

29 January 2021

Rt Hon Robert Buckland QC MP
Ministry of Justice
102 Petty France
Westminster
LONDON
SW1H 9AJ

PrivateOffice.LC.Buckland@justice.gov.uk

Dear Mr Buckland

I am writing on behalf of University and College Union (UCU) members working for Novus, the largest prison education provider in England and Wales, to bring to your attention the negligence and disregard for health and safety displayed by their employer.

Whilst the three other main prison education providers have all met with UCU to discuss safe provision during this latest wave of the pandemic, Novus and its parent company the LTE Group are refusing to meaningfully engage with our representatives. The LTE Group and its chief executive John Thornhill continue to put our members at risk by insisting on unsafe face-to-face teaching, and completely ignoring widespread health and safety concerns.

As you will of course be aware, the Ministry of Justice's own data shows that prisons are high risk workplaces, with an infection rate currently at 4.2 times the national average, and a doubling of cases in the week 11-18 January 2021. UCU members working for Novus on the frontline are facing breaches of social distancing, unclean departments and toilets, insufficient PPE, and exclusion from prison vaccine programmes. Worse still, they have been discouraged by local management from reporting these extensive health and safety breaches.

In successive letters on 5 and 13 January, UCU set out detailed health and safety demands to Novus, insisting, inter alia, on no face-to-face teaching in the adult estate; mandatory wearing of face masks; for on-site attendance to be moved to a voluntary basis, and for education staff not to have to attend where a high standard of cleaning is not taking place. The concerns expressed in both letters went unaddressed, and just yesterday we were made aware of two further covid-19 outbreaks at prison education departments.

Only last week, UCU members employed at Novus delivered a vote of no confidence in CEO John Thornhill after safety concerns and the lack of engagement with the union, and have subsequently written to the LTE board to express their concerns. Staff have reported intimidation, illegal recording of union meetings, and unsubstantiated allegations from Mr Thornhill.

We would encourage you to write to Mr Thornhill and the LTE board to ask them to put staff safety first, call on them to immediately re-engage with the UCU Novus branch, and to urgently address all the health and safety concerns of our members. Prison education is vital, but our members cannot be expected to deliver it in such unsafe conditions.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jo Grady". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J".

Dr Jo Grady
General Secretary

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