

22 March 2020

Sent by Email Only

Phil Copple
Acting director general of prisons
HMPPS
102 Petty France
London
SW1H 9AJ

Dear Mr Copple

Prison Educators – Urgent Request

I write further to our correspondence to Ian Bickers (18 March); Katharine Ball (18 March) and Education providers (13 March and 20 March). I also attach the response received on Friday 20 March from Ian Bickers to my letter (18 March). We do not believe that the contents of that letter adequately addresses our substantial concerns around the safety of our members at this current time.

Mr Bickers states: *“prison education is a crucial service to prisoners and a key deliverable that enables prisons to continue running a stable and effective prison regime”*.

Due to the imminent health and safety risks that this current crisis has caused, our overriding demand is that prison education is suspended along the same lines that have taken place elsewhere in our sector relating to face to face teaching. The General Secretary of the Prison Officers Association, Steve Gillan has given the POA’s full support to our position.

We note that Chaplaincy services have closed across all sites. In addition, prison educators in Northern Ireland (NI) were withdrawn from their workplaces on 20 March on health and safety grounds following intervention from UCU with the NI devolved government (Department of the Economy). This was despite the provider college declaring 'business as usual' to their employees working in prisons whilst closing all face to face provision in colleges.

Mr Bickers in his response, compares the wider further education sector where there continues to be a provision for EHCP learners and those who are children of key workers

as an example as to why it is acceptable to continue delivery of prison education. We do not believe that this is an appropriate example to use because of the fundamental environmental differences.

Providing supportive learning with a select number of learners at a college site with acceptable standards of hygiene and infection control differs greatly to that of a prison environment, particularly given the health and safety hazards that have been reported to us by our reps in high numbers. At this current time, neither the most basic levels of hygiene are not being met nor government advice regarding social distancing are being followed. A few of our examples include: classrooms over capacity (HMP Hull) or observing wings as 'households' and isolating accordingly (learners from such wings still being sent to Education (HMP Ranby)), no access to hot-water (HMP Winchester) or soap (HMP Lancaster Farms); lack of adequate cleaning taking place (most places); staff having to share one toilet (male and female) with learners (HMP Rochester).

The current numbers of health and safety breaches are not being addressed in a timely manner. We are still awaiting a response to our e-mail to Katharine Ball and escalated queries raised directly with education providers also remain unanswered. Education in prisons cannot continue whilst our members' health and safety is at such significant risk.

We are currently conducting an urgent survey with all of our members who work in prisons, asking them to detail the ways in which this crisis is being dealt with in their establishments. We will be analysing the results on the morning of 23 March and will be taking immediate steps to publicly advise our members where clear breaches of the H & S at Work Act are reported, including if necessary their rights under s44. ERA not to attend a dangerous workplace. If necessary, a copy of the report will also be made available to the Justice Committee which is due to sit at 3.00pm on 24 March.

We note the protections and reward packages announced by the POA for its members on Friday. This announcement came through at the same time that I was being notified that YOI Feltham prison education department had been told that even if there are no learners to teach and the prison moves into a lockdown situation, they should still attend in order to 'paint the department'.

Retention of qualified and experienced staff was already becoming a problem before this current crisis and we are concerned that attrition rates could be exacerbated due to the lack of due regard towards our members' health and safety. In the words of one of our member's yesterday "*the general feeling is we are expendable, insignificant, undervalued and pawns in a financial game*".

Request:

We suggest that during a period of prison education closures that prison education teams could work on offering innovative ways for learners to engage in learning within the prison environment. We know that very many of our members are ready and waiting to produce learning resources and packs for their learners from home in order to help prisons to get through this crisis.

There will also be members who are not in the categories of heightened risk who would be willing to help play a role in attending sites in order to facilitate printing and collation of learning packs thereby helping the prison to function. But this would have to be on a voluntary basis and risk assessed with safe systems of work accordingly.

I appreciate that there may be slightly different provision arrangements that we would have to arrive at for YOIs/YPs but this has to be safe and delivered by staff that are well enough and not at enhanced risk to do so.

We have already extended an invitation to HMPPS and providers to meet (virtually) with UCU to discuss how we can work together to best address the current situation whilst delivering a level of education in our prisons that protects members and learners. I would like to extend that offer again here.

UCU is ready to work with you in order to quickly and carefully develop an emergency framework which facilitates a process by which our members (that are well enough and able to do so), can continue to deliver a safe and effective level of prison education that preserves the health and safety of both our members and their learners.

We look forward to hearing from you by return.

Yours sincerely,

Jo Grady
General Secretary

Cc. Ian Bickers, HMPPS
Cc. Justice Unions Parliamentary Group (for distribution)