

## **Recovery and growth for creative freelancers: during and post-pandemic**

Insights from our Industry Champions: in partnership with the Centre for Cultural Value

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### **Introduction**

The Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre (PEC) consulted a panel of Industry Champions with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on creative industries freelancers across the UK. This Industry Panel informs part of a [national research project on the impacts of COVID-19 in the UK](#) which is looking into how the pandemic is affecting the sector's workforce, organisations and audiences sector and is being led by the Centre for Cultural Value (CCV).

The PEC's Industry Champions are trusted and respected practitioners, drawn from all parts of the creative industries. They have deep knowledge of industry practice and a desire to inform academic research that leads to better policies for the creative industries. On this occasion, the panel was made up of 15 individuals - both creative freelancers themselves or those who work with freelancers - from a wide range of industries and regions across the UK

Chaired by Creative Industries Federation Director of Policy and Programmes, Caroline Julian, the virtual panel took place on March 23rd 2021. A briefing document synthesising the published literature on freelancers from before and after COVID-19, as well as outlining previous calls made for changes to policy, was prepared by the team in advance under the guidance of the PEC's researchers. The discussion considered the following questions:

- What needs to happen in the short term to get freelancers back on their feet?
- What long-term changes could be made to help freelancers thrive in the future?
- What interventions have worked, and what interventions could work?

There was general consensus that the pandemic has exacerbated challenges that freelancers were already faced with, such as unstable job prospects: research has shown that [55,000 thousands jobs in music, performing and visual arts were lost during the first lockdown](#), and that as a result of the pandemic there has been a collapse in working hours across the sector.

The impact of COVID-19 on the freelancer workforce has been felt in all industries, but it has been a particularly pressing issue for the creative industries where, according to the [latest Employment Estimates from the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport](#), 32.3% of the workforce is self-employed<sup>1</sup> (as opposed to 15.6% of the UK workforce overall). There are several reasons why this is the case: the creative industries function by nature on the basis of "[project-based production systems](#)", where different skills are required for different productions and creativity benefits from collaboration and access to networks. Additionally, and as was emphasised by the panellists, many freelancers have chosen this work model as a way of life because they enjoy the benefits and flexibility that come with it.

Freelance work is by its nature less secure than employed work, however the pandemic has highlighted the lack of job security and employment support as a major area of concern for the creative industries and an issue that needs to be addressed going forward.

### **What are creative freelancers?**

The [Government defines someone's employment status as self-employed if they run their business for themselves and take responsibility for its success or failure](#). The term '**freelancer**' is less clearly defined. It is sometimes used as a subcategory of self-employment - for example in the Labour Force Survey where respondents can choose to list it as their particular type of self-employment, although it is left to them to define what this means. IPSE (the Association of Independent Professionals and the Self-Employed) have [defined freelancers as those self employed people working in highly skilled managerial, professional and technical occupations](#); this includes occupations from lawyers and accountants, doctors and scientists, writers and designers to high level managers and directors, to list a few. In practice they are often treated as synonymous with self-employment as a whole.

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<sup>1</sup> It is to be noted that in their guidelines for setting up a business and employing people, the UK Government [considers freelancers, together with consultants and contractors as a subset of the self-employed workforce](#)

## Insights

### Heterogeneity within the workforce – one size does not fit all

Throughout the discussion several panellists raised the great heterogeneity within the freelance workforce as one of the factors that make addressing its needs so challenging. The panellists argued this was particularly so in the creative industries. Whilst some self-employed creatives such as artists develop their own work for sale or on a commission basis, many freelancers work solely on a contract-to-contract basis (e.g. visual effects for feature films). One panellist who works with a range of creative freelancers stressed that there needs to be more nuance in how they are considered as a workforce; that many feel undervalued and that the reliance of the rest of the industry on them should be better acknowledged.

This heterogeneity means that the freelancers have been impacted in a variety of ways by the COVID-19 crisis. One panellist, who works with creatives across a range of art forms, described how live performance artists have been the ones '*at that very sharp end*' of the situation, working jobs that were often economically unsustainable even before COVID-19. They explained that many artists work 'from project grant to project grant' and frequently supplement their income with work in the gig economy. The panellist explained that these artists had been especially hard-hit because of how funding works: until they have the means to show their work again, they can't apply for grants '*so they're stuck in the trap of needing the bigger organisations to help them present or make the work*'. This was echoed by a panellist who works in visual arts: they noted that the pandemic had not affected all sectors in the same way, and that certain freelancer professions have been worse affected than others, highlighting in particular the struggle faced by musicians. Consistent with this, official estimates from the Labour Force Survey show that those [freelancers working in music, performing and visual arts have been particularly impacted by the crisis](#).

