



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

15 December 2021

Dear Chancellor

I am writing on behalf of Equity to ask for urgent action to protect the creative workforce in light of the rising cases of the Omicron variant of Coronavirus. This worrying situation threatens the fragile return of live performance in theatres, pubs, clubs and other venues across a critical Christmas season.

As a reminder, we are the largest UK trade union in the arts and entertainment industry representing 47,000 performers and creative practitioners. Public health is a top priority, which is why we have strongly encouraged all members to play their part in keeping this threat at bay by ensuring they are fully vaccinated if they are able.

The government's recent decision to make masks compulsory for audiences in England was very welcome. This followed my statement last week where I urged venues and producers to enforce mask-wearing amongst audiences and maintain the strongest COVID protocols backstage to protect all those watching and working in live performance. However, we are seeing a growing number of performances being cancelled last-minute due to outbreaks of Coronavirus, which is extremely concerning and threatening job security.

In the theatre sector Equity contracts are used to engage performers and stage management in both the West End, Commercial and Subsidised theatres. In recent days and weeks, we have seen a range of productions cancelled temporarily, such as the *Lion King*, *Ocean at the End of the Lane*, *Tina: The Musical*, *Moulin Rouge*, *Life of Pi*, *The Rhythmics*, and *Hex*. While performers are currently being compensated, this burden on employers cannot be maintained for multiple cancelled performances. There is a significant risk that with Coronavirus cases rising, this will lead to closure and thousands of our members will lose a significant proportion of their income. In this scenario, it is vital that the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme is rebooted but also modified to cover those previously excluded. This must include performers working on Equity contracts in subsidised, commercial, and West End theatre as well as other sectors of the film, TV and entertainment industry.

For our freelance Variety Performers the risk is even greater because they have very little protection against cancellations. During the previous lockdowns many of our variety members fell through the gaps of the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) alongside millions of self-employed people. This clear injustice in government policy was well document but never rectified. Going forward, it is vital the government delivers targeted support for creative freelancers covering those

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**Equity**  
Independent Trades Union  
Incorporating the Variety Artists  
Federation  
Affiliated to the TUC, STUC and FIA

**President** Maureen Beattie  
**Vice Presidents** Jackie Clune, Lynda Rooke  
**Honorary Treasurer** Bryn Evans  
**General Secretary** Paul W Fleming

**Trustees:** Judi Dench,  
Malcom Sinclair,  
Timothy West, Penelope  
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previously excluded, such as the newly self-employed people and those with less than 50% of their income from self-employment.

Crucially, the Universal Credit (UC) system is not fit for purpose. The fundamental problems self-employed workers experience claiming UC remain unchanged and the reintroduction of the Minimum Income Floor (MIF) is having an extremely negative impact on Equity members. Its effects are excessively harsh to the self-employed with variable and unpredictable income, which is very common in our industry. The MIF creates a cliff edge forcing Equity members into financial hardship when they have reduced or nil income. 50% of respondents to our recent member survey stated that they were concerned that they could be forced out of the industry as a result of its reintroduction. We are calling on the government to abolish the MIF and replace it with a meaningful alternative.

I am sure you will agree that a strong intervention against COVID-19 means strong support for working people and the economy. In fact, the IMF recently stated the following, which I wholeheartedly support:

*“In the event of a virulent COVID-19 wave requiring widespread mandated closures, the authorities should be ready to redeploy a subset of the most successful previous exceptional programmes (such as a furlough scheme and targeted support to the most vulnerable households and small businesses), but with due attention to lessons learned about their design (including tapering and timely sunset).”<sup>i</sup>*

Unfortunately, the government’s ‘Plan B’ strategy falls far short of this. There has been no support announced for Equity members and performers facing an uncertain winter, and no support for entertainment workers reliant on a strong Christmas season. I urge you and your Cabinet colleagues to deliver an urgent plan for the creative workforce, a plan that prioritises workers over buildings. This must include the following measures:

1. Reboot and modify furlough to cover workers on Equity contracts - saving jobs and retaining skills in sectors hit by Plan B
2. Delivering targeted support for creative freelancers - including those previously excluded from the SEISS
3. Reforming Universal Credit so that creative freelancers, especially those from working class and marginalised backgrounds have a sufficient safety net

The joy and togetherness of live performance is sorely needed in a dark winter, and it is critical that the industry is protected.

Yours sincerely,



**Paul W Fleming**  
**GENERAL SECRETARY**

<sup>i</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/dec/14/uk-mini-furlough-omicron-economy-imf-covid-19>