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# FREELANCERS

BUILDING WORKFORCE RESILIENCE FOR GROWTH  
IN THE UK FILM AND TELEVISION INDUSTRIES

A Screen Industry Voices report prepared by:

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## ABOUT THE PROJECT

Screen Industry Voices is a four-year project exploring the lived experiences of screen industry professionals and examining how to create positive change to address current industry challenges.

Drawing on the expertise of University of Reading researchers, industry partners and advocacy groups, and the testimony of interviewees working in a range of contexts and at various levels, the project's 'oral history of now' provides the foundation for bespoke interventions into current industry challenges in talent acquisition and retention, working and management cultures, and regional support for screen creatives.

The project is part of the Impact Accelerator Account programme at the University of Reading, which is funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council from 2022 to 2026. The testimony we are collecting will be anonymised and collated in a data archive accessible to accredited researchers to use in the pursuit of further knowledge creation and impactful research projects.

This report emerges out of the Freelancer Experience strand of the project, which examines how current industry challenges are affecting the freelance workforce.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The UK screen industry relies heavily on freelance workers, who constitute a significant portion of its labour force.

Alarmingly, many of these individuals are facing substantial financial instability and insecure working conditions, leading a considerable number to consider leaving the sector. This loss of experienced professionals poses a serious threat to the very existence of the UK film and television industries.

**Our research reveals that freelance screen professionals lack readily available and tailored support and face working practices that are often inconsistent and unsustainable, leading to significant financial precarity.** We have identified that much of this financial instability stems from taxation and policy issues that are not currently being adequately addressed, as well as informal hiring and working practices that are not always compliant with employment law. To tackle these pressing issues and ensure a resilient and inclusive future for the UK screen sector, we call for immediate action on the following key recommendations:

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **The screen industry must urgently develop a comprehensive and adaptable online resource for freelancers, in collaboration with researchers.** This vital tool will provide freelancers with **personalised information and guidance** by collating and synthesising the wide range of freely accessible but fragmented support and advice.
- **The screen industry must implement sector-wide systems that adhere to agreed and endorsed standards for engaging freelance screen industry workers.** This will establish fairer and more predictable working practices across all productions and ensure compliance with legal obligations.
- **The government should appoint a dedicated Minister for Self-Employment and Precarious Workers.** This ministerial role is crucial to advocate for the needs of this substantial segment of the workforce by working across government departments. The challenges faced by screen industry freelancers can inform solutions benefiting millions of self-employed individuals in other sectors.
- **The screen industry, with the support of government and relevant bodies, should urgently improve the collection and analysis of data concerning the freelance workforce.** Robust data on entry into, progression within, and departure from the sector is essential for understanding the extent of precarity and informing targeted support measures.

These recommendations demand industry-wide collaboration, transparency in operations, and a firm commitment to improving the professional lives and financial stability of individual freelancers.

**By addressing the lack of resource visibility, the instability of work, and the absence of reliable data—particularly through a dedicated ministerial role that tackles underlying taxation issues and speaks for the wider self-employed community—we can cultivate a people-focused industry that retains talent, promotes inclusivity, and safeguards the long-term prosperity of the UK film and television sectors.**



## ON THE GROUND INSIGHTS: THE SCREEN INDUSTRY VOICES PROJECT

Quantitative data-driven reports by sector organisations, advocacy groups and charities play a crucial role in defining the large-scale challenge landscape facing the UK film and television industries, but **qualitative data is also essential to understanding the policy implications of on the ground experiences. This report draws upon the extensive qualitative data gathered through the Screen Industry Voices project, offering vital insights into the lived experiences of those working within the sector.**

In producing this report, we have consulted with a wide range of stakeholders, including the British Film Institute (including the [WorkWise for Screen](#) team), Screen Berkshire, the Film and TV Charity, the Association of Independent Professionals and the Self-Employed (IPSE), the Creative Industries Independent Standards Authority (CIISA), Resource Productions, Screen Berkshire, and Bectu, the Broadcasting, Entertainment, Communications and Theatre Union. This consultation, combined with our primary research, allows for a nuanced understanding of the sector's challenges and potential solutions.

Through in-depth interviews and online forums, we examined the lived experience of over 20 freelancers working across key segments of the film and television industries. We also spoke to organisations that support them nationally and regionally, including those mentioned above as well as Raising Films, Media Parents, Media Cymru, Screen Academy Bradford, and member organisations and guilds which include freelancers and their employers as members, such as Directors UK. We have also engaged with academic and policy researchers including the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre.

### Interviews

We carried out 25 anonymised 90-minute individual interviews, inviting participants to reflect on their route into the industry and the challenges of accessibility, career development and training opportunities they faced along the way. Using a semi-unstructured interview method allowed us to explore in detail how opportunities arose and the unpaid work experience or internships, attending networking events, or self-financed upskilling that freelancers often invest in to generate those opportunities. We asked for detailed descriptions of challenges they faced and how they overcame them, and how they experienced the broader challenges the industry is facing. A wide range of topics were raised, including workplace practices, HR support or lack thereof, personal and career development, hierarchies and power structures, gatekeeping and workplace prejudice, accountability, health and safety, wellbeing support, formal and informal training and development, mentorship and peer support, EDI practices and siloed working practices.

The archive of anonymised testimony will be made available to screen industry researchers, helping to expand UK research expertise in film and television sectors, and the contexts in which they operate.







## Online Forums

We also delivered ninety-minute online group forums that provided a structured, welcoming space for freelancers to discuss the challenges they face, the resources they need and how best to work with researchers achieve these. Forum participants were local to the Reading and Berkshire area, generating a regional perspective on the challenges facing freelancers. This was especially timely in the wake of Shinfield Studios opening and the inauguration of [Screen Berkshire](#), a BFI Screen Skills Cluster.

## Workshop

The Screen Industry Voices oral history research led to the convening of a national stakeholder workshop on [The Freelancer Experience: Creating Positive Change](#) at the end of April 2024, which brought together a uniquely diverse range of stakeholders including freelancers, employers, sector advocates and academic researchers to share their stories with one another, building a community of expertise that could identify gaps in existing support provision, constraints and opportunities, and barriers to and levers for change. The workshop enabled a productive exchange of expertise, first-hand experiences, and models of best practice, giving space for a variety of voices to be heard, and building mutual understanding across academic, industry and advocacy participants.