A panellist based in the music industry raised the issue that, for many freelancers, it was the closure of venues that has made the pandemic such a difficult time, and that supporting venues in the longer run would be a way to help get such freelancers back on their feet. A panellist from the theatre industry agreed on this point, stressing that '*I think that buildings are in paralysis and that's a real worry*'. **An implication for National and Local governments is to consider strategies that would encourage creative venues to support the freelance workforce when reopening after lockdown.**

Additionally, another panellist stressed the specific situation faced by contemporary and visual artists who, in many cases, '*didn't realise [what was available] or felt comfortable with taking [the available support] because they didn't see themselves as a business*'. Additionally, this panellist highlighted that some of the terminology was "problematic", an issue that may have

stopped some applying for support they would have been eligible for. A survey by the Creative Industries Federation indicated that just under two thirds (64%) of creative freelancers had successfully accessed a COVID-support scheme. In many cases this may reflect eligibility criteria precluding them from doing so, but as far as the rest are concerned a possible implication would be for **funders to make the available support schemes and grants targeted at freelancers more easily accessible by simplifying the process and in particular clarifying who counts as a freelancer.**

**Policymakers should recognise and acknowledge the diversity and different working models among creative freelancers and consider how this impacts where resources are directed for recovery.**

### Mental health concerns

Aside from the financial challenges of COVID-19 for creative freelancers, another issue that was consistently raised by the panellists was the concern about the mental health of those who have struggled to maintain their jobs or keep an income as a result of the pandemic. One spoke about the loss of creative connection and collaboration, and how this had bigger implications for certain artistic practices, while another panellist, from an organisation supporting those under-represented in careers in film, highlighted the 'staggering' impact on the mental health of freelancers in the industry who were also carers and parents, where time spent on homeschooling, for example, meant direct loss in income. They suggested that those with caring responsibilities would be more likely to leave the sector as a result of the lack of support throughout the pandemic.

**An implication for industry is that businesses should examine how they can support the mental health of the freelancers they work with.**

### Childcare responsibilities

Challenges in making childcare arrangements was seen as a major challenge for freelancers even in normal times. The pandemic had only made things more difficult, especially for mothers. One panellist, who is self-employed and works in graphic design, spoke about how they had lost their childcare and had to '*squeeze the work [they] did have into the evenings*'. Although this had affected parents across all industries and whatever their employment contract, the fragmented nature of much freelance work, and specifically that in the creative industries, often left creative freelancers with no networks of support at work to help cover the reduction in workable hours. Additionally, another panellist added that there were '*real issues around a tax-deduction of childcare in the freelance sector*', and explained that those in Pay As You Earn (PAYE) employment can get childcare vouchers where freelancers can't. This meant only those

with more traditional working arrangements could pay for childcare out of pre-taxed income. This panellist highlighted the experience of a close friend who takes on extra work specifically in order to fund their childcare, and suggested that it was problematic that this amount was included in the Chancellor's £50k cap on Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS).

**Two implications for policymakers are firstly, to consider how childcare guidelines could be changed as the lockdown eases to allow better access to support networks. The other is to consider changing the terms of SEISS so that work done by freelancers and the self-employed within and outside the sector specifically to pay for childcare is not included in the £50k cap.**

### Inequality among those affected by the fall-out

The discussion about *how* different freelancers work led to a wider discussion about *who* works in creative freelance roles, and about how certain demographics within the freelance community have been disproportionately affected by the crisis. It is worth highlighting here that an earlier [PEC Industry Panel focused on the impact of COVID-19 in the creative industries](#), and that one of the implications of that session was that *'as industry recovers, there should be consideration of how to address the lack of diversity at all levels of an organisation (e.g. finance, operations, production, front of house, performers, boards).'*

A panellist from the craft industry spoke about the need to emphasise socio-economic background, gender and ethnicity when considering who had fallen out of freelance work, and that there needs to be an ongoing focus of diversity and inclusion in the recovery from the pandemic. While [research and data are already showing this clearly](#), **further research should be conducted on the racial, gender and socio-economic diversity of freelancers most affected by the crisis and on whether previously existing inequalities have been exacerbated as a consequence of the pandemic.**

This concern about inclusion was echoed by many across the panel, including another panellist who works with a range of creative freelancers. They further expanded on which demographics had been hardest hit, describing how *'everyone I know that went off to be Hermes delivery drivers were all at the beginning [of their career]. They're all starting out, they're all more working class and they haven't got networks'*.

