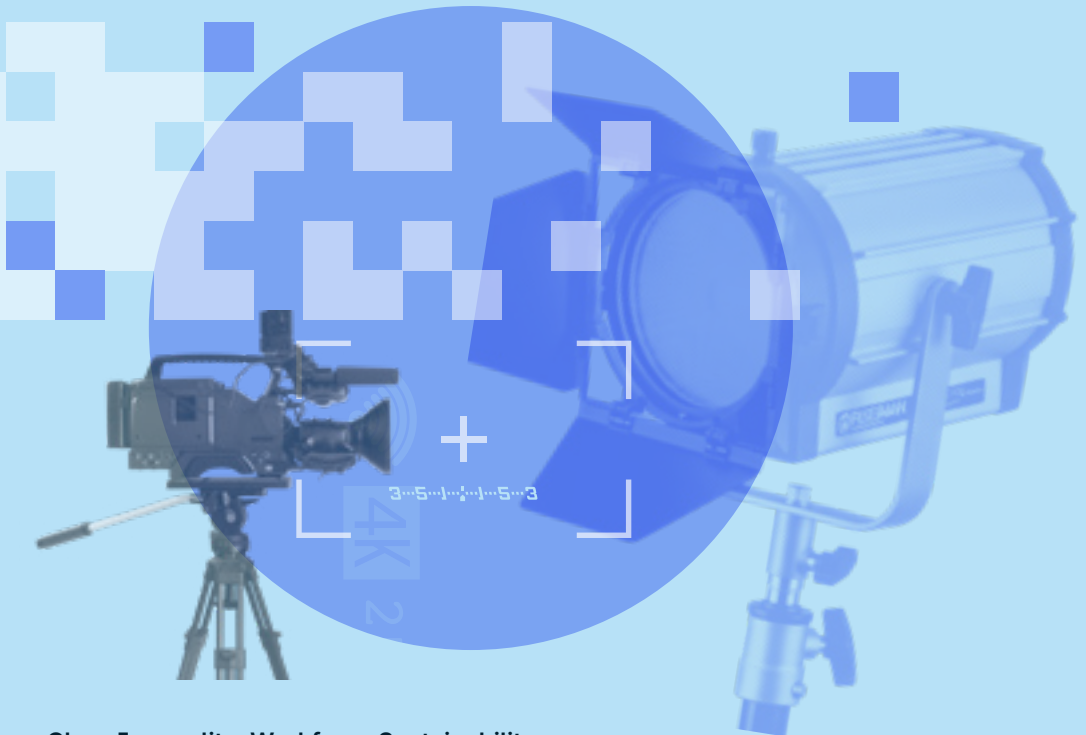
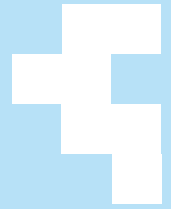


From Evidence To Action



Class Inequality, Workforce Sustainability and Workforce Wellbeing in UK Television

An extended policy briefing for UK regulators, public funders, broadcasters and industry bodies
(March 2026)

Prepared in collaboration with the Film & TV Charity

Prof. Beth Johnson and Anna Theodoulides



We help with life behind the scenes

Executive Summary

Class inequality is a structural feature of the UK television labour market and contributes to workforce instability, mental wellbeing harms and uneven access to career progression. Evidence from the AHRC-funded *What's On? Rethinking Class in the Television Industry* project and the Film & TV Charity's wellbeing research, indicates that **current working practices disproportionately disadvantage those from working-class backgrounds** and interact with other structural inequalities such as race, gender and disability.

The Film & TV Charity's *Money Matters 2* (2026) report underlines the **scale of financial precarity in the screen workforce**, including sustained worklessness and increased intention to leave the industry. Developed in collaboration with the Film & TV Charity, this briefing draws on shared evidence and sector dialogue. The analysis and recommendations presented here are those of the authors. Class inequality should be understood as a **systemic labour-market issue rather than solely a matter of access**. Evidence from the *What's On?* research, alongside sector surveys including the Film & TV Charity's *Looking Glass*

and *Money Matters* studies, indicates that long working hours, insecure employment, informal recruitment practices and uneven access to progression interact to reproduce inequality and undermine workforce sustainability.

The *What's On?* research introduces the concept of **'classed risk distribution'**, describing how financial, temporal and emotional risk is organised across television production. Insecurity, long working hours and informal hiring practices transfer risk onto those least able to absorb it, contributing to stronger intentions to leave the industry and poorer wellbeing indicators. **This mechanism helps explain why class background continues to shape progression and career continuity even where access initiatives have expanded.**

New analysis of Film & TV Charity crosstab data reinforces this mechanism: while contract type is distributed similarly across class backgrounds, the negative impacts of precarious work are greater for those from working-class backgrounds. This indicates a **classed 'precarity penalty'**, where class shapes who is

able to absorb labour-market risk even under the same employment conditions and contracts.