## Conferences and Relationship Building

As part of our research activity, the Screen Industry Voices team and key partners have presented at various conferences and events. We have identified several impactful grassroots training initiatives actively addressing some of the issues highlighted in this report that have influenced our own proposals. Examples of these include:

- **Screen Academy Bradford** embedded structured training and professional development in 2024 through 26 paid, full-time training placements on *Virdee*, a BBC1 drama production shooting in Bradford.
- **The Outlander Training Programme** in Scotland, supported by Screen Scotland and ScreenSkills, offered structured training within a real filming environment, focusing on preparing trainees for a freelance environment.
- The Heads of Department training delivered by **Screen Berkshire** represented a targeted and warmly received effort to equip those in leadership positions with the knowledge and perspectives to source crew locally and sustainably, as well as the importance of enhancing diversity in hiring practices and being legally compliant in working environments (see Ghosh 2025, forthcoming).

## KEY FINDINGS FROM OUR RESEARCH: WHAT THE INDUSTRY TOLD US

Through our interviews and stakeholder engagement, several key themes emerged, reinforcing and nuancing existing understandings of the challenges faced by screen industry freelancers:

- **Invisibility and Fragmentation of Resources:** Freelancers expressed significant difficulty in accessing and navigating the existing landscape of support resources. Many were unaware of available networks, schemes, and programmes. A participant in The Freelance Experience workshop pointed out that:

“There are things out there for freelancers that I wasn’t aware of and definitely lots of organisations working for us. It was nice to actually be... part of the conversation which I don’t think we always are.”

—Freelance Producer

An interviewee said it is vital to:

“Democratise the information, that in my view removes the barrier of knowledge, the knowledge gap, knowledge gatekeeping. It kind of makes everybody valuable, everybody can contribute, everybody can work and get the product to its higher standard.”

—Visual Effects Artist

- **Financial Precarity and the Impact of Industry Fluctuations:** The economic slowdown compounded by events such as falling advertising revenue and the rising costs of production has intensified financial insecurity for freelancers, with many considering leaving the industry for good as a result. Another industry-seasoned interviewee told us:

“I’ve got friends who’ve been out of work for a year. You know, they’re having to sell their houses... and these are experienced, serious producers.”

—High End Television Executive



While a mid-career freelancer argued:

“You’re out of work for a while, for whatever reason, you don’t get sick pay, you don’t get holiday pay. So you are paid well when you work. You work very long hours when you work and then you might be out of work for a long time. And if that money over that year doesn’t meet enough of a threshold, I think maybe you should be allowed some kind of like top up or something.”

—Intimacy Coordinator

- **Precarious and Inconsistent Working Practices:** Informal hiring practices, coupled with a lack of training for those employing freelancers, were highlighted as contributing to precarious and sometimes exploitative working conditions as well as barriers to diversity and inclusion. Another interviewee explained that:

“I do think film and TV is structurally racist and I think black and brown talent is not valued in the same way that white talent is. White talent is talent. You want a good writer for something, you get a talented writer. If you’re working on a black and brown project, you get a black and brown writer. I don’t think we’re given the same... We’re not equal.”

— Freelance Writer

- **Incomplete Data:** Detailed tracking of freelancers coming in and out of the screen industry as a whole would enable a deeper understanding of the challenges they face and provide insight into the effects of economic changes and poor working cultures on staff retention and attrition across freelancers and PAYE workers.

An example from the broadcast television sector shows what insights are possible when the data is available. Ofcom’s [2022 and 2023 EDI reports](#) show how underrepresented groups are being recruited into jobs but retaining them remains a struggle. Our interview data reveals possible reasons why: the industry continues to be a place where those from underrepresented backgrounds feel unwelcome and alienated. As an experienced industry specialist told us:

“Most of the roles or jobs or things that I’d had were with working class people right, people that aren’t from like, from different like, I’d say higher up backgrounds. I wouldn’t say I had much interaction with them until I got into the television industry. So now I’m in these environments, in these circles and I’m noticing that... **Not only am I the odd one out, I’m probably more often than not the only black person in the room, but I don’t speak the same language. I’m not cut from the same cloth.**”

— Visual Effects Artist

## Freelancers are integral to UK Film and Television's market resilience.

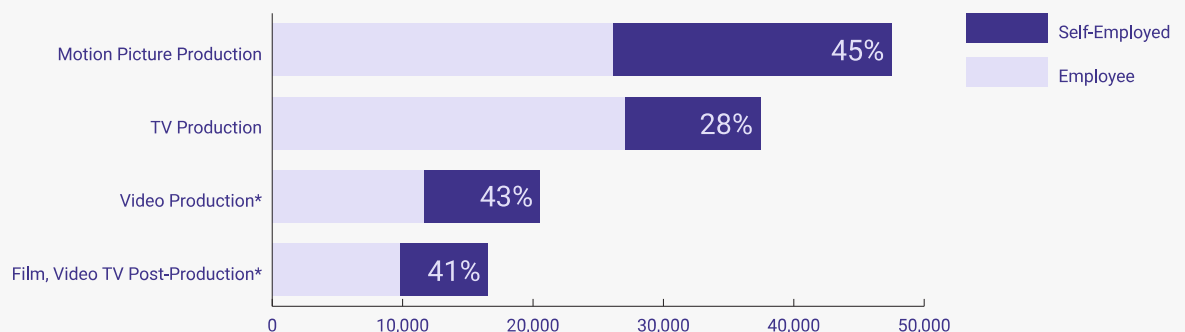
The economic slowdown following the initial post-pandemic boom has put enormous pressure on the financial sustainability that enables the continued growth of the UK film and television industries. Pre-existing precarity and scarcity of work for screen industry workers has significantly increased, posing challenges in retaining skilled workers within the industry and ensuring the pipeline of the next generations of such talent.

