

Mr. Kevin Conroy  
The Centre Director  
INTO, Newcastle University  
via email only: [kevin.conroy@newcastle.ac.uk](mailto:kevin.conroy@newcastle.ac.uk)

Thursday 28 October 2021

Dear Kevin

### **Concerns and queries about Covid-19 measures**

I hope that you are well.

I have spoken to a number of UCU members in the last few days. They have all expressed concerns about health and safety. Those concerns appear to arise from:

1. Anecdotal evidence about positive Covid-19 cases amongst staff and students in the Centre;
2. Reports about [rising number of cases in the north east](#);
3. A perceived lack of consultation and communication over INTO's Covid-19 policy, procedures, and risk assessments;

In regard to the first two points, I do not expect personal information on Covid-19 cases to be divulged, and the rising cases is general context for concerns, rather than specific to INTO. However, as they both have an impact on feelings and perceptions, they are important to mention.

Regarding the third point, I do not know the extent to which staff have been involved, consulted and communicated with about the Centre's protocols for Covid-19. What I can tell you is that concerns about health and safety were at the forefront of everyone's minds when I have spoken to UCU members over the last few days. This includes when I met with members earlier this week, as well as the contact that I have had with others since. It would appear that reassurance on health and safety matters is needed. It would definitely be welcomed.

I am aware that some colleagues will have contacted you directly on these matters, or perhaps raised them with individual managers. This correspondence is not to take anything away from that. It is a collective way of pulling together those concerns and making proposals about how they might be addressed. I therefore make the suggestions below for your consideration, based on feedback from members of UCU.

## **A Review**

The Centre should review its Covid-19 policy, procedures, and risk assessments, ensuring that all staff are involved and consulted with during this process. Any final documents should be made easily accessible to all staff.

The rationale for such a review is the context that I have outlined above. Comments I have received suggest the review should include consideration of:

- policy and protocols on hot-desking;
- in-person vs. online staff meetings;
- reducing some in-person activities where there may have been exposure to Covid-19;

On the issue of meetings, we have suggested (and agreed) the following wording with a number of organisations:

*The expectation (a starting point, not a 'rule') is that **meetings will still predominantly be MS Teams based**. There will be meetings/events that require staff to be in the same physical place at the same time, but Teams should continue to be the starting point of meeting organisation.*

I mention this as all members I have spoken to have expressed disquiet about some staff meetings continuing to be in-person.

## **Health and Vaccinations**

Members also raised issues with me about other sources of illness and infection, as well as Covid-19. I wondered if the Centre would consider a policy of paid time off for vaccinations and covering the cost of the flu vaccine?

Recent [ACAS guidance](#) suggests that staff should be given paid time off to get the Covid-19 vaccine as well as any issues that might occur afterwards. The guidance states:

*Employers should support staff in getting the coronavirus (COVID-19) vaccine once it's offered to them. If an employer would like to support staff to get the vaccine, it's best to talk to staff, the workplace's recognised trade union or other employee representatives and agree how this will work. To encourage staff to get the vaccine, employers might consider:*

- *paid time off to attend vaccination appointments;*
- *paying staff their usual rate of pay if they're off sick with vaccine side effects, instead of Statutory Sick Pay (SSP);*

- *not counting vaccine-related absences in absence records or towards HR 'trigger' points;*

Some staff will soon be due their third (or booster) vaccine for Covid-19. In addition, a number of organisations - including Newcastle University - have provided time and funding for staff to obtain the flu vaccine. Making commitments such as these would send a positive message to staff.

I appreciate that, as we have acknowledged in previous correspondence, UCU does not have any formal mechanism for raising concerns and seeking to resolve them collectively. I am sending this letter in the spirit of collaborating and resolving issues that are a concern for our members. A number of them have been involved with the production of this letter.

In the spirit of openness, we will make our members aware of the contents of this letter. Likewise, we would like to do the same with any response.

If you would like to discuss any of these matters, please do get in touch.

Kind regards,

*Jon Bryan*

**Jon Bryan**  
**Regional Support Official**