For regulators and funders, these findings raise **urgent questions about whether current frameworks address the conditions under which television is made. At a moment of charter renewal, funding constraint and workforce pressure, the implications are immediate.**

This briefing identifies **policy actions that can be delivered through existing regulatory and funding levers**, with direct implications for DCMS objectives on skills, productivity and regional growth, and for Ofcom's oversight of public service broadcasting. If left unaddressed, these pressures risk accelerating workforce exit over the next decade and narrowing who is able to sustain a career in television.

The analysis and recommendations set out in this briefing are those of the authors and draw upon research from the AHRC-funded *What's On?* project and data shared by the Film & TV Charity.

Key policy takeaways



1. Class inequality is a labour-market risk issue: in UK television it reflects how labour-market risk is organised, functioning as a structural driver of workforce exit pressure and uneven career sustainability rather than an access deficit.



2. Current regulatory and funding frameworks focus on entry while overlooking retention, progression and risk distribution, reducing the long-term return on public and industry investment in skills and training.



3. Working time intensity, insecure contracts and informal recruitment practices function together as a systemic source of inequality and wellbeing harm, increasing workforce exit pressure at early and mid-career stages.



4. Regulators and funders already possess proportionate levers - through commissioning expectations, funding conditions and reporting frameworks - but these are not currently being used systematically to address workforce retention, progression and risk distribution.



5. Addressing class inequality is central to workforce sustainability, skills retention and public value, shaping who is able to remain in the sector and whose stories are ultimately represented on screen.

Why Class Inequality Requires Regulatory Attention

UK television production is currently facing a convergence of challenges, including growing concern about workforce sustainability, widespread reports of poor mental wellbeing, and increasing evidence of workers taking steps to leave the industry.

These challenges are not evenly distributed across the workforce. Recent reviews and regulatory discussions across the UK screen sector have further underscored concerns about class, geography and authenticity in both representation and production cultures.

Evidence from the *What's On?* research on UK television drama, together with academic research on creative labour markets and sector workforce surveys such as the Film & TV Charity's *Looking Glass and Money*

Matters studies, indicates that class background remains a significant factor shaping who is able to enter, remain and progress within television production. Those from working-class backgrounds report higher exposure to insecurity, isolation and poorer mental wellbeing, and are less likely to have access to the financial and social resources that mitigate risk in freelance and project-based work. Recent policy debates have prioritised access through outreach, skills development and entry-level schemes. This has direct implications for DCMS media and charter frameworks, and for Ofcom's oversight of public service broadcasting and public value.

Policy gap

Current workforce frameworks have prioritised entry and participation, assuming that sustainability will follow once access barriers are addressed. Evidence reviewed in this briefing challenges that assumption. Without policy attention to how risk is distributed across working time, contracts and progression, access initiatives risk driving churn rather than improving retention.

This briefing introduces a key analytical concept to support policy action:

Key Concept: Classed Risk Distribution

Classed risk distribution refers to the way financial, temporal, and emotional risks in television production are systematically allocated across the workforce, with disproportionate effects on those from working-class backgrounds. Evidence indicates that long working hours, insecure contracts, informal recruitment practices, and uneven access to progression combine to shift risk onto individuals least able to absorb it. Freelance engagement functions as a key mechanism through which this risk is concentrated and normalised within the television labour market.

From a policy perspective, this matters because classed risk distribution:

- undermines the return on public and industry investment in skills and training
- contributes to workforce attrition and skills loss
- weakens long-term sector resilience and public value

Structural Drivers of Class Inequality

The evidence reviewed here points not to isolated barriers, but to a patterned distribution of risk across the television labour market.

The following sections outline how working time, recruitment practices, and wellbeing outcomes interact to reproduce class inequality over time.

2.1 Working time and labour intensity

Research evidence indicates that excessive working hours remain widespread and culturally normalised within television production. These practices are rarely framed as a policy issue, yet they have clear implications for mental health and wellbeing, equality of access to work, and retention.

2.2 Recruitment, progression and informal labour markets

The sector continues to rely heavily on informal recruitment mechanisms, including word-of-mouth hiring and network-based recommendations. While these practices are often justified as efficient, the evidence shows they have predictable distributional effects.

Those from working-class backgrounds are less likely to have access to influential professional networks, to absorb repeated periods of unpaid or speculative labour, or to convert entry-level opportunities into stable careers.