At the sharp end of this crisis are freelancers, who make up a significant proportion of the film and video production workforce – 44% in 2021 compared to 13% of the UK workforce as a whole according to the ONS (BFI 2022, 185). The true number of freelancers in the industry is likely to be higher, as this data from the ONS' Annual Population Survey does not include freelancers hired on short term payroll contracts (so-called PAYE freelancers). There is further variation reported in the proportion of freelancers working within some industry subclasses. According to the ONS (2021), those identifying as self-employed were 28% of those engaged in TV production activities; this was estimated to be 41% of those working in post-production within TV, video and motion picture activities. Nearly half of those reportedly employed in motion picture production, 45%, were freelancers (see Table a).

## 'Invisible' attrition damages the stability and sustainability of the industry.

Precarity and attrition for the self-employed have increased in the past few years, producing a substantial loss of expertise that harms UK film and television businesses' ability to respond to future increases in demand, limiting sector growth and profitability. Bectu (February 2024) reports that 68% of film and television workers are not currently working, with 37% planning to leave the industry within the next five years. **This attrition is often invisible, since there is no standard measure to monitor the actual number of leavers from this atypical worker group.** Bectu's survey substantiates scholarly research (Wallis & van Raalte 2022) finding that difficulties resourcing screen industry production is caused less by a 'talent pipeline' crisis (see Bazalgette 2017) than by a 'leaky pipeline'.

Table a: UK Film and TV workers January-December 2021

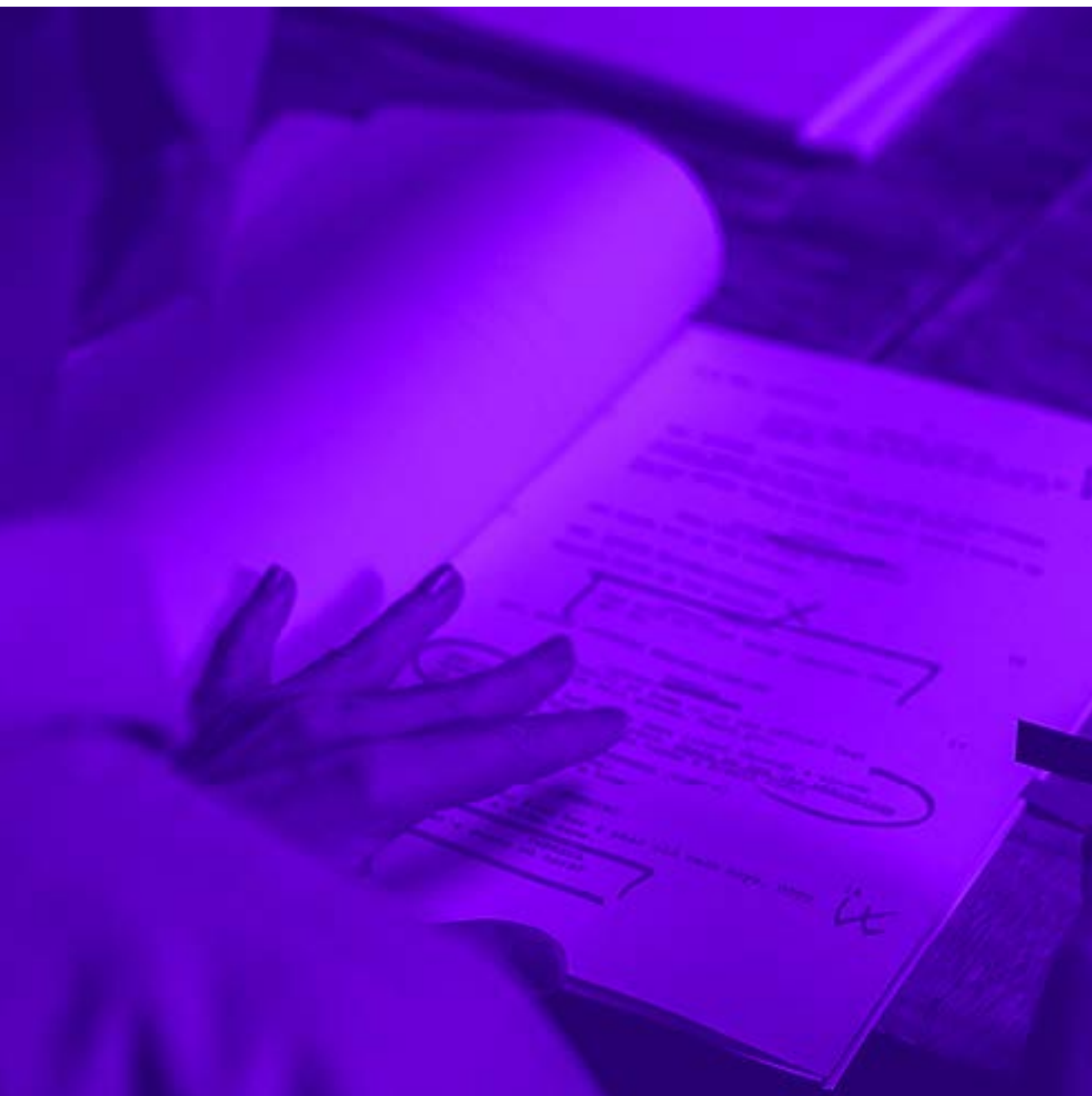


Source: Office for National Statistics Annual Population Survey

\*based on a small sample size

Although there is little credible evidence of a lack of supply, there is plenty of evidence to show a crisis in retention of experienced mid-career professionals leaving the industry when faced with intermittent issues of exploitation, insecurity, and a lack of clear career development structures. The media has recently reported on the precarious nature of employment for even the most experienced screen workers, and the sometimes barely legal working practices that cause severe mental health breakdowns or worse ([Anonymous 2024](#); [Healy 2025](#); [Kale 2024](#)).

A further consequence is the reversal of recent, long-awaited progress in diversifying the workforce and in improving working cultures ([Creative Diversity Network July 2023](#); [Ofcom 2022 & 2023](#)). Bectu's initial ([February 2024](#)) and follow up surveys ([July 2024](#)) indicated that higher proportions of women and people of colour were out of work and/or planning to leave the industry than white male peers. There is an urgent need to develop sustainable strategies to support the freelancer workforce and retain existing expertise to build the sector's future market resilience.



