

COVID-19 impact on Community sectors

Self-employed

Our members who are self-employed are increasingly concerned about the impact COVID-19 will have on their business and work, especially those who are low paid. Self-isolation due to COVID-19 is not an option for the self-employed who will face a loss of income as a result of coronavirus.

The Budget announcements particularly on 'quicker and easier' access to benefits does not go far enough in supporting the self-employed, especially those on low pay. Universal Credit and Employment & Support Allowance provide less money than Statutory Sick Pay, and only applies when self-employed people have the virus. Universal Credit could also take up to 5 weeks before payment, especially with increased demand. Most of our self-employed members cannot afford to wait for such a payment and consequently will have to choose between paying their bills or their health (and the health of others).

Community believes self-employed workers should be entitled to statutory sick pay during the outbreak, and therefore be able to self-isolate and minimise the risk of spreading the virus without being out of pocket. Freelancers and the self-employed should also be given specific advice from the government on how to stay safe and healthy throughout pandemic.

Gig economy

Similarly to our self-employed sector, our members working in the gig economy face similar issues with lack of SSP and support systems if they need to self-isolate during COVID-19. For those members, as well as our members working two jobs or more in the gig economy to make ends meet, they need additional financial support from Government in the form of sick pay, so they do not put themselves at risk.

Companies such as Uber for example have said they would 'compensate drivers when proper documentation shows they have been diagnosed with the coronavirus, or if they are placed in quarantine, asked to self-isolate, or removed from the app for up to 14 days at the direction of a public health authority'. This will be based on driver's average earnings for 14 days rather than SSP.

Social care workers

Our members in social care are extremely vulnerable and at risk of contracting COVID-19, as well as spreading the virus within care homes, the elderly and those with health conditions. So far the government advice for care workers who are concerned they have COVID-19, is that the workers should follow the stay at home guidance, and should not visit or care for individuals until safe to do so.

However, those workers who are advised to and need to self-isolate and who are on zero-hours contracts may be entitled to SSP if their average earnings are at least £118 per week. Many of our members could earn less than that a week, and will therefore have to rely on UC and ESA, which is less than SSP.

In addition to this, if the individual being cared for has symptoms of COVID-19, government advice suggests the risk of transmission should be minimised through safe working procedures. This includes PPE, cleaning and laundry. Our members should not be out of pocket in their safety provisions, and with increased global supply of PPE, government must ensure care workers are prioritised in PPE provision, so they are equipped for patients.

Justice, custodial and immigration

The spread of coronavirus presents a new and even unprecedented challenge to the operations of prisons and the criminal justice and immigration systems.

For an already under resourced system, there will no doubt be a need for more prison officers if staff fall sick. For prisoners who are ill and in protective isolation, and for those who may be transferred to healthcare facilities with usual escorts, prison staff and escorts will need additional support in safety protections and ill-health prevention.

Furthermore, staff are advised to wear PPE for activities requiring sustained close contact with possible cases. Those across the sector must be prioritised in obtaining the necessary minimum level of PPE equipment.

The general secretaries of the two largest justice, custodial & immigration sector trade unions, the POA and Community, have issued a joint statement on the COVID-19 coronavirus.

POA General Secretary Steve Gillan and Community General Secretary Roy Rickhuss said:

“Our members are on the frontline of public service in both the public and private sectors. We recognise that the spread of coronavirus presents a new and even unprecedented challenge to the operations of prisons and the criminal justice and immigration systems. We are in close contact at the highest level, where we are respectively recognised, with the Prison Service and senior management within justice, custodial and immigration services contractors.

“We understand that this situation requires everyone involved in the sector to work together constructively and we are giving that commitment on behalf of our unions. This is clearly a developing situation and we will continue to evaluate matters in the interests of our members, while recognising the vitally important role they undertake delivering public services.”

Steel

Steelworkers are needed on steel sites to keep the works operating during the pandemic, even with stripped back shifts. With a predominantly older workforce who may be at additional risk of contracting the virus, working from home is not possible for the majority of the workforce, and will therefore have to rely on additional staff. For an industry that is already struggling, ensuring enough workers are able to operate and maintain the plants could be a key challenge for the sector. COVID-19 exemplifies the need for our economy to be more resilient and for a strong manufacturing sector to be vital to that economy.

Government must develop a plan for a sustainable future for the industry, in particular on energy prices and business rates, which make UK steel production uncompetitive when compared with other European countries. The UK faces some of the highest industrial electricity prices in Europe, which impacts UK competitiveness, and in meeting our ambition to be net-zero by 2050. Furthermore, and outlined in UK Steel recommendations, the Government could bring business rates for capital intensive firms in line with their competitors by removing plant and machinery from business rate calculations, so the industry can be prosperous through the various challenges our country and government face.

Italian steel unions are asking the government for a complete halt of operations at all steel and metal companies until 22 March for precautions and the safety of their workforce. Some producers in Italy have already taken the decision to temporarily halt operations, while others so far have no plans to stop production. Consideration needs to be given to the impact this

decision could have if replicated in the UK, and how the industry and workforce will be supported.

Furthermore, it is vital that employees are equipped to adapt and cope with temporary downturns without cutting jobs and shedding invaluable skills. The sector therefore needs a commitment from government to develop a national programme of support. Short time working would make a real impact for businesses and employees and help them through the current crisis. This could replicate a similar programme to Germany's system after the recession in 2008 with companies that could demonstrate they were unable to support the workforce due to temporary shortage of orders were eligible to be granted short time working allowances for affected workers.

These allowances amounted to 60% of the wage reduction (or 67% for those with children). The employer paid all social security contributions for working hours cancelled, but these could be reimbursed provided that employers delivered training measures to upskill those on short time working. The take up was huge, in March 2009 alone companies submitted applications for short time working allowances on behalf of more than 700,000 workers.

Betting

The gambling firm Flutter, which owns Paddy Power and Betfair, issued a profit warning after sports events around the world were cancelled or postponed.

If restrictions remained in place until the end of August, including a full suspension of Australian sports and the cancellation of the Euro 2020 football tournament, annual profits would come in £90m-110m lower than expected, the company said. Flutter would lose an additional £30m of profits every month if horse racing fixtures in the UK, Ireland and Australia were also cancelled and its UK and Irish betting shops had to close.

Community represents hundreds of members who work in betting shops across the country, and who will need support throughout the challenge the sector and businesses face over the coming months.

Aviation

The UK's aviation industry will be significantly impacted by the coronavirus pandemic without emergency financial support. Our members in the industry need government support in order to keep their jobs, and we support the call for £7.5bn emergency support to rescue the UK aviation industry.