

Equity response to Work and Pensions Committee 'Get Britain Working – Reforming Jobcentres' call for evidence

March 2025

About

1. Equity is the largest creative industries trade union with 50,000 members united in the fight for fair terms and conditions across the performing arts and entertainment. Our members are actors, singers, dancers, designers, directors, models, stage managers, stunt performers, circus performers, puppeteers, comedians, voice artists, supporting artists and variety performers. They work on stage, on TV and film sets, on the catwalk, in film studios, in recording studios, in night clubs and in circus tents.
2. They are generally considered to be self-employed by the Department for Work and Pensions and, often, their work is short-term and project based. Equity's membership is among the youngest of any UK trade union, the most common age is 28 and most members are under 41. 3% of Equity's members identify themselves as deaf or disabled.
3. Equity is the only UK trade union to offer an in-house social security advice service, which has operated for several decades. We run a twice-weekly helpline and a casework service. We have considerable frontline experience advising self-employed Universal Credit (UC) claimants working as creative professionals.

Summary

4. Equity welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence to the Work and Pensions Committee's call for evidence on 'Reforming Jobcentres'. Our work with members has indicated an urgent need for reform across the social security system, and we are campaigning for the government to abolish the minimum income floor (MIF) in UC which causes extreme and unnecessary hardship, anxiety and sickness, and drives workers away from the creative industries which is contrary to the government's Industrial Strategy in Invest 2035. We have also called for a full, evidence-based review of the effectiveness of the social security system in supporting workers with careers in non-standard work environments and sectors.
5. Equity supports an overhaul in the approach of Jobcentre Plus (JCP) to supporting workers. Our research shows that Jobcentre staff are not adequately trained to understand self-employment, or the short-term and last-minute pattern of freelance work in the performing arts. This compounds and exacerbates the problems caused by a social security system that is not set up to support self-employed creative workers.

Are there any groups that JCP should be supporting that it is not currently? If so, how should DWP engage with these groups?

6. As relates to our membership, we have identified three particular groups that JCP does not support adequately, these are:
 - The self-employed
 - Freelance workers in the creative industries
 - Disabled workers

7. **Self-employed** – members frequently tell us that JCP staff do not understand freelancing and self-employment, resulting in poor support, inefficient claim handling and incorrect information being passed to claimants who are treated as self-employed.¹
8. Members report that this lack of knowledge among work coaches results in allowable expenses being refused, claimants being required to report earnings in a way that does not reflect their income and a lack of accommodation for working irregular hours. One member told us:

“The work coach insisted I provide weekly pay figures. There is no such thing in my work.”

“The work coach told me I cannot declare regular expenses such as singing lessons. I am a singer and I need regular singing lessons for my continuous professional development. The work coach said the lessons were ‘for me not for my business’. In the end, I just didn’t declare lots of allowable expenses.” A, actor and singer

9. Far from supporting self-employed professionals, interactions with JCP often deter members from claiming support that they are entitled to or prevent them from being able to engage with paid work in their industry due to the requirements of the system.
10. Members often highlight that work coaches provide incorrect or incomplete information on their entitlements. For example, not advising claimants correctly about the start-up period ahead of the minimum income floor being implemented, leading to claimants having the MIF applied unexpectedly. Resolving these errors can take weeks if not months, causing significant distress and forcing claimants into financial insecurity. One member shared their experience:

Aidan² was deemed ‘gainfully self-employed’, this was during the period in which the MIF had been suspended. When it was reinstated in September 2021, it was applied to Aidan’s full claim without the first-year start up period: “they never ever applied the start-up, they immediately applied the MIF and I got nothing.”. There was no attempt to provide any support of any kind “whilst the premise is that they’re there to support you, they’re not ... the aim is to stop you claiming benefits.”

He spoke to Equity who asked if he’d had his start-up period. “I said what’s a start-up period?.. They hadn’t mentioned that.” Equity supported him in challenging the implementation of the MIF which was successful but took 4 months “backwards and forwards, chasing and chasing ... the amount of chasing we had to do was insane”. During this time, he had no support “I had to borrow a lot of money”.

¹ Equity members work portfolio careers and are often engaged using either Limb (B) or self-employed employment status. Despite this distinction, the Department for Work and Pensions treats both these groups as self-employed for the purposes of social security. We therefore use the term ‘self-employed’ as a shorthand throughout this submission to describe both of these statuses of engagement.

² Name changed to protect the identity of the individual

...

It was a further 4 months until the back payment was provided. He was then told, in writing, that the MIF would be applied in January 2023. However, in September 2022 the MIF was applied unexpectedly leaving him with £70 a week to cover rent, bills and living costs. He was told that the initial date was incorrect: "obviously we made a mistake, sorry about that."³

11. **Creative workers** – Equity's research, *Not Here to Help*, describes the nature of work in the industry:

"Equity members work across the cultural and creative industries. These sectors are dominated by project-based modes of production which rely on a flexible workforce, that is ready and trained to work on projects as and when they occur. This means that workers are reliant upon numerous short-term contracts moving from one project to another. In order to do this, they juggle multiple projects simultaneously and engage in a range of work both within and outside the sector to sustain themselves between (and often during) professional projects and contracts..."