## WHAT IS A FREELANCER?

In any given year between 2012-2021, nearly half or over half of the growing film and television industry workforce are considered freelancers (BFI Statistical Yearbook 2022, 197), meaning temporary workers, although the term 'freelance' does not currently exist in employment law. Precarity of workers rights is baked into the terms of the self-employed freelancer, as demonstrated by the [Government's advice](#) on employee hiring practices for freelancers, consultants and contractors:

If you hire a freelancer, consultant or contractor it means that:

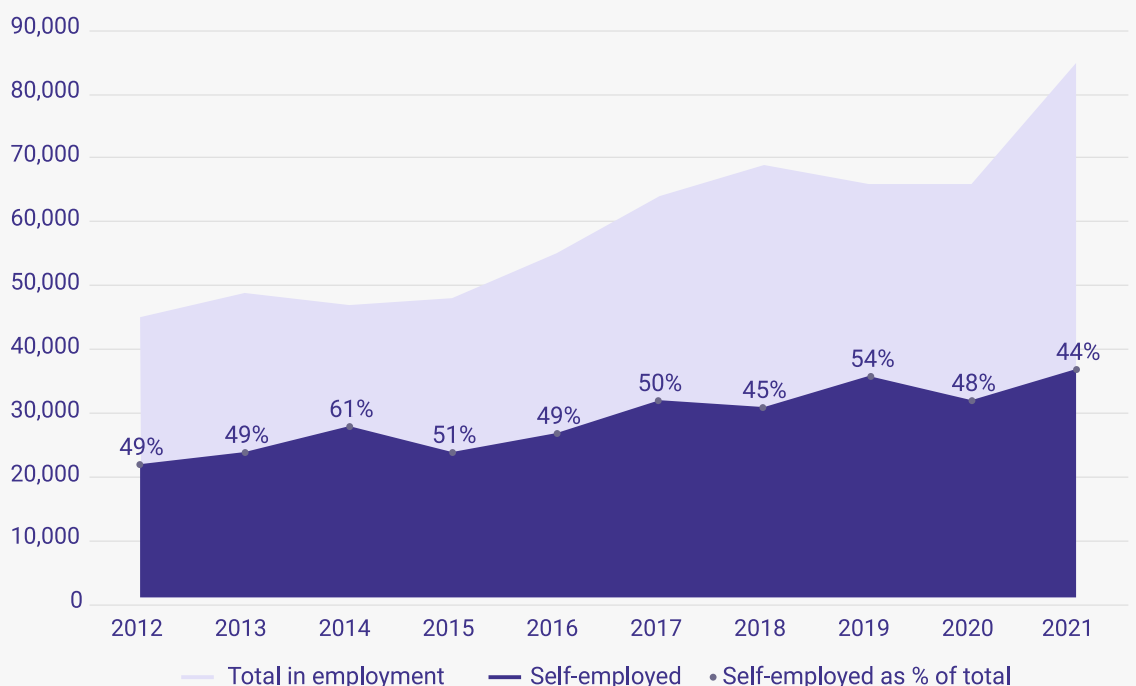
- they are self-employed or are part of other companies
- they often look after their own tax and National Insurance contributions (NICs)
- **they might not be entitled to the same rights as workers, such as minimum wage**
- you're still responsible for their health and safety

Bectu loosely defines freelancers as follows:

Although the term freelancer is not defined in employment law, when people speak of freelancers, they usually mean:

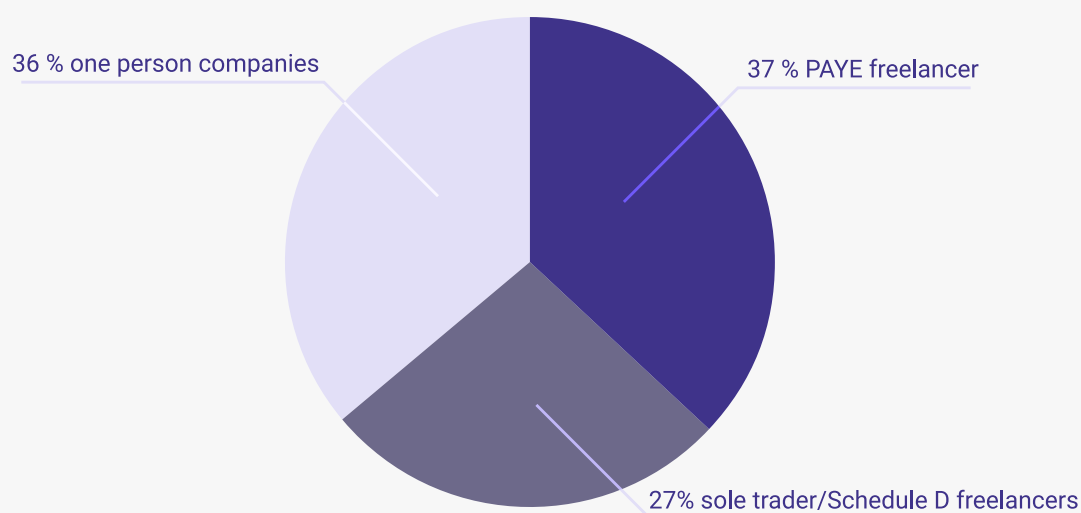
- People who work a series of short fixed-term contracts where they are on PAYE terms
- People who work a series of short fixed-term contracts who are deemed to be 'self-employed' for tax purposes
- People who work through their own limited companies, supplying labour, services, equipment, and sometimes the services of other people
- People who are hired to provide a particular one-off service

Table b: Film and video production workforce, 2012-2021



Source: BFI Annual Statistics 2022 / Office for National Statistics, Annual Population Survey.

Table c: Overall freelance workforce, UK Film and TV sector



Source: BFI Research and Statistics Unit (2020)

In 2020, the BFI Research and Statistics Unit noted that this group broke down as follows: 37% PAYE freelancer, 27% sole trader/Schedule D freelancers, and 36% one person companies (BFI [Response to DCMS Select Committee Inquiry 2020](#); see Table c). Yet, extant **reports referring to freelancers often fail to preserve or analyse these distinctions as well as their distribution across industry subclasses**. This is further complicated by the fact that **freelancers often change between tax categories** as they move from one engagement to another. The conflation of these subcategories under the umbrella term 'freelancer' in industry usage **dilutes the accurate reporting / monitoring of recruitment and attrition levels, and impacts employers' awareness of their legal responsibilities** to these different groups (see the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre's [The Good Work Review 2023](#)). Furthermore, freelancers are only considered useful in the contractual terms of the temporary skills they bring to a particular phase of production. Their long-term well-being is not the concern of those who engage them.

