



Zita Holbourne & Martin Sundram  
Joint National Chairs  
Artists' Union England (AUE)  
Old Bakery  
Carlow Street  
London  
NW1 7LH

Email: [info@artistsunionengland.org.uk](mailto:info@artistsunionengland.org.uk)

2<sup>nd</sup> April 2020

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

# **Open letter to the Chancellor of the Exchequer from Artists' Union England:**

## **Impacts of the coronavirus on self-employed artists**

Dear Chancellor

We wrote to you on the 23rd and the 26<sup>th</sup> of March on behalf of our union members to raise concerns about the impacts of coronavirus on self-employed artists and to raise concerns about the measures the government announced last week for self-employed people, including the fact that the end of June was too long for our members to wait to receive financial support as they are already facing the devastating financial impacts of the coronavirus crisis on them, their ability to work, their families and their ability to survive.

We have not received a reply to date so we are sending you this open letter to raise concerns again and to request that you take urgent action to address the very real impacts that our members are facing now.

We have been inundated with communications from our members raising concerns about how they and their families are impacted and we are including in this letter a selection of case studies we have received from our members to illustrate to you, the real life impacts on our members and on self-employed artists.

Most artists are low paid, work precariously and many struggle to make ends meet at the best of times. This has now become amplified as work is cancelled for the foreseeable future.

These are workers who often do crucial socially engaged and educational work, using art to support the most vulnerable people in society and in our communities as is illustrated in the case studies.

### ***Case Study 1***

“I’ve spent the last 5 years building up my art practice. As a disabled artist I feel really hit. My tax returns have been a loss for the last 3 years because I’ve been investing so much in building myself and my art studio up. Now all my exhibitions/charity auctions/displays have been cancelled. No visibility, no networking, no income. I have to still pay for my website though.”

### ***Case Study 2***

**“My studio is in a safe storage building. This has meeting rooms that can be booked for workshops and the like. On Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> March I went to set up for a workshop that I was hosting to be told that I couldn’t have access to the room. I did manage to go ahead with the workshop that day. But I have had to cancel all future workshops at this setting and a few to be located at other sites.**

**One of my regular weekly jobs is a creative therapy session in a care setting for people with mental health issues that are all on some kind of section. The care setting cancelled this session on the morning of the 17<sup>th</sup> March, less than an hour before I was due to go in. They cancelled because of government advice.**

**I do not qualify for universal credit/ ESA as I have savings (although these are not “savings”. I have a lump sum that I inherited from my late parents and another sum that I am holding in trust along with a sister of mine for two nieces until they reach 25 years old.) My husband has also been made redundant due to a slowdown because of Covid-19.**

**I have managed to secure a part time supermarket job. I am starting this week. I will also get some of the government’s relief for self-employed workers when that materialises in June.**

**I am unsure, though, how I will pay the rent on my studio (also June) as I need to pay almost £600 for 6 month’s rent.”**

### ***Case Study 3***

“I have a family to support and live on a low income as is the case with many artists. Over the last ten years the majority of my income has been earned from freelance work, short projects, occasional teaching, all very precarious, not really out of choice but an effect of the way funding keeps disappearing. I struggle to earn enough to live on, as is common amongst artists, my wage has sat below the tax threshold for ten years now. I’m lucky that I have a mortgage which makes my living costs relatively low and I have a

work space at home, though obviously this costs money (on the mortgage) it's generally cheaper than the cost of renting studio space, without this situation I don't think I would have been able to keep working.

So far the impact of coronavirus has been quite stressful for me, I had two small contracts in place (both zero hours) bringing in a small income (though not enough to live on) which have so far been continued as remote working though I expect one of these may finish after Easter. My freelance work has completely disappeared, work for the Easter holidays cancelled, and a substantial piece of work which I was due to interview for in March doing community consultation has been postponed without any sense of when it will be picked up again. This alone meant that money I had been likely to earn to get through to Autumn disappeared overnight leaving me to rely on my partner for money to cover basic living costs. On top of this planned funding applications have been put on hold.”

#### ***Case Study 4***

**“In the last two years I had prepared sculpture exhibitions in Belgium (opening 27.03.2020), the exhibition is due to open in German in May and in London in September.**

**I have spent approximately £ 30,000 to prepare these exhibitions; I only have £2000 left and was expecting to sell work at the exhibitions.**

**My exhibitions in Belgium and Germany have already been cancelled.**

**This means that for at least the next six months I will have no income at all.”**

#### ***Case Study 5***

“My partner and I are both artists and we have one school aged child. We have two large rented studios, paid for monthly, our art practices are subsidised through teaching and gardening jobs respectively and sometimes jointly shared. Although we own our UK home meeting our monthly bills and food is precarious, pretty well hand to mouth most of the time. We had been working for 4 years towards a solo showing in Karachi (for one of us, the other travelling to extend connections educationally & professionally in Pakistan where we have both worked for several decades). This show booked years in advance for a gallery that maintains its scheduling at least 2+ years in advance, so we can't even delay till later in the year. International travel for the family has all been paid for (partly supported by a grant yet to be returned) and it is unknown when we will be refunded by the airline & UK coach services. All meetings with several PK University faculties, producers, galleries and collectors indefinitely postponed, which is damaging

in myriad ways. We have a huge investment financially and in terms of our time, suddenly all gone. Our planned for income from jointly marketing Art Portfolios online in April-May amounting to up to £6K between us has now cancelled.

