

**Written evidence from Professor Lisa Purse and Dr Andrew Philip, University of Reading
(UKSA22)**

**Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee
The work of the UK Statistics Authority inquiry**

Professor Lisa Purse and Dr Andrew Philip research the film and television industry's current challenges as part of the AHRC-funded University of Reading Impact Acceleration Account. They have co-authored the recently published report 'Freelancers: Building Workforce Resilience for Growth in the UK Film and Television Industries' (April 2025).

We address the first two questions raised by the committee.

How well served are researchers by the data that ONS produces and the services it provides?

Our research suggests that ONS data does not adequately serve industries with significant freelance workforces, or the policymakers and researchers who support these industries.

The government's Invest 2035 strategy puts the creative industries, including the film and television industry, at the heart of its growth plans. These sectors are characterised by a high proportion of freelancers. Currently it is not possible from the ONS data to establish with accuracy their numbers and movements in and out of the sector. This hampers decision-making about the actions that are most suitable to grow these sectors sustainably, and the actions that can best make work pay in these sectors.

The film and television industry functions as a case study to illustrate below.

Freelancer data in the film and television industry

Almost half of the video and motion picture production workforce is freelance.

Academic and private sector researchers in the creative industries have reported that they are not well served by the data produced by the ONS in this area, specifically when it comes to earnings, and the shifting working status of freelancers throughout each financial year.

- The term freelancer includes several different types of workers according to His Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC): self-employed sole-traders, non-employee limited companies, and those on PAYE fixed-term contracts.
- Freelancers in the screen industries often work on a number of short-term projects each year. They can shift between different contracts and tax statuses across the projects they are involved with.
- The annual population survey (APS) from which most data about freelancers is obtained does not include non-employee limited companies or those on PAYE fixed-term contracts.

- Thus, only a partial picture of the freelance workforce is currently possible, and existing policy research based on the APS is similarly constrained by this partial data.

Looking at the UK as a whole, the APS suggests that over 13% of the UK workforce are self-employed, contributing £366B to the UK economy; because of the lack of data highlighted above, this value is likely to be significantly underestimated.

Is the UK's data environment evolving, and what challenges and opportunities does this present official statisticians and analysts?

The above challenges can be met by the government's proposal for a National Data Library (NDL) and/or the Integrated Data Service (IDS).

We propose that the necessary data to enable more accurate and more relevant research and policy for growth is already collect by the HMRC.

Freelancers of all descriptions are legally required to submit self-assessments and/or company accounts. Companies engaging PAYE-freelancers will also be duty-bound to report these contracts.

This data is of course subject to privacy laws. However, with appropriate oversight from the Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR) and robust end-user licences accorded to the IDS and NDL, relevant data from HMRC could be made available on an anonymised bases, and provided to government policy analysts and accredited researchers, and sector support organisations, to offer better-informed strategies for growth and a secure workforce.

It is worth noting that, during the national crisis provoked by the pandemic, HMRC and the OSR rose to the occasion. In seeking to implement the government support for self-employed workers, statisticians were able to repurpose existing data and introduce new data sources. This precedent shows that our proposal is achievable.

And better data is urgently needed to help secure the freelance workforce in the creative industries. The many press stories that persist on this subject, alongside our own interview-based research, demonstrate a large-scale and acute problem that risks the government's own ambitions for growth. The scale of freelancer attrition in the face of prolonged periods out of work, poor working conditions, and workplace prejudice cannot be properly assessed without better data.

We urgently recommend the committee examine the opportunities provided by the government's proposal to create a National Data Library that includes significantly improved data about freelance workers in the UK to provide the robust evidence needed to enable this sector of the workforce to grow and thrive.

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