Since 'freelancer' is the most widespread word used in the film and television industries and in the sector reports on these groups, we will continue to use the term here. However, as our recommendations note, there is an urgent need to refine existing data on freelancers that is informing sector policy in relation to these subcategories and industry subclasses.

## A VOLATILE LANDSCAPE, A PRECARIOUS WORKFORCE

### An industry crucial to the UK economy and its future growth

Turbocharging the growth of the creative industries has been rightly recognised as a UK Government priority. Central to the UK's cultural identity at home and abroad, the world-renowned British film and television industries contribute significantly to the UK economy directly through inward investment, job creation and revenue, with spillover effects on tourism, service, and other sectors. The BFI (2022) reports that the film and television industries' direct contribution to Gross Domestic Product was £11 billion in 2020, and in 2021 the UK film industry had a total turnover of £20.5 billion. Sky Group (2022, 5) notes that 'the UK Media and Entertainment Sector has the potential to be worth an additional £10 billion a year by 2033' as well as include 'a projected £2 billion boost for UK tourism'.

### Feast, famine, and a precarious workforce

In 2022, a perfect storm was brewing that would fundamentally disrupt the upward trajectory of the UK screen industries: economic headwinds, the downturn in advertising spend on traditional broadcasters, the freezing of the BBC's licence fee, the reforms enacted at Channel 4 by the previous government, shifting business models at large streaming platforms, strikes in the US, the aftermath of COVID and Brexit, the slowdown in inward investment and commissioning. These damaging events, alongside broader issues including the cost-of-living crisis, continue to have an acute effect on screen industry freelancers and the talent pipelines they populate.

In the UK, the pandemic lockdowns shuttered cinemas and paused productions. During the pandemic, 9.3 million people entered the COVID-19 job retention scheme (JRS) and another 2.7 million claimed a self-employment income support scheme grant (SEISS) (May et al. 2022 1-2). However, as the BFI (2020) pointed out to the DCMS Select Committee Inquiry on the Impact of Covid-19 on DCMS Sectors, several groups of screen workers were not eligible for or unable to access full support through the JRS or SEISS schemes. These included 20,000 PAYE freelancers not under contract by the JRS scheme cut-off date; newly self-employed freelancers lacking tax records for the requisite number of years; people above the £50K SEISS profit cap; people taking income from dividends rather than a wage, such as single owner companies, and freelancers on long term sick or maternity leave, all scenarios that lowered the average income calculation and thus the support the scheme provided. Single owner limited companies, once celebrated as key contributors to the economy, were historically given tax incentives to incorporate and charge VAT. The previous government changed outlook over the past 5-10 years, targeting single owner companies with higher taxes in the form of frozen thresholds, and implementing damaging off-payroll working rules known as IR35 (Toovey 2024).

In this and other ways, the pandemic exacerbated existing inequities in labour markets, working cultures, and marginalisation of women, workers with parenting and caring responsibilities, people of colour, and people with disabilities (for nuanced data and reports on these issues and more, Wreyford et al. 2021 and Raising Films 2021).

The post-pandemic production boom, driven in large part by large US streamers, generated 'good news' headlines for the screen industries, but created significant crew and space shortages, worsened working conditions, and exacerbated other problems, such as Brexit's impact on European inward investment, and the challenges in financing and revenue generation for the UK independent production sector.

Reporting on the production boom, the BFI Skills Review (2022) noted the implications for work culture and talent acquisition and development: crew promoted too early; increasing stress and poor work cultures; a narrowing of the UK independent film sector's capacity to develop emerging talent; lack of workforce diversity; and retention issues. This, alongside the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre's Good Work Review report (Carey et al. 2023) and the Film and TV Charity's 2022 Looking Glass survey on mental health in the screen industries, prompted a conversation about working cultures and workforce development that has resulted in the BFI's National Lottery funded £1.5 million Good Work Programme for Screen (BFI January 2024), including the recently launched WorkWise for Screen website (BFI October 2024), which will support SMEs to 'strengthen their management practices and build more inclusive and productive workplaces.'



It also prompted the UK Parliament to initiate the Culture, Media and Sport Committee's [inquiry into Film and High-End Television in 2023](#) to examine the current challenges faced by those industries, including skills and retention, and how to best support the independent film and exhibition sector to secure the UK as a global destination for film production.<sup>1</sup>

Yet more turbulence was to come, with rising costs of production, talent, and marketing, alongside the 2023 US strikes which paused existing productions and disrupted planned productions directly and by generating risk aversion amongst commissioners and financiers.<sup>22</sup>

Head of Bectu Philippa Childs ([Childs 2023](#)) outlined the effects of the US strikes on British workers in an open letter to Carol Lombardini, President of the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers:

**"The industry in the United Kingdom, like the US, has ground to a halt because of this dispute and our members, who work as behind-the-scenes crew and background artists, have been laid off under 'force majeure' contracts with very little notice and nil pay... The impact is huge and undeniable. 80% of UK film and TV workers we recently surveyed have had their employment directly impacted by your disputes, and three quarters are currently not working. 9 in 10 are worried about their financial security, and 6 in 10 are struggling with their mental health as a result of loss of work and/or financial worries."**

— Philippa Childs

By February 2024, Bectu demanded Government intervention in the face the slowdown in inward investment and commissioning that pitched large swathes of the industry's workforce into financial and mental health crises. Their survey revealed 68% of respondents were still out of work following the strikes, and 75% were struggling with their mental health, with 37% considering leaving the industry within 5 years. The Film & TV Charity's Money Matters survey ([2024, 3](#)) added further detail to this picture, with 45% of respondents reporting finding it difficult to manage financially and over a third frequently running out of money. The charity's more recent 2024 Looking Glass survey ([Film and TV Charity 2025](#)) paints an even more concerning picture, with 35% of respondents identifying their mental health as 'poor or very poor', and 30% experiencing suicidal thoughts over the past 12 months. Calls for a commissioner for freelancers have been growing since 2020 ([Goddard 2023](#)).

