

Coronavirus – advice for freelances

Freelances make up around a third of the NUJ membership and the union is here to help its freelance members during the coronavirus pandemic.

At the outset of the outbreak there were calls for the self-employed to be entitled to Statutory Sick Pay (SSP), and the union is asking you to sign a petition calling for such change. Include self-employed in statutory sick pay during Coronavirus
<https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/300336>

The UK budget included changes to the sick pay system, but the chancellor provided nothing for self-employed people who self-isolate, other than to suggest they apply for Employment Support Allowance (ESA) and Universal Credit. This is unacceptable.

ESA and Universal Credit are welfare benefits for those on very low incomes, and the application process is long and complex. Such benefits will not help those who depend for their living on earnings from self-employment: earnings which in many cases will be lost as a result of illness or self-isolation.

Francis Sedgemore, Freelance Industrial Council chair, said: "A recent survey of freelance members conducted by the NUJ revealed that around 40 per cent undertake work on clients' premises, or on assignment. Photographers are the most visible example, but writers and editors often work away from home, and we know that some have lost income as a result of coronavirus-related restrictions."

Natasha Hirst, Photographers' Council chair, said: "Photographers and videographers are experiencing a double disadvantage as a result of the disgraceful lack of thought given to the self-employed. Income is being lost due to cancellation of events and commissions and the lack of SSP is leaving individuals without income if they become unwell with covid-19. We encourage members to inform their MP's of their concerns and remind the Government that freelancers are vital to the economy."

The union urges freelances who believe they may have symptoms to self-isolate and follow official guidance. The union has published information on dealing with Covid-19 on its website
<https://www.nuj.org.uk/work/covid-19-information/>

Responsible freelances who self-isolate could lose out financially if they lose work because they cannot travel to assignments, or if offices close they could also find they are not being paid for shifts. The NUJ's freelance office, freelanceoffice@nuj.org.uk, can offer advice regarding contractual matters and cancelled work.

Those on very low incomes, or who have lost all income as a result of coronavirus, should consider applying for ESA or Universal Credit. ESA is paid to those too sick to work, provided they meet certain conditions. It is worth £73.10 a week, or £57.90 for the under-25s. The government is also temporarily removing the minimum income floor for universal credit, which considers how much you would normally expect to earn in a month when calculating entitlement to universal credit. Not having the minimum income floor means that applicants can better claim for time lost to sickness.

The TUC has published COVID-19 Coronavirus - guidance for unions
<https://www.tuc.org.uk/resource/covid-19-coronavirus-guidance-unions>

The Irish government has published the following advice COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Information for Employers and Employees
<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/99104a-covid-19-coronavirus/>

The NUJ, working with its UK Parliamentary Group, will be lobbying the government to urgently extend the Statutory Sick Pay protections to the self-employed.

- Write to your MP calling for the benefit to be extended immediately to the self-employed. (template letter <https://www.nuj.org.uk/documents/letter-to-mps-on-access-to-statutory-sick-pay/>)
- Sign the petition <https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/300336>

Remember we are in uncharted waters, government advice may change, and the NUJ may not immediately have all the answers. Stay safe, keep well, and look after those around you!
How to apply for Employment and Support Allowance <https://www.gov.uk/employment-support-allowance/how-to-claim>

March 2020