Some supplemental gardening continues but even with social distancing rules acknowledged clients are afraid of neighbours socially shaming them for allowing someone to work. Our child is suddenly with us 24/7 which complicates online teaching with 2 part time university lectureships. Our situation continues to evolve as does everyone's but we have very little to fall back on and really can't afford to take on more debt to get through this unknown hiatus. It's not like life is so profitable under "normal" circumstances as a visual artist."

### ***Case Study 6***

**"I am self-employed, a single parent, living with my 19 yr. old son, relying on my business as my sole source of income. From March 12th I have had most of my work postponed. An open studio event postponed, a Sunday market I do weekly stopped, sessions at a special school put on hold, arts centre and gallery where I sell work have closed, ring making workshops I run from my studio put on hold. This will have a devastating effect on my income. I am also part of a national children's book illustration programme, with masterclasses throughout the country which have been cancelled. I believe I can still use my studio as I can isolate there, so I can be making stock and I also have an etsy shop. Much of my work cannot be done from home as it involves metal cutting, noise and dust and I live in an upstairs flat.**

**On top of practical work issues, I have temporarily re located to Wales to support my mother in quarantine, my daughter, a single parent key worker and her daughter. I am finding it so difficult to focus on work and the uncertainty seeps into everyday life."**

### ***Case Study 7***

"I am a Freelance Artist – I have teaching experience working within the Mental Health sector, refugees and asylum seekers, adults in recovery and in addiction and young carers.

Roughly five weeks ago I received a letter from the Housing Benefit Office telling me that my financial support for Housing Benefit and Council Tax had been suspended because my circumstances had changed and I had not notified them. It turned out that they had been informed by HMRC that I was currently employed by a University – the truth was that I had delivered a one hour talk at the University and according to the University's Finance Department I was classed as an occasional worker.

When I phoned the benefits office to explain that there had been a misunderstanding, I was told to make a complaint/appeal by letter and this would take at least three weeks to be dealt with. Fortunately, I had managed to pay extra payments on my Council Tax so I was in credit, however I now had to find my full rent money. Incidentally, I am still waiting for that overpayment to be reimbursed. When I explained my situation, they told me that I should inform my Landlord that I couldn't pay the full rent and when the issue was resolved that I could pay him in full. They weren't the slightest bit interested in the fact that my Landlord might not be so understanding.

Even when I told them that I had spoken to the University's Finance Department and that they had given me a direct number so that someone from the Housing Department could speak to a member of staff about this mistake they still insisted that I send an appeal letter. Both HMRC and the University agreed that the income I had earned would have made no difference to my yearly allowance, therefore I should not have been penalised.

I have experienced the threat of homelessness before, twice in fact, and through no fault of my own and it was horrendous.

When the lock-down began my claim was ongoing which basically meant that I had no idea if or when I would receive the financial support I relied on for my rent. Within two days of the Government's announcement about the lock-down all of my teaching jobs were cancelled – I now have no income for the foreseeable future. Being single and living alone means that I don't have anyone else to rely on which is stressful. Thankfully I have a small amount of savings to help in the short term but lack of funds means that I am now considering applying for Universal Credit.

I'm not sure if the 'powers that be' understand that most self-employed artists are classed as precarious workers, this means that they are often juggling several jobs, waiting for and chasing payments. Jobs can often be seasonal too so there is rarely a steady income. We don't receive sick pay so as with many desperate people we are often forced to go back to work even when we are unwell.”

### ***Case Study 8***

**“I am a freelance artist and I curate educational art exhibitions to create opportunities particularly for young black and minority ethnic artists, in recognition of the barriers they face in the labour market and the arts and culture sector due to race and age. I work as a community artist, exhibiting and doing commissions focused on equality, justice and human rights. Due to the coronavirus my exhibitions for this year have all been cancelled along with opportunities to sell my art, there have been no sales via my online shop and no commissions. Like many artists I also have a job with an employer which I have had to do due to the precarious nature of work for freelance artists and being a**

**single parent with a mortgage. As a result, even though I have lost any income I could have expected from my art practice, definitely for the rest of this year, but maybe for longer, I do not qualify for any of the measures that the government have proposed.**

We hope that these examples above provide you with a better understanding of the impacts. We are requesting that your attention is given to the concerns we have raised with you in this and previous correspondence and that urgent action is taken to provide access and receipt of financial support for freelance workers now as our members and their families cannot wait until June , they need help now in order to survive, to feed their families and to secure both their living accommodation and their studios so that they can continue to produce work for the future.

We would be most grateful if you were to acknowledge this letter and your previous letters and we look forward to receiving your response.

Yours Sincerely

Zita Holbourne & Martin Sundram

Joint National Chairs, Artists' Union England (AUE)