These conditions of work and employment have led professionals working in this sector, despite high levels of skill, to be amongst the most precarious...

The work is sporadic and precarious; workers generally find other types of employment to sustain themselves, although these jobs also need to be flexible to allow time to attend auditions and do the work necessary to gain more sector specific work. Performers can be informed of an audition the night before, leaving little time to prepare or notify other employers."

12. Members report that JCP staff frequently do not understand the nature of work in the creative industries, and their attitude towards this work contributes to driving away those who the system should be supporting. One member told us:

"My work coach told me that all my pre-rehearsal work [auditions, researching the role and learning lines] for a 3-month tour was fluff" A, actor

13. Creative professionals have to spend a significant amount of time preparing for their jobs and 'working to get work'. Our research shows that members are spending on average 12.1 hours a week undertaking costly and/or unpaid work⁴ just to engage with employment opportunities.⁵

³ The full case study can be found in [Not Here to Help](#)

⁴ This can include contacting agents, creating self-tapes, learning lines for auditions, travelling to and attending auditions, contacting networks, keeping social media updated, attending events and related workshops, or opportunities to network and researching the sector.

⁵ Not Here to Help, a report for Equity by the University of Warwick, <https://www.equity.org.uk/campaigns-policy/policy/universal-credit-report>

14. The sporadic and precarious nature of the industry requires our members to be available at short notice to attend auditions and rehearsals. These elements of the profession are not compatible with the current work-related requirements system and members frequently report JCP staff requiring them to attend JCP appointments under threat of sanction, instead of their scheduled auditions and rehearsals, undermining their paid work. One member told us:

"I am a creative professional but have to pretend not to be to get any money. I am increasingly despairing. I am stuck in two worlds and on one hand trying to deal with this and on the other trying to pretend it is not happening and things will be fine so I can keep working without falling to pieces."

15. Training for JCP staff should be industry-specific, showing what it is like to be a self-employed creative professional and should enable JCP staff to adequately support a range of claimants from different industries and with a variety of access needs. JCP staff should be able to correctly advise claimants and help them to navigate the system in a way tailored to their individual needs and circumstances. Equity and our members again offer to work together with DWP to improve understanding of the industry among staff.

16. **Disabled workers** - We reiterate our previous calls for a comprehensive review and re-design of all the systems that are meant to support disabled people into work, led by deaf and disabled people and grounded in the social model of disability.

17. Deaf and disabled members tell us that the system is far too complex to navigate and, even when navigated correctly, the knowledge of JCP staff is insufficient to adequately support disabled workers.

18. Often, people are not aware of their rights when it comes to social security, particularly given the increasing complexity of the system since the introduction of UC. Members tell us that JCP staff are poorly trained to understand different disabilities, health conditions and varied access requirements and provide poor information to disabled claimants navigating the system. In particular, members have flagged that the information given by JCP staff has been particularly poor in supporting those navigating the migration from Employment and Support Allowance to UC. A neurodivergent self-employed creative described to us that administering her UC claim was a full-time job.

19. Additionally, Equity have been clear that Access to Work (AtW) is preventing disabled creative professionals from being able to fully engage with their profession. Members report that the length of the claiming process is prohibitive to them being able to take on work, let alone short-term work.

20. Equity has called for AtW to be placed on a statutory footing and for the scope to be widened to provide support for those applying for work as well as those in work. Better integration between JCP and AtW would be beneficial in supporting disabled workers, for instance, work coaches being able to refer claimants to AtW and assist with running through the claiming process.

To what extent does JCP have an “image problem”? How might this be addressed?

21. Claimants, and particularly disability benefits claimants, have a low level of trust in JCP and by extension the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). Equity comes into contact with poor quality information from JCP on an almost daily basis and members regularly report poor quality, lengthy and confusing interactions with JCP staff leaving them unsure of their rights, stressed and unwell.
22. JCP needs to address the poor quality of support that claimants receive by ensuring that staff are trained to provide reliable, clear information and make robust decisions. This aligns with DWP policy aims of supporting people to work and claim the correct support from the system.
23. Trust in JCP and the wider system is particularly low amongst those claiming disability support. Scapegoating rhetoric has been used for years by successive governments and in the media when referring to those supported by the social security system, with claimants dubbed ‘scroungers’ ‘skivers’ and ‘cheats’ and pitted against the ‘law-abiding taxpayer’. In 2024, the UN Committee on the Rights of Disabled People highlighted complaints upheld against the UK Government for ‘stirring up hostility’ against claimants, noting that this has resulted in ‘hate speech and hostility towards disabled people’⁶
24. This rhetoric has eroded trust between disabled claimants and the social security system. Changing language to be more neutral, accurately describing the aims of JCP to facilitate a ‘social security system’ and actively encouraging those who are entitled to support to claim it would address the stigma arising from scapegoating rhetoric.

