Zero-hour contract workers in the creative industries

Bectu briefing • August 2026

Employment in the creative industries is often atypical and relies heavily on a freelance and casual workforce. Rather than following a standard full-time employment model, many workers build careers through a mixture of engagements across different employers, productions and projects. Long-term relationships with employers frequently exist alongside irregular working patterns, fluctuating hours and seasonal peaks and troughs in demand. Portfolio careers, short-term engagements and variable working patterns are a normal feature of employment across much of the sector. Zero-hours contracts remain a significant feature of employment in the creative and cultural industries.

Many workers value the flexibility these arrangements can offer, particularly where they are balancing multiple jobs, freelance work, study, caring responsibilities or creative practice. However, flexibility is too often experienced as one-sided. Rather than being shared between workers and employers, many workers bear the risks associated with fluctuating demand, unpredictable scheduling and last-minute changes to work. This can leave workers with uncertain working hours, unstable incomes and limited ability to plan their finances or personal lives.

In Bectu's big survey of almost 6,000 workers across the creative industries[1], 52% of zero-hour contract workers had a job cancelled at short notice in the previous 12 months. Only 16% said they felt secure in their job. And 61.9% earned less than £20,000, with 62% finding things financially difficult and 27% planning to leave the creative industries within the next five years. In the previous 12 months, zero-hours workers reported significant financial challenges:

- 14.7% had taken on debt to pay bills
- 14.7% had moved back in with family
- 12.9% were unable to pay household bills
- 10.3% had applied for Universal Credit
- 8.6% were unable to pay rent/mortgage
- 3.5% had used a foodbank

The Government's proposed reforms provide a welcome opportunity to rebalance the relationship between workers and employers by reducing one-sided flexibility while preserving the working arrangements that many creative workers value.

This briefing summarises the findings of our August 2026 survey of 369 Bectu members currently employed on zero-hours contracts in the creative industries [2]. We find that workers do not see flexibility and security as competing objectives. Instead, they support reforms that provide greater predictability over hours and income, ensure guaranteed-hours offers are meaningful, and protect workers from the financial consequences of short-notice cancellations and scheduling changes.

[1] https://bectu.org.uk/bectu-big-survey-hub/

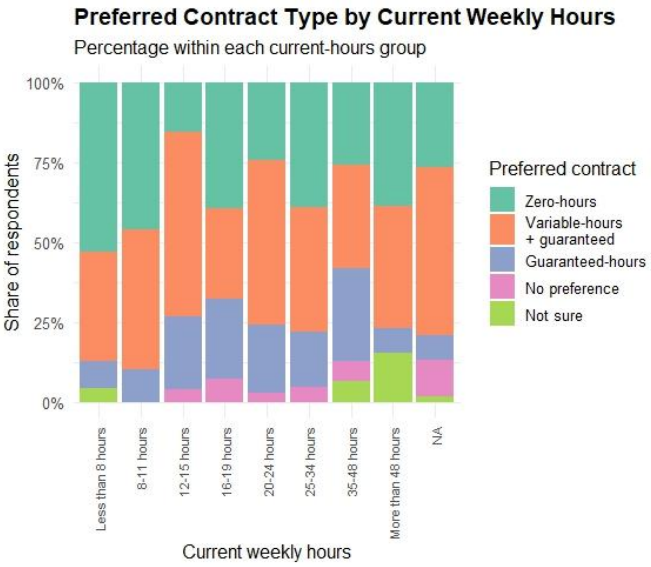
[2] We excluded any workers not currently on a zero hours contract, although we also represent workers on a number of minimal guaranteed hour contracts with similar experiences

Security and flexibility

Our survey demonstrates that there is no single contractual model that meets the needs of all workers in the creative and cultural industries. Respondents reflected the diversity of working patterns across theatres, live entertainment venues and cultural organisations, with many balancing employment alongside freelance work, creative practice, study, caring responsibilities, health needs or other paid jobs. More than two thirds (67.6%) reported having another paid job alongside their current zero-hours role.

