and other COVID-19 breaches, plus criminal acts, have not stopped, nor has concern that many of these are associated with non-residents. Staff report being overwhelmed. The University has taken a number of additional steps to improve safety and site security, but the need to prevent night-time access by non-residents remains. A key lesson from this investigation is to engage with students resident and staff working at the Fallowfield site in future responses.

Appendices

Appendix : Terms of Reference (attached)

The University of Manchester ('the University')

Terms of reference for inquiry into the erection of fencing at Fallowfield Halls of Residences on 5 November 2020

- 1. Introduction**
 - 1.1 This document sets out the terms of reference within which an inquiry will be carried out in connection with concerns raised with the University about the erection of fencing at the Fallowfield Halls of Residence on 5 November 2020.**
 - 1.2 The inquiry will be carried out by Professor Clive Agnew, former Vice-President for Teaching, Learning and Students at the University ('the Investigator') supported by Fatima Abid, former General Secretary of the University of Manchester Students' Union.**
- 2. Purpose and scope of the inquiry**
 - 2.1 The purpose of the inquiry is**
 - 2.1.1 to collate information and evidence relevant to the erection of fencing at the Fallowfield Halls of Residence on 5 November 2020 including the decision-making leading up to the erection of such fencing, and what was and was not communicated with residents and other students about the fencing ("Issues");**
 - 2.1.2 to set that out in a report with accompanying evidence; and**
 - 2.1.3 to include within the report recommendations regarding potential next steps, for consideration by the University (see paragraph 4 below).**

3. **Procedure for the inquiry**

3.1 The Investigator shall, on behalf of the University, seek information from relevant students and staff and others as he considers appropriate for the purposes of investigating the Issues. This should include a review of documentary or video evidence from appropriate sources and interviews with witnesses, where these are relevant to the Issues.

3.2 The Investigator shall:

3.2.1 carry out an impartial and objective investigation;

3.2.2 review all relevant evidence relating to each of the Issues; and

3.2.3 find facts in relation to each of the Issues;

3.2.4 make recommendations to the University, as appropriate, about potential actions or next steps.

3.3 During any meetings held as part of the **investigation** the Investigator shall:

3.3.1 explain that the purpose of the **investigation** is to gather information in connection with the events on and leading up to 5 November 2020 in relation to the erection of fencing at the Fallowfield Halls of Residence for the primary purpose of identifying where practices and processes can be improved;

3.3.2 seek information from them in connection with the Issues;

3.3.3 explain that the information may be relied upon and used in a formal report which the University will consider and may rely upon, and which may be referred to in any subsequent related procedures;

3.3.4 thank them for their assistance.

4. **Reporting procedures**

4.1 The Investigator shall produce an investigation report which sets out his findings of fact and all supporting evidence and which explains in full, by reference to that evidence, his reason for reaching those findings. The report shall include **recommendations regarding potential next steps, for consideration by the University.**

4.2 The report (with any attached supporting information and evidence) shall be sent to the University's President and Vice-Chancellor who will consider its findings and recommendations and determine what further action may be necessary.

4.3 The report will be used to determine any appropriate further actions.

4.4 The report will be made public, subject to appropriate redaction of any personal information, after consideration by the President and Vice-Chancellor and determination of further action.

5. **General**

- 5.1 It is anticipated that the investigation will be completed by **30 November 2020**, or as soon as possible thereafter.
- 5.2 The Investigator shall provide the University with all notes and all other documentation upon completion of his work.
- 5.3 The Investigator shall, if required to do so by the University, attend any meeting required by the University's procedures to explain his findings and recommendations.