

Written evidence submitted anonymously

Background

I work as a self-employed sole trader and am a Series Producer making observational documentaries. Much of my work involves filming with public sector organisations such as the police and hospitals. The programmes I've worked on have been nominated for awards and regularly get millions of viewers. In developing and creating new series, I've played a part in creating millions of pounds of business within the TV industry and jobs for dozens of freelancers like me.

It had never been difficult to find employment until the pandemic hit last year, but since then the work I do has become increasingly difficult and harder to find. I managed to get a less senior job (part time) over the summer and since September have been working 1-2 days per week on another series. However, because this current project is with the NHS, the new lockdown has again delayed when it can go into full production and it is likely to be pushed back by several months.

This year, my income has dropped significantly (I'm currently bringing in about 20-30% of pre-Covid levels and I expect to achieve at most about 50% of my usual turnover for tax year 20/21).

To date I have not had any help throughout the pandemic beyond taking a mortgage holiday. I haven't been eligible for any support schemes or UC in spite of my work being significantly affected by Covid, and having a significant drop in income as a direct result of the pandemic and the restrictions put in place by the government. I was not eligible because of the upper income limit on the SEISS scheme. Based on the tax years up to 18/19 my income was too high by a small amount. However, in tax year 19/20 I earned under the income limit. In spite of submitting my tax return to HMRC in September 2020, this information was not included in eligibility assessments for any of the SEISS grants.

At the time my MP raised the possibility of using more recent figures with HMRC but the response was that it was not fair to change eligibility to include the 19/20 tax year as not everyone would have completed the 19/20 tax return.

As this second wave and new lockdown arrive, this means I am facing a year in this situation with still no prospect of support. To get through over the last twelve months has involved cutting back my outgoings to the bare bones, getting help from family, building up interest on my mortgage when I took the mortgage holiday, not being able to pay into my pension in the way I would normally and eating into my savings (which were also part of my retirement planning).

To what extent do the government measures protect viable jobs and how effective is government support for the television industry?

I believe my job is still viable, people still want to watch television and will do when the pandemic eases. I still have the skills and experience to make those programmes. However, a year with severely reduced income and the experience of no government or other support for the self-employed plus the wilful decision by the government to continue to deny there is an issue has made me consider changing industry.

The industry/production companies cannot pay me for not working. A scheme for self-employed people that was equivalent to the PAYE furlough scheme would help to keep me connected to this

industry (and make the small amount of work I am able to do viable). I would then be available for when work is able to resume.

The government seems to have little understanding of the eco-system of the TV and film industry. In spite of the fact that, pre-Covid, it was a rapidly growing sector of the economy and contributed billions to the UK economy with an annual trade surplus of close to a billion pounds, their response to date to sector specific support has not effectively protected the freelance workforce that underpins the success of the sector. The rhetoric coming from the Treasury about self-employed people is dispiriting and fails to recognise the contribution we make to this country.

The two most glaring omissions are the gaps in support within the SEISS (eg for newly self-employed, those like me who are ineligible due to the income ceiling and limited company directors) and the lack of support for PAYE freelance short contract workers who were in many cases not eligible for furlough.

There is a real risk of a talent drain particularly for some less represented groups including those from working class backgrounds who do not have the family support and savings to get through an extended period of time without income and those in more junior roles within the industry. Particularly after a year of very poor support measures, people will be considering whether the level of job insecurity and risk associated with a career in television is worthwhile when they could take their skills and experience into other equally rewarding sectors which offer more support and long term prospects.

This year there has also been a reduction in entry level jobs available during this current period as the number of people on shoots (even before the lockdown) has been cut back for health and safety reasons meaning the routes to entry for new starters are significantly diminished. This means the opportunity to develop the skills and experience needed to move into this industry has been significantly reduced. So new talent will be looking to other industries and taking work outside of TV – this is something I have experienced directly through mentoring a number of young people who were interested in working in TV and have chosen to pursue other paths.

How has the second lockdown impacted the economy and what should the government do to support if intermittent lockdowns continue?

With this new lockdown, although theoretically the TV industry can continue, it is hard to see how the kinds of programmes I make (observational documentaries) will be continuing as normal until restrictions have eased. Currently conversations I'm having are about projects being delayed and pushed back and I believe this is happening across the industry. More broadly, some of the issues above around fewer roles on productions because of health and safety will be continuing until Covid is no longer a risk. In addition, the cost of making television has significantly increased as a result of the extra measures involved in making a production covid-safe. This has not been reflected in increased budgets so there is likely to be a reduction in staffing or more pressure to do more with less in other areas.

The other worrying trend is some production companies trying to continue with "business as usual" while putting self-employed contractors at increased risk from Covid by, for example, not providing the resources to work from home or demanding that they travel in to a place of work when it is not strictly necessary. While in theory they are obliged to work in a Covid secure way, the lack of union support and protection for freelance workers and the dreadful work situation means many individuals are really being placed in a very difficult situation – choosing between taking on work and putting themselves at risk or having to turn down work they cannot afford to turn down.

The government should provide the industry and individuals within it enough to support to operate safely and remain viable for when this pandemic eventually eases. The cultural industries contribute significantly to the UK economy and to the lives of people in Britain and beyond and it makes economic sense to provide effective support to be in a state to pick up when things get better. A key part of this is supporting the largely freelance and self-employed workforce more effectively than is currently being done. In particular, they need to look at helping those who have so far been excluded from support. For example, it would help if all SEISS assessments for the next grant could be based on the 19/20 tax year at the very least. As all tax returns for 19/20 should have been submitted by the end of January this should be possible to be taken into account for assessments of everyone's eligibility in the next grant for Feb-April.

More broadly, looking at how to help PAYE freelancers would make a significant impact and ensuring that the support provided to the sector is effectively feeding down to the self-employed workforce and not just supporting the organisations who contract freelance and self-employed staff.

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