

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

24 March 2020

Dear Rishi,

COVID-19, school closures and working parents

I warmly welcome the unprecedented measures that you announced on 20 March to support employees. These will make a real difference to UK working parents - especially the many working pregnant women we have heard from who have been frantically concerned about the financial implications of following the Government's advice on isolation.

However, I'm really concerned that, since Friday's announcement, eleven parents – all mothers – have been in touch with our Legal Advice Service indicating their employers intend to dismiss them – or to force them to take unpaid parental leave – following school closures. It would be really useful if the Government reminded employers that such an approach could expose them to legal action (in some cases women are being specifically targeted while their male colleagues are told they can work from home) – and that keeping them employed via the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme should be fully explored first. We are also hearing from pregnant women who are being told by their employers they can no longer work or receive any retention payment.

This message needs to be balanced with clarification that there is no need for employers to automatically 'furlough' their working parents. While there are significant challenges for working parents now needing to provide childcare and education, this does not automatically mean that parents are completely unable to work. Clear messaging urging employers to take a pragmatic approach, with an emphasis on allowing employees who can from work home to do so with changes to working patterns and hours, is needed. Employers should continue to pay employees working from home as usual, and they must have the right to return to their usual working pattern once the Government announces the end to these special measures. These messages could form part of the advertising campaign that you will shortly be commencing and the guidance to employers that HMRC is currently compiling.

If employers make wholesale decisions to 'furlough' one working parent in each working family, all the evidence suggests that it is overwhelmingly working mothers who will be put in this position. This risks undoing all the progress that the UK has made in closing the gender pay gap, alongside the obvious downsides for family wellbeing, incomes and economic productivity.

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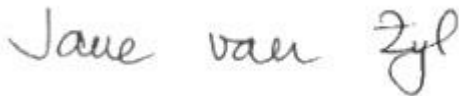
We know from our experience that parents and carers that are gig economy workers and zero-hours contractors are among the most likely to lose income in the current situation, and among the least likely to have a financial cushion to enable their families to weather this storm. It's crucial they are supported in the same way as employees.

I want to turn now to the self-employed, largely excluded from Friday's announcements. In addition to changes to the benefits system – notably increasing Universal Credit payments and suspending the minimum income floor for the self-employed affected by coronavirus - the Government should go further and reimburse 80% of their average earnings – or top their income up to 80% of their average earnings – up to £2,500 per month.

Finally, further reforms to the benefits system are needed. Parents getting in touch with us are worried their social security support will stop because they are having to take emergency time off to care for their children. The conditionality and sanctions regime is entirely unsuitable during this crisis and should be suspended immediately. Advance payments in Universal Credit should be an automatic grant, even if it is only an estimate of entitlement, and the five week wait for new applicants to commence Universal Credit should be immediately waived.

Working Families has worked with employers for more than forty years on how to make flexible working a usual way of doing businesses in the nation's workplaces, and we are keen to play our part in supporting the UK Government and UK employers in meeting this unprecedented challenge.

Best wishes,



Jane van Zyl
Chief Executive

CC. Liz Truss, Minister of State for Women & Equalities
Susan Clews CEO, ACAS
Rebecca Hilsenrath, CEO, Equalities & Human Rights Commission