### A lost generation

Speaking about how different freelancers have been affected in different ways, several panellists raised concerns about the fact that among those hardest hit by the pandemic were early-career freelancers, and emphasised the danger of 'a lost generation'. [Recent figures](#) show that the overall figure for creative freelancers in the UK has declined by around 38,000 since the start of 2020 and that the steepest decline has been registered among those aged 25-29.

One panellist from the publishing industry stressed that the challenge had been greatest for debut authors, lesser-known writers and people who had lost income through events they would've been doing, but that those with in-house freelance jobs such as photographers and copy-writers may have in fact seen an increase in their work during the pandemic.

Another panellist who works as an artist described how different the landscape is going to be for younger artists and musicians in the wake of the pandemic, and argued that financially supporting this group would be vital in order to keep them within the sector.

A panellist from the interior design industry spoke about some initiatives in her industry, such as [United in Design](#), that have aimed to support younger freelancers through apprenticeship schemes. It was suggested that some of these initiatives could be transferable to other sectors.

**An implication for policymakers is to consider the extent to which young creative freelancers have been affected in exceptional ways, and explore models that could work to support them specifically.**

**Policy, industry and academic and research organisations should emphasise inclusion and diversity in the post-lockdown responses, and prioritise support for young, working class, and ethnically diverse creative freelancers, as well as those with caring responsibilities.**

## Looking forward

### [An HR hub](#)

There was strong consensus among panellists on the need to offer HR support to freelancers as a way to ensure a more transparent process and set of working standards, as the freelance workforce *'tends to be employed in a really casual way and because no-one is held accountable for any of their employment practices'*.

A panellist from the film industry highlighted that a proposal for a *'kind of HR central department [for freelancers]'* within industries that as *'a small business or employer you can buy into'* is being discussed in other places, including the [APPG for the gaps in support](#). While trade unions were mentioned as organisations that might already be providing support along these lines, the panellist responded that as they are 'big machines' they can be difficult to engage with on specific, and perhaps "smaller" negotiations. Another panellist supported the idea on the

grounds that it might help to confront the urgent matter of the mental health of creative freelancers. **Industry and trade bodies should consider a collaboration fostering and establishing an HR Hub to offer support to freelancers across the creative industries.**

There were also calls for the development of better networks for creative freelancers: one panellist drew attention to the [Association of Illustrators](#), which provides support and useful information for freelancers in that industry. It was further suggested that greater transparency about what freelancers are paid would be helpful, and could be provided by these sorts of networks. There was some disagreement amongst the participants on this point, however. Some felt that the issue of pay stemmed from wider problems with funding, and highlighted that setting more standardised rates of pay could be problematic. One panellist commented that sometimes '*those rates aren't payable within the kinds of funding that are available*' and that standardised industry rates could lead to freelancers shortening the time they claim to work on a project in order to remain appealing to funders with a limited budget. **An implication for organisations across the sector is to encourage development of industry-specific networks for freelancers.**

### New ways of working

Another theme that came out of the discussion was that flexible models of working such as those prevalent in the creative industries are becoming more normalised in the workforce as a result of how the pandemic had altered the way in which people work, with one panellist suggesting that the creative industries are 'at the forefront of new models of work for the future'.

One panellist noted that during the pandemic many employees have wanted to move to flexible or job-sharing situations. It was acknowledged that not all employers would accept different models of employment as they could be 'perceived as risky'. But the panellist suggested that addressing the value of job-sharing and exploring alternatives for flexible work options would be key: 'If that is an option to help people stop leaving the industry along with greater support, I think that is something we can be encouraging'. Existing groups such as [Share my Telly Job](#) - which champions job-sharing as a suitable alternative for those who need more flexibility but are faced with a lack of part-time jobs in the TV industry - were raised as examples of where this is successfully being attempted in the creative industries. **Industry should consider the benefits of job-sharing and flexible work to the creative industries, and encourage innovative ways of working.**

### Calls for Universal Basic Income

In considering long-term solutions to the perceived excessive insecurity of creative freelance work which has been exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, a number of panellists mentioned

Universal Basic Income (UBI) as a promising answer. This was raised as a potential solution to the issues presented by the inherent heterogeneity within the creative freelance workforce, and also as a potential solution to the problems around childcare: *'if you couldn't work because you had to look after your children you're not going to lose everything [if UBI is in place]'*.

