

Written evidence submitted by WGGB (Writers Guild of Great Britain)

1. WGGB (the Writers' Guild of Great Britain) is a trade union representing professional writers in TV, film, theatre, radio, books, comedy, poetry, animation and videogames. Our members also include emerging and aspiring writers. We are pleased to provide evidence on behalf of our members.

The immediate impact of Covid-19

2. WGGB, along with all other organisations representing workers in the creative industries, has been active in highlighting the impact that the Covid-19 crisis has had on writers.
3. From the moment that lockdown was announced, many writers found themselves facing enormous financial losses. Unlike most in the creative industries, writers receive their payments in stages, rather than as a regular weekly or monthly amount. Each stage can represent a significant proportion of their annual earnings, so a break or delay can be disastrous.
4. For example, in theatre, writers with plays in progress, or whose productions were about to be staged, would have been expecting box office royalties of around 8% of ticket sales. This could amount to several thousand pounds. As one member told us:

“As a playwright with two plays due to be on in the coming months I was banking on the ticket royalty to fund myself for the latter part of the year.”

5. Those in film and television faced similar difficulties as a significant proportion of their payments are only made when filming begins, and most productions were immediately suspended or cancelled.

“All TV filming is postponed – that means no ‘first-day filming’ money which is 50% of my income.”

“I have lost 50% of future income. A show I was writing on was due to shoot in June, so I lost all my principal photography money.”

6. These losses were exacerbated by the simultaneous loss of supplementary work which many writers also rely upon, such as festival appearances, writers' workshops, etc.

“All workshops and paid festival gigs are cancelled possibly until next year. They not only bring a small but vital additional income but help me to find new readers and to sell books, so, without them, my future royalty income may well be reduced. “

“My book sales have been small and the planned book signings would have significantly increased awareness of my books as well as increased my income from the direct sale of the books.”

7. With the overwhelming majority of writers being self-employed, many were left with little or no income protection.

“I am for all intents and purposes without a livable income at the moment. Payments for completed jobs are delayed all over the place and new work – whether it be writing or script translation – has come to a grinding halt.”

“The commissioned project I was working on has been ‘parked’ for a year – this was to be my income for the next 12 months. Apart from a couple of low paying development jobs – I have no income.”

8. WGGB, like many trade unions, has a small welfare fund for members in difficulties. We immediately saw an increase in applications from members unable to meet their immediate financial responsibilities.
9. We were particularly mindful that, despite initial government advice that those in difficulties should claim Universal Credit, the particular way in which writers are paid made that very difficult.

“I don’t think I will qualify for [Universal Credit] because I received a lump payment last month which they are calling my monthly income. They won’t consider that it is my earnings for 3- 4 months.”

10. WGGB therefore welcomed the introduction of the SEISS and the CJPS as well as its recent extension. We also welcomed Art Council England’s schemes to support artists and companies. These schemes undoubtedly helped some writers who would otherwise have had no financial support system at all.
11. However, it quickly became apparent that the schemes put in place to date have not only left large numbers of writers unsupported and in financial difficulties, but also left the sector vulnerable to large scale job losses.
12. Indeed, as details start to emerge about when and how the industry might start operating again, WGGB is concerned about an earnings ‘timebomb’ for writers (see paragraph 20).
13. Organisations across the creative sector have undertaken research highlighting the huge numbers of creative freelancers excluded from all the existing schemes and are all in agreement that the SEISS scheme needs urgent reform. The need to reform the scheme was also highlighted in the recent report from the Treasury Committee.
14. The key changes we believe are needed include:
 - a. The removal of the 50% income from self-employment threshold
 - b. The extension of the scheme to the self-employed operating through limited, personal service companies
 - c. The removal or tapering of the £50,000 ‘cliff edge’ in earnings
 - d. The consideration of gross income not net profits (due to the fixed costs of self-employment)
 - e. The inclusion of the recently self-employed
 - f. Consideration of the effect on income of periods spent on maternity/paternity leave or caring responsibilities,

All of these proposals are discussed in detail in a supplementary joint submission.

Longer term impact

15. Figures released on the 17th June by the Creative Industries Federation and Oxford Economics highlight the catastrophic financial impact that the Covid-19 crisis is set to have on the creative industries. They predict a combined revenue drop of £74 billion for the UK’s creative industries in 2020 with one in five creative jobs expected to be lost.

16. Lockdown and the ongoing need for social distancing have hit the live arts particularly hard, with many venues unable to find safe ways to reopen. The running costs of many venues mean that it is not financially viable for many to stage productions with only limited number of seats on sale. Whilst the venues are dark, they have no income whatsoever, and whilst some have managed to benefit from donations from ticket holders, these do not cover the costs required to keep their staff in employment.
17. To try and retain the loyalty of their audiences during lockdown, a number of venues/companies have been offering 'streamed' versions of previously staged productions, newly-commissioned monologues and/or plays recorded in lockdown. The level of payment for the writers of such productions has been variable – and indeed, in the case of streaming existing recordings, many writers have been asked to waive any fee. Whilst this was initially undertaken in a spirit of generosity to support those experiencing social isolation in lockdown, the economic realities of the situation are now becoming clearer and many writers fear that work for no, or very little, pay is becoming an expectation. In cases where theatres have invited donations from viewers, that income has gone to the producing theatres rather than to the freelancers – including writers – who made the shows.
18. The Oxford Economics report highlights that Theatre is projected to lose £3 billion in revenue (61%) and 26% of permanent jobs (12,000). Research from UK Theatre/SOLT suggests that job losses in theatre across permanent and freelance roles could number 200,000 (over 70%). The same report suggests a £36 billion loss in revenue for film, TV, video and photography and a £7 billion loss for publishing.
19. Social distancing means that film and television productions are having to find new ways of working to ensure the safety of their cast and crew. It is now estimated that additional time needed on set for health and safety is adding 15 – 20% to production costs meaning fewer productions overall.

“The show I am working on has reduced the number of episodes in the next series to mitigate the extra costs of filming with Covid-19 precautions in place. So, another script fee has evaporated.”

20. One of the particular challenges of working in the creative industries is the long lead time for projects and the subsequent delays of payment stages. The reason WGGB has referred to an earnings 'timebomb' for writers is that even when screen and stage productions are able to restart, because of lockdown, producers now have a backlog of scripts – most of which will already have been paid for (at least in part). The number of new commissions are expected to drop significantly, meaning that just as it appears that the industry is beginning to get back to work, writers may face a further six to twelve month delay before new paid work begins to filter through.

“If I had a break of 6 months with no new writing work or any fee-paying writing to work on, I would very quickly have no money (and I have a mortgage). I am very concerned about the situation six months/a year down the line when there may not be new commissions.”

21. In addition to the reduction of work available for writers as a result of the crisis, WGGB is also concerned about the types of work that will be being made in the immediate aftermath of the crisis. With the industry under intense financial pressure, there will inevitably be pressure to fall-back on 'safe bets' for new productions, relying

mainly on established writers, further reducing the opportunities for new writers and those from under-represented groups.

22. Writers who are currently shielded or in vulnerable groups are also concerned about whether they will be seen as 'too risky' and/or disadvantaged by restrictions on their ability to travel. There is a distinct possibility that 'risk aversion' will result in diversity in the industry being put back significantly by the crisis.
23. WGGB has been working with partners across the industry to try to secure support for writers and new writing in particular, and is campaigning for the creation of a fund to finance new theatre commissions. However, it is clear that a coordinated national response is now required.
24. WGGB is supporting the call for a Cultural Renewal Fund to ensure that our Cultural industries survive the pandemic and are able to return to their position of one of the UK's most successful industries.