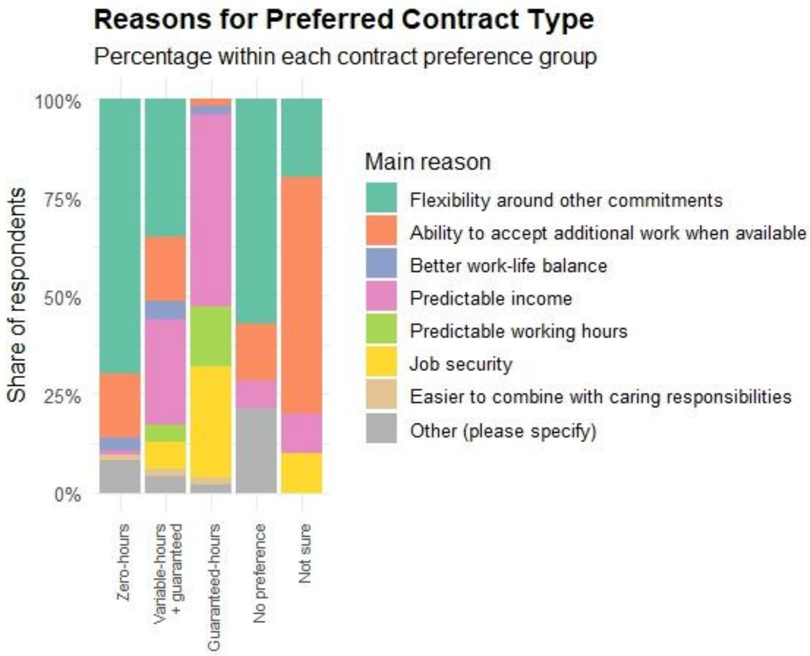
> *"As an actor, zero hour contracts means I can stop submitting availability for my zero hours contract job when I have an acting project and not lose that income stream when the project is over."*
>
> *"Having no obligation to provide work has left me without income at various points."*
>
> *"I've gone from averaging 32 hours a week to 8 or 12."*

When asked which type of contract they would prefer, the most popular option was a variable-hours contract with some guaranteed hours, chosen by 42.3% of respondents. A further 15.4% preferred a fully guaranteed-hours contract, while 35.4% preferred to remain on a zero-hours contract.



These findings suggest that workers are not seeking the replacement of all flexible working arrangements with fixed-hours employment. Rather, they indicate strong support for arrangements that combine the flexibility many workers value with greater security and predictability.

Workers who preferred to remain on zero-hours contracts most commonly highlighted the importance of maintaining flexibility around other employment, caring responsibilities and personal commitments. At the same time, workers who favoured guaranteed or partially guaranteed arrangements were more likely to emphasise the importance of predictable income and greater financial security."

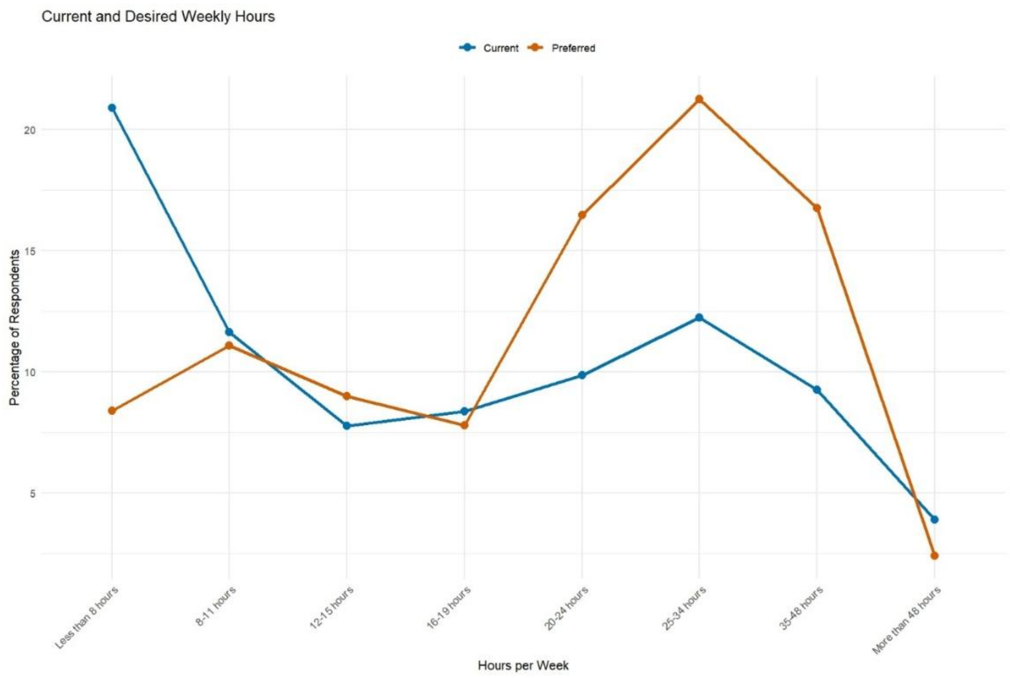


This emphasises that worker choice should remain central to any reforms. While some workers would welcome greater security through guaranteed-hours arrangements, others value the ability to work irregular patterns or accept work only when it suits their circumstances. Workers who genuinely prefer highly flexible arrangements should retain the ability to decline a guaranteed-hours offer where they do not wish to accept it. Collective agreements can also play an important role in providing appropriate optout mechanisms where alternative arrangements better reflect established working patterns and worker preferences.