There was, on the other hand, an almost unanimous rejection of what was defined as the "notion" that freelancers aren't paying as much tax as the rest of the workforce. In the words of one of the panellists: *"we are [paying as much], we're just allowed to claim back the money we've spent on earning that money"*, and *"I don't understand why we should be paying more than the employed populous for working. How could we? We don't earn more than them, we earn less by and large."*

The discussion about UBI was supported by one panellist's recollections of how many creatives relied on the benefits system to support their practices in the 1980s: *'the dole was the biggest arts funder because there was no paid work out there'*. Whilst this was not seen as an intrinsically good thing, it was suggested that for the creative industries, Universal Basic Income or something similar would be a 'no-brainer' as a means by which creatives could develop their careers with financial support to fall back on in the situation of a future crisis. The panellist remarked that it would be 'fascinating' to 'crunch the numbers' on how much Universal Basic Income would have cost in comparison to the schemes that the Government has put in place.

### [What interventions have worked?](#)

As stated in the introduction, the impact of COVID-19 on freelance and self-employed creatives has been particularly hard. Shortcomings in government support for freelancers have been well-documented, with an estimated 1.6 million self-employed workers nationally slipping through the gaps, unable to benefit from the Coronavirus Jobs Retentions Scheme (CJRS) or the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS). Non-governmental grants and support have been available to some, but have been unevenly spread across different parts of the industry and more accessible in certain regions ([Centre for Cultural Value, 2020](#)).

Cultural policy specifically is devolved and there are considerable differences in the support packages offered across the UK. Some panellists felt that England's approach focuses more on protecting organisations and institutions, while [devolved nations have invested more in supporting individuals](#)<sup>2</sup>. One commented that local interventions had been 'a lot more powerful

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<sup>2</sup> Scotland has created a [Newly Self-Employed hardship fund](#), and Wales a [Start-up Grant](#), both of which have offered one-off grants of £2,000 to those unable to access SEISS. Northern Ireland's [Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme](#) was for the same purpose, offering grants of £3,500. All three devolved nations created a [Small Business Support Grant](#) of £10,000. Further, Scotland's [Bridging Bursary Fund](#) specifically targeted freelance creative workers least likely to benefit from UK-wide support schemes, offering £500-£2,500; Wales' [Arts Resilience Fund](#) directed £7 million towards individuals most at risk in the aftermath of lockdown; and Northern Ireland implemented an [Emergency Resilience Programme](#)



than anything governmental', with Manchester described as being 'miles ahead' of most cities. Some of the local initiatives highlighted by the group were the [Greater Manchester Artist Hub](#), the [Cultural Sector Hardship Fund for Freelancers](#), and [GM Independent Artist Initiative](#), along with creative responses such as [United We Stream](#) and [The Box on the Docks](#).

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## Implications

The points made in the Industry Panel pointed to a number of implications.

### Implications for national and local government policymakers:

- National and Local governments could consider strategies that would encourage creative venues to support the freelance workforce when reopening after lockdown.
- Policy should recognise and acknowledge the diversity and different working models among creative freelancers and consider how this impacts where resources are directed for recovery.
- Emphasise inclusion and diversity in the post-lockdown responses, and prioritise support for young, working class, and ethnically diverse creative freelancers, as well as those with caring responsibilities.
- Consider how childcare guidelines could be changed as the lockdown eases to allow better access to support networks. Consider changing the terms of SEISS so that work done by freelancers and the self-employed within and outside the sector specifically to pay for childcare is not included in the £50k cap.
- Policymakers should consider the extent to which young creative freelancers have been affected in exceptional ways, and explore models that could work to support them specifically.

### Implications for industry and trade bodies:

- Businesses should examine how they can support the mental health of the freelancers they work with.
- Emphasise inclusion and diversity in the post-lockdown responses, and prioritise support for young, working class, and ethnically diverse creative freelancers, as well as those with caring responsibilities.

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designed to support freelancers and creative practitioners in combination with their [Artists Emergency Programme](#) and the [Deaf/Disabled Artist Fund](#).

- Industry and trade bodies should consider a collaboration fostering and establishing an HR Hub to offer support to freelancers across the creative industries.
- Organisations across the sector should encourage development of industry-specific networks for freelancers.
- Industry should consider the benefits of job-sharing and flexible work to the creative industries, and encourage innovative ways of working.

#### **Implications for funders:**

- Funders could make their support schemes and grants targeted at freelancers more easily accessible by simplifying the process and in particular clarifying who counts as a freelancer.

#### **Implications for research organisations:**

- Further research should be conducted on the racial, gender and socio-economic diversity of freelancers most affected by the crisis and on whether previously existing inequalities have been exacerbated as a consequence of the pandemic.