

Rishi Sunak MP
Chancellor of the Exchequer
HM Treasury
1 Horse Guards Road
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Alok Sharma MP
Secretary of State for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy
Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy
1 Victoria Street
London SW1H 0ET

18 March 2020

Dear Rishi & Alok,

COVID-19, school closures and working parents

Working Families is the UK's work-life balance charity. We provide legal advice to parents and carers on their rights at work, help employers create flexible and family-friendly workplaces, and influence decision-makers on policies to help parents and carers more easily balance work and care.

We're hugely concerned by the number of parents and carers already getting in touch with us for advice concerning COVID-19 and school closures. They are worried about keeping their jobs and being able to make ends meet during this unprecedented health crisis. Given it's now been confirmed schools are closing, and the Government has said it will do 'whatever it takes' to support businesses and individual throughout this national emergency, I wanted to set out the initial measures we think are needed to support working parents and carers.

Many working parents and carers with young children will soon find themselves needing to juggle work with looking after their children – including supporting their learning – at home. Employers should be encouraged to take a pragmatic approach to this, with an emphasis on allowing parents and carers to work from home and paying them as usual during this time.

Clearly, not all parents and carers are able to do their jobs from home – and if schools close, they won't be able to work. It's essential that the Government provides support to employers that can't afford to continue to pay staff who are unable to work from home. This includes small employers that cannot afford to absorb any fall in productivity due to the parents and carers they employ having to work from home whilst looking after their children. Particular attention should be paid to supporting parents and carers in insecure work, including the self-employed, as they are most at risk of not being paid.

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It's crucial that the social security system adapts to this national emergency to ensure that parents and carers who aren't being paid by their employers, or who aren't receiving an income because they are self-employed and can't work, continue to receive—at a minimum—pay for their hours worked at national minimum wage replacement levels. For the self-employed and those working irregular hours, pay should be based on how much they work on average. This should be paid at the beginning of each week following the end of the period their last wage covered, and should be in addition to the support they usually receive – requirements around hours worked should be disregarded during this time.

Finally, the Government needs to make it clear to employers that all parents and carers--regardless of their employment contract—can rely on their right to emergency time off for dependants while schools are closed, and that they cannot be dismissed or treated unfavourably as a result. Again, this point is particularly important for parents and carers in insecure work, as they are at a higher risk of not having a job to return to.

I hope you agree that the coronavirus outbreak has underlined the ongoing importance to the UK economy of good quality, part-time and flexible jobs being available to parents and carers, and that the Government's next steps around 'flexible by default' as announced in the Queen's Speech are meaningful enough to deliver a UK labour market that enables part-time and flexible working by default.

Best wishes,



Jane van Zyl
Chief Executive