The findings therefore challenge the idea that flexibility and security are competing objectives. Instead, they suggest that workers want flexibility that works for them, alongside protections that reduce the risks associated with insecure work. The strongest support was not for either extreme of the labour market, but for arrangements that provide a meaningful level of guaranteed work while retaining the flexibility that is often essential in the creative industries.

Working patterns

Workers on zero-hours contracts in the creative industries are engaged across a wide range of working patterns. While some respondents worked only a small number of hours each week, others were working close to full-time hours or more. Around one fifth (20.9%) reported working fewer than eight hours per week, while 12.2% worked 25-34 hours, 9.2% worked 35-48 hours and 3.9% reported working more than 48 hours each week.



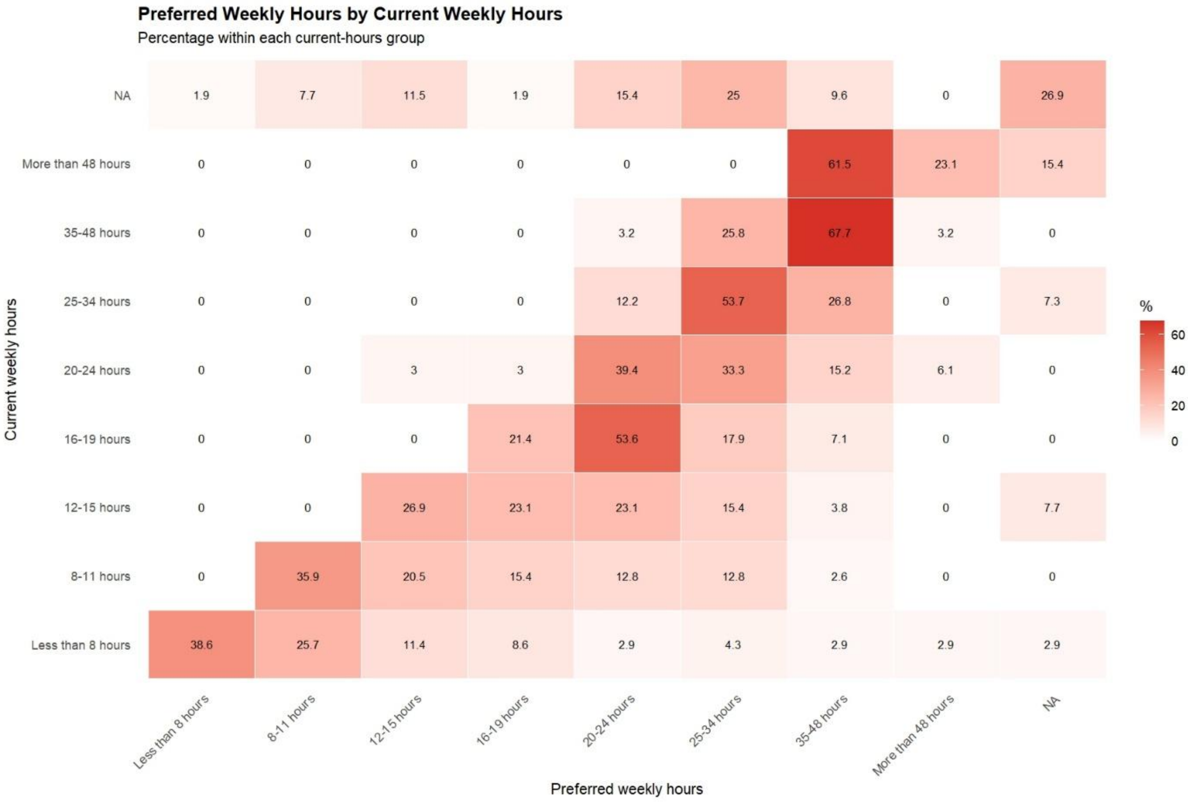
The variation in hours also reflects the reality that many creative workers experience fluctuating workloads over time. For example, a theatre worker may work intensive hours during rehearsals, technical rehearsals and performance runs, before seeing hours reduce during dark weeks or between productions. Similarly, workers in festivals, live events and visitor attractions may experience predictable peaks and troughs linked to seasonal demand, programming schedules or annual events. However, the survey suggests that insecurity is often linked not only to variable hours, but to insufficient access to work and income.

