

**Written evidence submitted by Stephen Bowen (Managing Director/Owner at Renegade Print Management Ltd)**

I am a Director of a small business in Newcastle East constituency. I have run a successful print management company for over 15 years as a limited company. I pay myself largely by dividends, if and when the turnover and profits allow. Not to do so might have seen us trading whilst insolvent which is against the law. I have paid ALL my taxes on time over the years of trading and complied with the government and HMRC at every step.

My business has been decimated due to a significant loss in work and our financial struggle has been rooted in the government's decision to exclude me from fair & equitable financial support even though we have heard the Government responses to the pandemic in 2020 - "we will support jobs, we will support incomes and we will support businesses...we will do whatever it takes"; "I promise to do whatever it takes"; 'we will not leave anybody behind'.

Highly dependent on the creative industries, and not a little reliant on the retail/hospitality sector, I have seen my business turnover has dropped by at least 60% from March 2020. Whilst furlough was and is an ongoing option, I have been severely restricted as to how I can work to maintain my business. Unlike my self-employed colleagues/competitors who not only received £2,500 per month, but were allowed to maintain their respective businesses giving them a huge advantage when the industry re-starts. Any help given directly to specific industries, does not take into account the supply chain equally effected.

I have had no option but to take a Bounce Back Loan (BBL), which the government classifies as part of their financial package to businesses when in actual fact it is not 'financial help', but more debt. Paying back the BBL is due to start in April 2021 when the whole country and my business is nowhere near recovery. This is another stressor alongside many others myself and my wife face. I am being offered a payment plan to pay my corporation tax bill, ostensibly more debt. I have no premises, therefore, I cannot obtain grants offered to such businesses.

We have been surviving on my wife's NHS pay, our savings and the absolute minimum furlough payment which does not cover 15% of our monthly outgoings. The banks initially supported us through payment holidays for mortgage, loan & credit card payments but they have now ended although the pandemic has not. We have taken 6 months mortgage holiday which is increased our personal debt. We have also accrued considerable interest on personal loans. We have now been forced to take 'tailored support' from Lloyds bank which has affected our credit file considerably and we now face uncertainty and potential rejection or paying more for financial credit in the future through no fault of our own. This has devastated our plans for retirement and continuing to supporting our son though university. We now have massive debt which we did not want or ask for. The whole situation has taken a massive toll on my mental health and that of my wife. As it is, my wife and I have spoken at length about having to put the family home on the market just to survive.

Over the years (I am 57) I have done the right thing and save for my retirement, funds that I have had to decimate as basic state help is unavailable to those with small nest eggs. Had I been reckless and had nothing to fall back on, the Government would be supporting me with Universal Credit by now. I did the right thing and feel I am being punished for it. We also of course do not qualify for universal credit which the chancellor seems to think is the panacea to anyone who hasn't been able to access business grants. Even if we could claim UC, it would not cover basic mortgage costs and bills.

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We speak for many others who have found ourselves discriminated against because we are self-reliant and were building ourselves a future so we would not have to rely on the state. Unfortunately, the unfair and discriminatory decisions this government continues to take will in fact have much longer term negative consequences and the opposite impact on individuals. We no doubt will be accessing primary and secondary health services much more often and will be relying on social and financial support in the future costing the tax payer much more long term than helping the excluded come out of the pandemic in the short term. We implore the committee and our local MP to bring the government to account and help the millions of people literally cast aside, dismissed and apparently forgotten. We only ask for the same parity of financial support that the government has provided to other sectors.

Thank you in advance for listening to our circumstances. We are happy for our evidence to be published.

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