Many of the issues raised by Bectu, the Film & TV Charity and other advocacy and policy evidence gathering organisations were aired in the written and oral evidence to the parliamentary inquiry on film and high-end television. After a hiatus due to the change of Government in July 2024, [the inquiry has been reinstated](#), but its outcomes, and those of the new UK Government's industrial strategy consultation, [Invest 2035](#), will take time to arrive. For many of the talented, creative, and experienced freelancers working across the screen industries, who are already suffering huge financial distress, such actions may come too late.

The predominance of informally recruited and employed freelancers in the screen workforce makes tackling the precarity of working cultures, career development, and financial recompense essential.

<sup>1</sup> The DCMS inquiry into British Film and high-end television was cut short by the general election but has now resumed as ['British film and high-end television 2'](#).

<sup>2</sup> For example, the Creative UK/Netflix Breakout scheme for emerging filmmakers, which selected 6 projects for development, one of which would be greenlit with a £1.5m budget and global launch on Netflix, was recently 'reshaped' by Netflix who declined to greenlight any of the projects, amidst a shift in commissioning strategy towards safer bets: familiar stars in vehicles in the mould of *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* ([Dalton 2023](#)).

## CHALLENGES & RECOMMENDATIONS

The recent economic and social turmoil outlined above, and the on the ground insights our project has produced, challenge the industry to secure its workforce and its economic sustainability and potential for further growth in new ways, supported by appropriate ministerial oversight of the broader UK self employed workforce. The following pages set out the four key challenges identified in our research and our recommendations to address these. It provides a roadmap to industry and government to effect achievable changes which are urgently needed.

### CHALLENGE 1: INVISIBILITY OF RESOURCES AND BARRIERS TO DIVERSITY

#### Access to support resources

One of the greatest barriers to screen industry freelancers accessing support is the lack of clear information and pathways to available resources. Participants in our workshop were surprised to find out about existing networks, schemes, programmes and resources that are not clearly or consistently signposted to all freelancers.

Training and education available for those entering the screen industry is well developed but limited in scope. As film producer Rebecca O'Brien told the Film and High-End TV Parliamentary Hearing (February 2024), while the UK has good film schools and "nursery slopes" of television that successfully develop skills, there is still a lack of understanding about the range of opportunities available for those entering the industry:

"What they need to do is find out about the industry, to find out that directing is not the only job, or camera is not the only job. There are so many, there's a myriad of wonderful jobs you can discover."

—Rebecca O'Brien

Nonetheless, it is easier for those new to the industry to find opportunities than it is for mid-career workers, leading to a stagnation in career progression that subsequently generates problems for productions struggling to fill roles. A film events producer we interviewed summarised the problem here:

"If you're 18 and going into the film industry or the creative arts in general, there's all these entry schemes. There're all these great things. But **once you get over about 25, those schemes aren't there.** And in my opinion, the more life experience you gain, the better your stories are, the more you've got to share."

— Film Events Producer

Interviewees reported seeking out their own training or mentorship opportunities, spending their free time and their own money developing the skills they felt were necessary to progress in their careers.

## Regional variation of provision, inequality of access

Sustainable support also varies regionally. While regional support of creative work can lead to locally fruitful cultural ecologies (see [Genders 2022](#)), we argue that policy driven by purely regional indices leads to an unevenness of availability across the country by design. Furthermore, several official or casually organised schemes have a limited window for application or support duration, further constraining opportunity. With the very term ‘freelancers’ encompassing multiple tax categories as outlined in the background section above, the complexities and costs of accessing existing guidance and resources becomes intractable to navigate in the context of busy working lives and precarious finances.

Additionally, we continue to lack crucial resources that effectively tackle the inequality in the industry, particularly the barriers to women, the disabled, and people of colour. Time and again, the screen industry underperforms when compared to the wider UK workforce in the representation of women, people of colour, disabled people and people from working class backgrounds (see [Creative Diversity Network July 2023](#); [Carey et al. 2021](#)).

Our interviews revealed a vicious cycle of inaccessibility partly fuelled by underrepresented groups lacking visibility in the industry, making it harder to perceive as a viable career pathway for individuals within these groups. This perception is compounded by a fear of the personal challenges posed and potential sacrifices implied by working in an industry that persistently favours the privileged ([Carey et al. 2021](#)) and thus might not accommodate for or understand the specific needs of those who are from less privileged backgrounds.

Increasing the visibility and transparency of available resources provides evidence to aspiring screen workers, hiring managers, and the wider public that underrepresented groups belong in the industry and demonstrates a willingness to tackle the remaining imbalances and inequalities with focused support.

To drive the long-term, sustainable, inclusive and secure growth of the UK economy, the inherent lack of visibility of both resources and of the existing diversity of the workforce must be tackled in tandem with the further recommendations outlined below.

Currently, there are several avenues for finding information, such as Bectu’s freelance survival guide aimed at union members; the [freelance toolkit](#) offered by the BFI-funded ScreenSkills website, aimed at upskilling the screen industry workforce; and the newly launched [WorkWise for Screen](#) resource also developed by the BFI, created with the initial goal of helping employers better look after their workforce by sharing tools and good working principles, as part of the BFI’s larger campaign for industry-wide behaviour change in working cultures. WorkWise for Screen plans to provide a ‘community area’ of their platform that gathers together existing open-access resources to support freelancers and the wider screen community, acknowledging that existing information is fragmented and presents significant challenges to finding pertinent information quickly.

We throw our support behind this work by the BFI, while proposing that additional funding is needed to produce an efficient one-stop information for time-poor freelancers. Such a resource could use the latest technologies to leverage WorkWise for Screen data on existing disparate sources of information for screen workers, to provide tailorable responses to freelancers’ individual circumstances.

