

Death of UK teacher Donna Coleman blamed on “community transmission” despite Burnley College breaching COVID rules

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A Health and Safety Executive (HSE) investigation into the death of Burnley College teacher Donna Coleman, who died on January 6, 2021, from COVID, has found that the college was in breach of multiple COVID health and safety regulations. It has been issued with a formal notice by the HSE, a first for an education sector employer.

The HSE is the government body tasked with regulating and enforcing workplace safety.

Donna, 42, was a popular teacher who worked with teenagers who had been kicked out of school, as well as with long-term unemployed people, helping them to continue their education or find work.

She tested positive on December 14, 2020 after feeling ill on December 11. There were reportedly at least 14 other members of staff who had the virus in the same week at the college. Donna had repeatedly told her sisters that she was frightened about going into work. She felt that the COVID safety protocols were inadequate.

“We are not safe,” she wrote in a WhatsApp message to a colleague on September 26. She considered reporting the college to the University and College Union (UCU), but the feedback form asked for a name and Donna was too scared that her complaint might be traced back to her.

The first COVID outbreak at Burnley College was in October 2020, when at least 22 individuals were required to isolate. There was another in November. At least four members of staff tested positive in the Foundation and Community Studies (FACS) department where Donna worked and where many students were teenagers with additional needs, such as learning difficulties.

In mid-December there was a third outbreak with at least 12 people testing positive. Donna’s head of department had to close FACS as so many people were off sick. Donna was one of them.

At home, members of Burnley College teaching staff messaged each other in dismay. “The place is a giant petri dish,” one staffer messaged Donna. “It’s sweeping the staff room again,” responded Donna, who said she had a fever and an aching head. She couldn’t eat and spent most of her time sleeping. When she was awake, Donna urged colleagues to get tests. “Everyone needs to go remote or shut it down,” Donna wrote in one message.

In a *Guardian* interview, Donna’s sister Stephanie describes the heartbreak and trauma faced by the family in Donna’s final days. On December 29, Stephanie woke up to a message from Donna in the family WhatsApp group: “I don’t want to worry you, but I had to call an ambulance, because I couldn’t breathe. I’m in Blackburn Royal A&E.”

On New Year’s Eve, Donna was moved to the intensive care unit. On January 3, 2021, doctors told Donna that she needed to go on a ventilator. Donna sent goodbye messages to her family and friends. Her organs began to fail and on January 6 her life support system was switched off.

An investigation was launched by the HSE amid claims that Christmas parties and other activities were taking place at Burnley College and that social distancing requirements were being flouted. It opened a fatality investigation into Donna Coleman’s death after the UCU raised COVID-19 health and safety concerns with both the college and the HSE—concerns that were initially ignored.

Despite the HSE’s own overwhelming evidence that Donna, her colleagues and pupils were put at risk due to the college’s negligence and multiple failings, the government body concluded that she was “more likely to have contracted COVID through community transmission rather than at work”. The finding is being appealed by the

UCU and Donna's sister Stephanie.

The HSE investigation found:

- A failure to meet social distancing and ventilation requirements within the office that Donna shared with two colleagues, one of whom also tested positive for COVID on December 14.

- A failure to meet social distancing requirements during meetings held within the college with external parties.

- A failure to meet social distancing requirements during social activities held by the college on site.

- A failure to monitor and enforce wearing of face coverings by some staff members and some senior managers.

- A failure to inform close contacts of those who tested positive.

To refuse to hold Burnley College accountable in these circumstances is absurd. Donna was killed by a virus which her employers did not adequately protect her from, and which was clearly circulating in her workplace.

Marie Monaghan, a regional support official for the UCU, having received complaints from staff about the lack of protection, emailed Burnley College on October 6, 2020 asking for a meeting. It did not reply. On October 9, she followed up. "It's my understanding that some staff aren't being made aware of relevant positive cases and wrongly advised to not self-isolate when they would be classified as a close contact."

Monaghan filed complaints with the HSE on October 13 and October 30. The HSE did not take enforcement action. A spokesperson said: "All concerns raised with us relating to arrangements at the college were looked into. The college provided us with detailed records and after discussions we were satisfied that the college was complying with the relevant published guidance."

Clearly it was not. Throughout the pandemic, the HSE has enforced not public health procedures, but the government's anti-scientific herd immunity strategy, refusing to implement improvement and prohibition notices despite receiving tens of thousands of complaints. Even where it has been forced to acknowledge grave breaches of public health measures as at Burnley College, it concludes with a cover-up.

The UCU, like all the education and other trade unions, acted as an accomplice, refusing to shut down through strikes workplaces it knew were unsafe. Instead, it helped to oversee the reopening and keeping open of schools in the second half of 2020 which contributed significantly to the explosion of infections over the autumn and winter.

Schools, colleges and universities became key vectors of viral transmission, with children aged 2-17 ending up the group with the highest rate of infection.

Educators like Donna knew their workplaces were unsafe and called for strike action and remote learning. But the unions allowed schools and colleges to be excluded from the limited November 2020 lockdown. It was only when educators threatened to take matters into their own hands in January 2021 that the education unions advised their members to refuse to return to work after the Christmas break by citing Section 44 of the workplace Health and Safety Act—again, seeking to avoid any unified industrial action. With an effective national education strike looming and threatening to trigger a broader movement against the policy of mass infection, the government announced a third national lockdown.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson was finally forced to admit in a speech, on January 4, 2021, that children are a key vector for the virus, as Donna was fighting for her life on a ventilator.

The tragic death of almost 200,000 people, including nearly 200 children and at least 570 educators, plus the debilitation of hundreds of thousands with Long COVID, could have been prevented if public health had not been subordinated to private profit. The ending of all mitigations and the "return to normal" continues to kill hundreds of workers on a weekly basis.

Donna's case shows that this cannot be brought to an end, nor justice done, through the structures of the state or the trade unions. The "community transmission" excuse will be applied everywhere to let employers off the hook. Health and lives can be protected only by workers organising independently through the building of rank-and-file committees to wage a fight for safe conditions and by participation in the Global Workers' Inquest to expose the crimes committed in the pandemic.



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