



Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee

House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA

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Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP
Chancellor of the Exchequer
HM Treasury
1 Horse Guards Road
London SW1A 2HQ

27 March 2020

Dear Rishi

My Committee welcomes the measures that you have already announced to support the UK workforce during the COVID-19 crisis. We commend your decision on 26 March to provide financial support for the self-employed, alongside the support you had already pledged for businesses and employees.

You may be aware that on 24 March I published an open invitation for citizens worried about their working conditions to write to the BEIS Committee about their concerns. We have been inundated with responses: 2000 in just four days. A substantial proportion of respondents have written not only about the difficulties and risks that they are facing at their place of work, but also about the challenge of childcare.

It is right and proper that attendance of schools, colleges and nurseries should be limited as far as possible. This is essential to minimise the risk of infection for families who have no choice but to send their children to school, whether this is because the parents' work is critical to the COVID-19 response or because their children are vulnerable or need specialist support.

However many parents and guardians who are theoretically able to care for their children at home, are not practically able to do this whilst also continuing their jobs at normal capacity. This is a major challenge both for parents able to work from home, and for those whose jobs require their physical presence in the workplace.

- Parents of children who are young, vulnerable or have specialist needs have repeatedly highlighted that it is simply not possible to work effectively at home whilst meeting their children's care needs. Many have been given the option to take time off by their employer, but only as unpaid leave or with statutory sick pay. This means that hundreds, if not thousands, of families, will face financial hardship. This is through no fault of their own, and notwithstanding a willingness in principle to continue work.

- In some cases, employers are asking parents without access to childcare to work back the hours that have been 'lost' whilst caring for their children. This leaves households in an extremely challenging situation, with a childcare 'debt' that will continue to pose difficulties long after the end of the immediate public health crisis.
- Some organisations which are deemed 'essential' have offered financial support to assist their employees with the costs of childcare, and others have advised employees to bring their children into work. These organisations' willingness to support families is commendable. However the offers of financial support are in practice worthless - as childcare provision is no longer available – and attempts to accommodate children alongside workers undermine the Government's guidance on social distancing.
- Many pregnant women and their partners are being forced to continue working - often in non-essential roles - for fear of losing their jobs and their income. This is despite Government advice that pregnant women should be "particularly stringent" in following social distancing measures.
- A concerning number of employees – including parents - who already have the facilities to work from home, are being put under pressure by their employers to physically attend their workplace.

Whilst it is preferable to support parents to stay in work, and for employers to have sensible conversations about how home-working can be organised around other commitments, it is evident that there are some cases where this simply will not be possible. It is also clear that many employers are unaware – or unsure – of whether it is permissible to furlough staff unable to work due to childcare duties, and to claim the wage costs of these staff through the Job Retention Scheme.

The correspondence received by my Committee on this issue likely represents only the tip of the iceberg; it is highly probable that the difficulties of working whilst also providing childcare at home are widespread across the UK workforce. If the Government is to succeed in its efforts to control COVID-19 whilst minimising pressures on the NHS and on families, it will need to tackle the problems faced by parents and guardians head on. Therefore, I would like to kindly ask you to provide explicit public guidance on the following:

- Please confirm that the Government supports the furloughing of employees unable to work due to unavoidable childcare demands, in particular care for young children, vulnerable children, children with underlying conditions, and children with specialist needs.
- Please confirm that the Government supports the furloughing of pregnant women and their partners, where these individuals are unable to work from home.
- Please confirm that employers will be able to claim for the wage costs of the above groups through the Job Retention Scheme.
- Please emphasise firmly and clearly that all employees with facilities to work from home must be allowed – and required – to do so, and that they should cease attendance at their workplace.

I request also that you examine the approach taken by Belgium to control COVID-19 transmission in the workplace and to publish a public statement on its appropriateness for the UK. Belgium is enforcing both the facilitation of home-working by companies, and the application of social distancing where this

is not possible. It is imposing fines and forceable closure on non-compliant businesses in order to protect the lives of workers and their families.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Rachel Reeves." The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. The first name "Rachel" is followed by a space and then the surname "Reeves." The signature is positioned above the printed name and title.

Rachel Reeves MP

Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee