

6 December 2021

Professor Andrew Wathey
Vice Chancellor and Chief Executive
Northumbria University
Sutherland Building
Newcastle-Upon-Tyne

Email C/o gillian.howie@northumbria.ac.uk

Dear Professor Wathey

I am writing to express our concern in relation to the treatment of UCU branch secretary and disability activist, Emma-Jane Phillips, by Northumbria University management.

You will be well aware that Emma-Jane is a wheel chair user who requires the aid of an assistance dog. She has raised many concerns about working as a disabled person at Northumbria.

These include, inter alia, being trapped in a malfunctioning lift on many occasions, having to fight to be allowed to bring her assistance dog onto the campus, and being timetabled to deliver teaching in spaces which are unsuitable for wheelchair users. This last has exacerbated her physical problems and caused her to be off ill.

Rather than address Emma-Jane's legitimate concerns the university has chosen to seek to silence her through a vindictive use of the disciplinary process. Moreover, the university chose to do this without first alerting the UCU Regional Official in accordance with the ACAS Code of Practice, your own disability procedure, and all recognised good practice.

We cannot but conclude that this is an attack on our union and on Emma-Jane because of her union role. These actions also lead us to question whether Northumbria is a safe place for disabled people to work and study.

As with many disabled people, Emma-Jane uses social media as a means of expression, to reflect on her experiences as a wheelchair user. It is common for disabled people to use social media to advocate for themselves and others in a similar situation, and Emma should be free as a disabled worker to explain the difficulties she faces in her day-to-day life. In seeking to silence a disabled worker who is raising legitimate concerns, the university is not only sending a damaging message about its attitude towards disabled staff but is also limiting that individual's freedom of speech on an important equality issue.

In conclusion, industrial relations in the university are at a crossroads. Rather than pursuing this damaging course of action we urge the university to engage urgently with

UCU reps to address legitimate concerns about disability inclusion at the university.
UCU will continue to support Emma-Jane in every way that we can.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jo Grady". The "J" is large and stylized, and the "Grady" is written in a cursive-like script.

Dr Jo Grady
General Secretary