What should be the role of JCP in getting those who have been out of the workforce in the long-term ready to begin a journey into work?

25. Equity is clear that any reforms to the social security system designed to support those who have been out of the workforce in the long-term should be led by deaf and disabled people and be grounded in the social model of disability.
26. We are clear that the role of JCP and the wider social security system involves supporting claimants to access work that is relevant to their skills and professional qualifications and not forced into jobs that do not align with this. Currently, the system is not adequately supporting our members with Equity research highlighting that 82% of members on UC reported it had not helped them to find work in the industry.⁷

⁶ UN Committee on the Rights of Disabled People (2024) – Report on follow-up to the inquiry concerning the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRPD%2FC%2FGBR%2FUIR%2F1&Lang=en

⁷ *Not Here to Help*

27. Equity is pleased to see DWP committing to supporting people into 'good work'.⁸ "Good work" in the creative industries has been defined as:

*characterised as offering fair reward commensurate to skill and contribution, that counterbalances security and flexibility; provides autonomy and personal fulfilment; where workers have agency, voice and representation and the opportunity to utilise their skills, develop and progress; in a healthy, respectful and inclusive environment. This experience of work must be fair and equal for all Creative worker, irrespective of their gender, age, ethnicity, disability or socio-economic background.*⁹

28. JCP must recognise the professionalism of creative work and improve understanding of the industry as a whole so that staff can provide claimants with robust, effective support to ensure that everyone can access work according to their skillset.

How effective is the support provided by work coaches, particularly to groups that experience disadvantage or particular challenges in the labour market? (e.g young people, disabled people, older workers)?

29. When it comes to support for deaf and disabled self-employed workers, the complexity, cliff edges, lack of clear and public information, poor decision making and processes across DWP and HMRC as well as lengthy waiting times across the board are creating retrogression in support for deaf and disabled self-employed workers.

30. Members tell us that their interactions with JCP often leave them feeling like they are not listened to. They tell us that their accessibility needs are not considered under JCP's 'one size fits all' approach with meetings repeatedly held in inaccessible locations, and information not being readily available in different formats.

31. The level of knowledge of work coaches is frequently highlighted as a frustration for members who describe them as just reading out information already available on the website and find that they have no access to senior staff when their work coaches do not know the answer to a query.

32. Case studies from Equity members highlight the frustration that they experience when interacting with JCP and its work coaches:

Ms Z: An autistic actor, writer, director and a UC claimant with LCWRA status. She reports suicidal feelings as a direct result of the poor system. Extracts from emails:

"I am unsure if the advice he [UC case manager] has provided is correct. It seems like he is asking me to change my UC to self-employed. This is starting to make me unwell."

⁸ 'Get Britain Working' White Paper (2024) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/get-britain-working-white-paper/get-britain-working-white-paper>

⁹ 'Job quality in the Creative Industries' – Creative PEC, (2023) https://pec.ac.uk/research_report_entr/good-work-review/

"I know in the grand scheme of things it's just a process error but when you're dependent on this for your house and your living, and it impacts your ability to function which then impacts any steps you take towards independence, its entirely suffocating, existential and cyclical."

Ms A: a neurodivergent claimant, carer for autistic partner and long-term Working Tax Credit claimant who recently moved to UC. Extracts from emails during the claim process about how UC should count their limited savings (and she is a former financial adviser):

"This system is so terrible that I am genuinely wondering if the claim is worth the VAST amount of time it's taking and stress it's making. I would ask you to raise this issue in your meeting with them, but making us feel hopeless and like it's 'not worth it' is a feature NOT a bug."

"I am so overwhelmed, I can't keep track of all the issues, this is SO COMPLICATED and so opaque".

"not being able to get a straight answer on ANYTHING is making me insane."

33. JCP staff need to be sufficiently trained to support deaf and disabled people to navigate the system correctly. They need to be able to provide accessible, tailored support to everyone that interacts with JCP in order to effectively support all claimants to access the support that they are entitled to.

What opportunities exist for digital and AI-tools to improve JCP?

34. Equity is clear DWP must be transparent about any use of digital and AI-tools in JCP processes. Use of digital and AI tools in JCP processes can in some cases be time saving and simplify processes; however, we are concerned that the introduction of, in particular, AI into already flawed processes that make up the UC system will only serve to exacerbate the flaws in this system.
35. As highlighted by the Public Law Project, there are several risks associated with the introduction of machine learning into UC processes. Namely, risks of bias, inaccuracy and a lack of public confidence.¹⁰
36. As above, Equity has significant concerns about existing failures of the system to properly support self-employed creative professionals as well as disabled claimants. DWP must ensure that any introduction of AI into the system does not bake in an already ineffective approach.

Contact

¹⁰ Public Law Project, written evidence, <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/131474/pdf/>

EQUITY

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