## RECOMMENDATION 1

**The screen industry must urgently develop a comprehensive and adaptable online resource delivering tailored information for freelancers, in collaboration with researchers.**

- Our research indicates a critical lack of awareness regarding existing support for the freelance screen industry workforce. Time-poor freelancers require personalised, timely support in navigating the complex landscape of available resources.
- We propose a tailored approach that leverages existing research into a freely accessible system capable of synthesising disparate online resources into bespoke advice, customised to individual needs and locations. By drawing from information that is already available on tax advice, employment rights, financial and business support, bursaries, and targeted support for underrepresented groups, this system would provide digestible answers to users and direct them to the precise resources they require.
- University researchers such as the Screen Industry Voices project team are well placed to co-develop such a tool, and to access funding to do so. This bespoke tool could be deployed across several industry platforms, alongside a comprehensive dissemination strategy across media and government channels and we propose it be piloted on the BFI-funded WorkWise for Screen website for testing and further development.
- The underlying data powering this system must be transparent, freely accessible, and regularly updated by industry representatives in partnership with researchers to reflect the latest available information sources. This commitment to data integrity and accessibility will ensure the system remains a reliable and effective resource for the freelance screen industry.

**TIMELINE: 2025-2026**

## CHALLENGE 2: PRECARIOUS AND INCONSISTENT WORKING PRACTICES

Informal or illegal engagement of workers pose inherent risks to both freelancers and those who contract them.

Current informal working practices within the screen industry, coupled with gaps in training for those employing freelancers, can inadvertently lead to working conditions that are not only precarious but potentially illegal.

The industry's reliance on informal hiring and promotion based on a volatile freelance model that responds hastily to market fluctuations and tight deadlines means individuals may rise to management positions without adequate training in employment law or best practices in engaging freelance workers. This lack of formal training for heads of department and those contracting freelancers can increase the risk of non-compliance with employment law and working regulations (see [Khomami 2025](#)), potentially leading to legal and financial liabilities for production companies.

The first critical step towards ensuring a sustainable and legally sound future for the UK screen industry is the widespread adoption of agreed standards for engaging freelance workers.

Gaps in training and persistent informal working practices are beginning to be addressed by both the Government and industry bodies. The Government's [Make Work Pay plan](#), part of the wider [Employment Rights Bill](#), intends to tackle low pay, poor working conditions and poor job security. Alongside the [HR toolkit](#) on the ScreenSkills website, the BFI's previously mentioned [WorkWise for Screen](#) aims to provide guidance and resources to SMEs and heads of department to improve understanding of UK employment law as well as developing shared working principles, a good first step in addressing this issue within the film industry.

The industry-funded Creative Industries Independent Standards Authority ([CIISA](#)) has developed a set of Standards that establish the minimum expectations of working behaviours across the creative industries, with the first iteration focused on the film, TV, theatre and music industries. CIISA's Standards Advisory Committee, which includes representatives from across film, television, music and theatre industries, will periodically review the Standards to ensure their appropriateness. CIISA plans to work with organisations on pathways to adherence to the Standards, and establish a certification process for roles, productions and companies.

This move towards standardised and transparent working practices can ultimately save companies money by mitigating the risk of legal challenges, fines, and reputational damage associated with improper or illegal working conditions. By implementing systems that align with Bectu and industry-endorsed standards, productions can move away from potentially risky informal practices and towards compliance to their legal requirements. Furthermore, clear standards and well-trained hiring managers can lead to more efficient productions and better retention of skilled freelancers who feel their rights are being respected.

Without freelancers, the screen industry faces an existential threat.

Implementing a set of agreed standards that makes hiring and working practices less beholden to informal practices is a vital first step to improve the lot of freelance workers and their employers. The future success of these ventures will depend on appropriate levels of funding and industry accountability.

## RECOMMENDATION 2

**An industry-led adoption of systems aligning to agreed standards in the engagement of freelance screen industry workers is a foundational step towards full compliance with working regulations and law.**

- We recommend systematic improvements in working practices be built into all film and television productions to ensure they are complying with their legal obligations, by implementing systems aligning to **CIISA's industry-endorsed standards**, and developed in close collaboration with the BFI and industry union Bectu.
- We recommend a kitemark certification for organisations conforming to shared working principles, such as CIISA's planned Professional Standards kitemark, similar to the widely adopted **albert environmental sustainability accreditation** of individual productions implemented by BAFTA, or the **Mentally Healthy Productions** toolkit based upon collectively agreed standards developed by the Film and TV Charity.
- We call on the Government to listen to voices from the screen industry in designing the scope of the **Fair Work Agency (FWA)**. Enshrining standards relevant to the creative industries as part of the FWA's remit is crucial. Enforcement and reporting on working conditions must be informed by CIISA's standards, and sector insights from industry union Bectu and sector support organisation the Film & TV Charity.
- To encourage the adoption of the agreed standards of working practices, we propose that **BAFTA** make a working practices review and CIISA's Professional Standards kitemark a necessary criteria for productions' awards eligibility. We also propose it be made a condition of eligibility for BFI funding and for relevant film/television tax reliefs administered by HMRC, including the UK **Independent Film Tax Credit (IFTC)** and the **Audio-Visual Expenditure Credit (AVEC)**, with appropriately-funded expansion of the eligibility scrutiny panels.

**TIMELINE: 2025-2027**



## CHALLENGE 3: FINANCIAL PRECARITY

Financial precarity is widely reported to be the dominant concern for freelancers. It is also a highly complex issue, interconnected with circumstances beyond the industry such as the cost-of-living crisis, the tax administration framework, and policy questions related to social welfare.

Financial security alleviates many of the other challenges at the forefront of our research: mental illness, lack of career development, inability to manage risk, the effects of social or economic marginalisation, etc. Value for money underpins many freelancers' choices, from whether to join a union, to seeking out additional training, to what jobs they take on and the equipment they invest in.

The current Universal Credit system is not designed for freelance work. Any changes to the system made by the Government should be informed by freelancers and experts on self-employment. Self-employed freelancers often need immediate, short term financial support given the precarious and often project-based nature of employment in UK film and TV.

**Financial precarity is often exacerbated by inconsistent and potentially exploitative working practices.**

A dedicated minister can bridge the gap between government policy and the realities of freelance work in the screen industry, ensuring that the progress made through industry-led standards is supported and strengthened by governmental action.