Together, insecure contracts, informal recruitment, and network-based mentoring operate as a mechanism of classed risk distribution. Individuals are expected to absorb periods of unpaid or speculative labour in order to progress, with success contingent on access to financial support and professional networks.

This reproduces inequality not through exclusion alone, but by normalising risk absorption as a condition of progression. Survey evidence indicates that freelance workers report consistently poorer outcomes across job sustainability, progression, career stability and mental wellbeing. Where those from working-class backgrounds are over represented in freelance roles, freelancing functions as a mechanism through which labour-market risk is unevenly distributed rather than as a neutral employment preference. This wider context is reinforced by *Money Matters 2 (2026)*, which reports 22% sustained worklessness and 43% taking firm steps towards leaving the industry.

Evidence from the *What's On?* programme indicates that regionally embedded production models can support progression and retention. Additional work linked to the drama *Waterloo Road* (beyond the formal case studies) illustrates how integrating paid training and step-up roles within a returning regional production can reduce reliance on informal recruitment and unpaid speculative labour, while supporting sustained employment and progression for early-career workers.

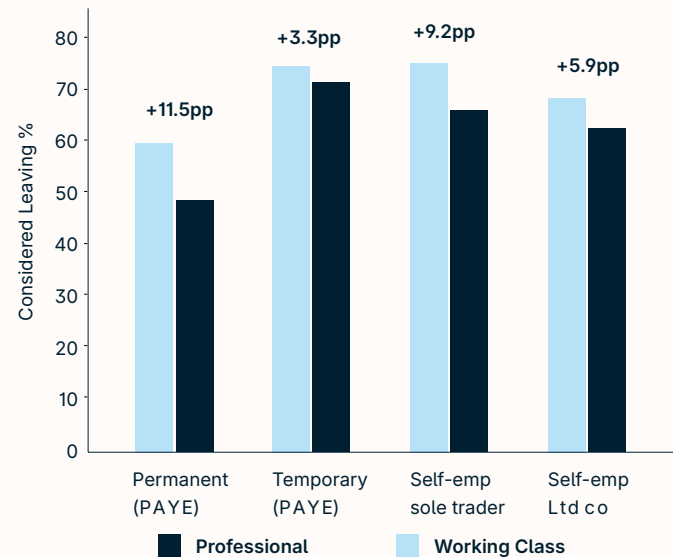
2.3 Class and mental wellbeing

Sector-wide data indicates that class background is associated with differential wellbeing outcomes, including higher reported levels of poor mental health, loneliness, and experiences of bullying or discrimination¹.

This association appears to be mediated in part through exposure to insecure and freelance employment, which intensifies financial precarity, isolation, and workload pressure. Importantly, class operates as an amplifying factor, intensifying the impact of other disadvantages.

New crosstab analysis of Film & TV Charity survey data supports this finding. While contract type is distributed similarly across class backgrounds, those from working-class backgrounds report poorer outcomes under the same contract conditions, including stronger intentions to leave the industry. Notably, even among permanent staff, those from working-class backgrounds report higher intention to leave than more advantaged peers (an 11.5 percentage point gap), suggesting contract stability alone does not remove class-related disadvantage.

Considered Leaving the Industry:
Working-Class vs Professional Background by Contract Type



Individuals are expected to absorb periods of unpaid or speculative labour in order to progress

Implications for Policy and Regulation

←
Source: Looking Glass 2024 cross-tabs (V1/V2), % reporting 'Yes'

The evidence suggests that entry-focused approaches alone will not resolve workforce sustainability or wellbeing harms.

Implications for skills, productivity and growth

From a skills and growth perspective, current labour-market conditions in television production undermine the return on public and industry investment in training. High attrition, limited progression and geographically concentrated opportunity result in skills leakage, reduced productivity and weakened regional capacity. Addressing classed risk distribution is therefore not only a matter of equity and wellbeing, but of labour-market efficiency, innovation and long-term sector resilience.

Risks of inaction

If classed risk distribution remains unaddressed, workforce pressures are likely to intensify. This includes accelerated attrition at early and mid-career stages, a narrowing pool of workers able to sustain a career, and reduced production resilience over time. Without intervention, these pressures risk undermining regulators' and funders' statutory objectives on plurality, public value and sector sustainability.

For regulators and funders, the question is not whether to intervene in employment practices directly, but how existing levers - funding conditions, commissioning expectations, reporting requirements and guidance - can be used more effectively to support sustainable and equitable work. In this context, inaction would amount to a failure to address known risks to workforce sustainability, skills retention and the delivery of public value.

How inequality is reproduced



↑
Authors' conceptual model based on the *What's On?* research and Film & TV Charity data.

Policy Principles

Effective action on class inequality should be guided by the following principles:

- 1. Proportionality:** interventions should align with existing regulatory and funding mechanisms rather than create parallel systems.
- 2. Transparency:** greater visibility of labour practices enables accountability without prescriptive regulation.
- 3. Outcome-focused oversight:** emphasis should be placed on retention, progression and wellbeing outcomes rather than participation alone.
- 4. Evidence-led iteration:** policies should be refined based on observed impacts.
- 5. Risk visibility:** financial, temporal and emotional risks in working practices should be visible so they can be measured and addressed.

Recommendations with Built-in Measurability

The following recommendations draw on the evidence reviewed above and are proposed by the authors to address classed risk distribution through existing policy and regulatory levers.

They prioritise proportionality, transparency and evidence-led oversight within established commissioning, funding and reporting frameworks, and do not represent formal positions of partner organisations. These actions rebalance how insecurity, long hours, unpaid gaps and informal hiring practices are distributed across television careers.

Rationale (shared)

These recommendations shift policy attention from access alone to retention, progression and workforce sustainability. By increasing visibility of working time, recruitment pathways and progression outcomes, they make labour-market risk measurable and therefore governable, enabling more effective use of current policy and funding mechanisms.





Recommendation 1:

Introduce proportionate monitoring of labour intensity and working time

Lead actors: Regulators; Broadcasters; Public funders

Action:

Require productions receiving public funding or operating under public service remits to record working-time patterns (including extended working days and unpaid overtime) through existing reporting processes, with a short mitigation note where recurrent extreme patterns are identified.

Indicative measures:

- Proportion of publicly funded or PSB-commissioned productions reporting working-time data
- Identification of recurrent risk patterns (e.g. extreme days, compressed schedules)



Recommendation 2:

Strengthen progression outcomes from entry-level schemes

Lead actors: Broadcasters; Skills bodies; Funders

Action:

Shift evaluation of entry-level and access initiatives from participation metrics to progression and retention outcomes beyond the first contract, including step-up roles, repeat employment and sustained career progression.

Indicative measures:

- Percentage of participants moving into paid roles within 6-12 months
- Contract continuity and progression at 12-24 months



Recommendation 3:

Increase transparency in recruitment practices

Lead actors: Regulators; Broadcasters; Public funders

Action:

Establish an expectation that a proportion of roles on publicly funded productions are advertised beyond closed professional networks, alongside existing hiring practices.

Indicative measures:

- Percentage of roles advertised beyond closed professional networks on publicly funded or PSB-commissioned productions
- Evidence of recruitment routes used (advert, referral, repeat hire)



Recommendation 4:

Formalise and resource mentoring

Lead actors: Broadcasters; Skills bodies

Action:

Embed structured mentoring with allocated time, recognition and accountability, particularly at early and mid-career stages, linked to concrete progression opportunities.

Indicative measures:

- Number of formal mentoring relationships supported
- Progression and retention outcomes for participants at 12-24 months



Recommendation 5:

Target wellbeing interventions where risk is highest

Lead actors: Funders; Industry bodies; Broadcasters

Action:

Target mental health and wellbeing interventions to areas where evidence indicates risk is highest, including insecurity, isolation and labour intensity, with particular attention to freelancers and early- to mid-career workers.

Indicative measures:

- Uptake of targeted wellbeing support among freelancers and early- to mid-career workers
- Changes in self-reported wellbeing indicators across the workforce over time



Recommendation 6:

Pilot class-of-origin measures in PSB and publicly funded production reporting

Lead actors: Regulators; Funders; Broadcasters

Action:

Build on existing workforce monitoring (including Diamond) by piloting consistent class-of-origin measures alongside retention and progression indicators, enabling tracking of class-related progression and exit patterns over time.

Indicative measures:

- Consistency and completeness of class-of-origin reporting within PSB/public funding reporting returns
- Ability to identify disparities in progression and retention outcomes over time.

Next Steps

This briefing is intended to inform current policy, regulatory and workforce strategy discussions across UK television drama.

While some production is delivered in-house, independent production companies are central to implementation because they deliver most UK drama and translate commissioning decisions into working conditions. DCMS, Ofcom, PSBs and public funders are invited to pilot these proposals through existing commissioning, funding and reporting frameworks, focusing on retention, progression and workforce sustainability.

The authors welcome discussion with policymakers and industry partners on implementation pathways and evaluation.

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1. Film & TV Charity, *Looking Glass 2024*. In the 2024 survey, 35% of respondents rated their mental health as 'poor' or 'very poor', and the mean SWEMWBS wellbeing score (19.3) was substantially below the UK population average (26.0).