We recommend the creation of a Minister for Self-Employment and Precarious Workers who, working alongside the Minister for Small Business, Services and Exports, can effect incremental changes to existing government mechanisms geared specifically towards encouraging growth in the creative industries by supporting freelancers. The proposed scope of this new position significantly exceeds the existing remit of the Small Business Commissioner, tasked with tackling late and unfavourable payment practices, and the cultural responsibilities of the Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism. The problem of precarity for the screen industry workforce is primarily an issue of economic sustainability that goes well beyond the issue of late payments.

**It is vital that this ministerial position is not merely a figurehead, but a meaningful appointment with the authority and resources to enact tangible change.**

This is why our recommendation deliberately proposes a minister rather than a commissioner or tsar, roles that often lack the legislative power and cross-departmental influence necessary to drive substantial policy shifts. The aim is to establish a role akin to the Minister of State for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education, who has demonstrated the capacity to make changes to rules and regulations by actively engaging with industry needs and translating those insights into meaningful policy outcomes.

**Advocacy for self-employed and precarious workers within government must translate into policy decisions that produce concrete improvements in their working lives and financial security.**

## RECOMMENDATION 3

**Create a Minister for Self-Employment and Precarious Workers to advocate for this growing sector of the workforce, reviewing related policies across government departments and agencies.**

- We propose a new ministerial position **working across the Departments for Culture, Media & Sport, Business & Trade and HM Treasury, as well as the incoming Fair Work Agency.**
- It is vital that this ministerial position is held by an individual with direct experience of working in or closely with the screen industry. The minister could **appoint urgent reviews of current forms of taxation, classification and financial support available to freelance workers**, who are a significant portion of the workforce (13% in 2020 according to the ONS, not including PAYE freelancers), and who contribute to HM Treasury and the growth of the economy.
- Furthermore, the minister would be responsible for **ensuring the voices of self-employed workers are heard and debated in the Commons**, and included in the policy decision-making of the Departments for Business & Trade and Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, HM Treasury, and the Fair Work Agency.
- This proactive and empowered approach to safeguarding workers' rights, driven by a minister with relevant experience and a mandate for change, will **contribute to a more stable, reputable, and legally sound UK film and television sector**, significantly mitigating potential financial and legal risks for screen businesses in the long term.
- The above recommendation should be deployed as soon as possible to stem the flow of those planning to leave the screen industry sector in the next four to five years.

**TIMELINE: 2026 ONWARDS**

## CHALLENGE 4: INCOMPLETE DATA

The lack of complete and accurate statistics about freelancers' movements across, in and out of the industry prevents businesses and policy makers from understanding the full scale of attrition and loss of expertise in moments of crisis, as well as the levers that are most effective in creating workforce resilience for a sustainable and resilient screen sector. This frequently articulated frustration in our workshops and interviews bears out in industry reports (Carey et al. 2023).

### Detailed data on worker movements produces critical insights.

Ofcom requests mandatory surveys as part of providing a licence in the highly regulated broadcast television and radio sectors. Ofcom are able to change their data collection methodologies (see [Ofcom 2023](#) for example) in order to fulfil their legal requirement to promote equality of opportunity in radio and television services. Detailed Ofcom data reveals, for instance, how a lack of diversity is worse at senior levels of the television industry. This enables their report to make informed recommendations on how senior leadership can enact change to improve the endemic inequalities within the system. Even so, they report gaps in knowledge; improving data collection remains a priority for them.

We propose extending the knowledge generation that Ofcom's remit enables to the rest of the screen industry, including film and advertising production and post-production activities. We further strongly suggest that methodologies of data collection be collaboratively developed between Government appointed bodies and industry-led advocacy groups.



## RECOMMENDATION 4

**Improve data collection across the screen industry to enable focused tracking of freelance workforce, in all their specificity, that enter and leave the sector.**

- We propose HM Treasury instruct the inclusion of a **mandatory employment and diversity survey** as a requirement of receiving tax credits towards film and television production, a similar approach to the Ofcom employment data reporting requirements in the television sector. **Productions and broadcasters are already required to regularly report to funding organisations and regulators**, so this could work as additional data rather than a brand-new instrument. This additional data recording and data scrutiny needs to be appropriately resourced and funded.
- **Screen Industry employers in receipt of funding, financial support or licensing should report information about those they contract**, including anonymised data about their tax status (distinguishing between full time PAYE employees, PAYE freelancers, sole trader and/or limited company) as well as diversity data.
- This data should be provided to the ONS and made available to researchers and policy makers. Furthermore, the ONS should adjust the data collection criteria to distinguish between permanent and temporary employees in their datasets.
- We also recommend that **those performing data collection work closely with a steering committee** made up of members from CIISA, the Film and TV Charity, Bectu, and the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre to regularly update data collection methodologies that help fill knowledge gaps and improve policy making decisions.

**TIMELINE: 2027 ONWARDS**

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## GLOSSARY

AHRC: Arts and Humanities Research Council

AVEC: Audio-Visual Expenditure Credit

CIISA: The Creative Industries Independent Standards Authority

BAFTA: the British Academy of Film and Television Arts

BECTU: Broadcasting, Entertainment, Communications and Theatre Union

BFI: British Film institute. A National Lottery funded charitable organisation dedicated to the production, promotion and preservation of British film and television

DCMS: Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport of the United Kingdom

EDI: Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

HETV: High End Television – one of the areas of focus of this project along with film. “High End” is a somewhat debated definition. The British Film Commission offers grants and tax incentives for HETV without specifying what counts as “high quality”. It typically encompasses scripted content with demonstrable cultural value and significant budgets

HMRC: Her Majesty’s Revenue & Customs

IFTC: UK Independent Film Tax Credit

IPSE: The Association of Independent Professionals and the Self-Employed

JRS: Job Retention Scheme

IAA: Impact Accelerator Account

ONS: Office for National Statistics

PAYE: Pay As You Earn – the government system an employer or pension provider uses to deduct Income Tax and National Insurance contributions before paying wages or pensions


PEC: Policy and Evidence Centre

SAG-AFTRA: The Screen Actors Guild–American Federation of Television and Radio Artists

SEISS: Self-Employment Income Support Scheme Grant

SIV: Screen Industry Voices project

WGA: Writer’s Guild of America



# SCREEN INDUSTRY VOICES

<https://research.reading.ac.uk/screen-industry-voices/>

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