When asked how many hours they would ideally like to work on the same contract, respondents' preferences shifted noticeably towards higher hours bands. The most popular response was 25-34 hours per week (21.3%), followed by 35-48 hours (16.8%) and 20-24 hours (16.5%). By contrast, only 8.4% said they would ideally work fewer than eight hours per week.

This pattern is reflected in workers' overall views about their current level of work. While 54.6% said they would like to continue working roughly their current hours, 41.7% wanted to work more hours and just 3.6% wanted to work fewer.

For many workers, greater security is not simply about reducing fluctuations in working time. It is also about ensuring access to meaningful and predictable levels of work that provide a sustainable income.

This has important implications for the design of guaranteed-hours arrangements. If guaranteed-hours thresholds are set too low, there is a risk that workers receive contracts that provide only limited additional security while doing little to address the underlying issue of insufficient work and income. Many workers rely on opportunities to take on shifts beyond their contractual minimum in order to earn a sufficient income. If employers respond to the legislation by reducing access to additional hours, restricting overtime, or concentrating work among a smaller group of workers in order to manage guaranteed-hours obligations, workers may gain contractual guarantees on paper while losing opportunities to increase their earnings in practice.



Respondents also raised concerns about how additional hours are allocated, including reports of favouritism, workers being disadvantaged after declining shifts, and decisions being influenced by perceived availability. Such practices may disproportionately affect disabled workers, carers and others whose availability is more constrained. Reforms should therefore encourage meaningful and predictable work while ensuring that access to additional hours is allocated fairly and transparently.

If you were offered a guaranteed-hours contract, what minimum weekly guarantee would be meaningful to you?*	
Less than 8 hours	12.87%
8-11 hours	13.47%
12-15 hours	10.18%
16-19 hours	11.98%
20-24 hours	20.66%
25-34 hours	10.48%
35+ hours	8.38%
Not sure	11.98%

The survey suggests that workers want guaranteed-hours arrangements to provide genuine security rather than simply formalising existing insecurity. Our survey found that the largest group of respondents identified 20-24 hours per week as a meaningful guaranteed-hours contract, while more than half considered a guarantee of at least 16 hours per week to be meaningful.

Evidence gathered from our workplaces supports this conclusion. Discussions with members and employers often identified around 16 hours per week as the point at which a guaranteed-hours contract begins to offer meaningful security, whereas guarantees of only a few hours per week were frequently viewed as tokenistic. However, these agreements vary substantially, with some employers organising guaranteed hours on a basis of numbers of shifts, and some allocating these on a monthly or annual basis rather than weekly.

Collective agreements should be able to play a role in accommodating workers who genuinely prefer lower-hours arrangements. Rather than setting the statutory threshold at a very low level for everyone, collective bargaining offers a mechanism for preserving flexibility where workers want it, while maintaining a higher baseline of security for the wider workforce.

Work is variable, but often predictable

A defining feature of employment in the creative industries is that workloads often fluctuate over time. Productions, events, exhibitions, festivals, performance schedules and visitor demand can all influence the number of hours available at different points during the year. However, while work may be variable, much of this variation is predictable and forms part of normal business operations.

Workers on zero-hours contracts reported significant variation in their working hours. More than two thirds said that their hours were either subject to large variations (36.2%) or were very unpredictable (30.8%). Only 9.0% said their hours varied little throughout the year

Despite this variability, most respondents identified clear patterns in their workload. Almost half (45.8%) reported regular seasonal peaks and troughs, while a further 39.5% said that workload patterns varied from year to year. Just 6.0% said that work levels remained fairly consistent throughout the year.

When asked about the causes of fluctuating hours, respondents most commonly identified seasonal demand (60.9%), production or project schedules (58.4%) and employer scheduling decisions (42.2%). Many also cited managing multiple jobs (29.0%) and staff absences (22.3%).

> *"I can go months without having work there and then I will do 6 weeks of 5 days a week."*
>
> *"At peak periods I can end up working over 80 hours a week, however during down periods, I am given no work at all."*
>
> *"Even though peaks and troughs are known months in advance, it's hard having to spend peak times saving up to deal with the tough times."*

This evidence supports a distinction between genuinely unforeseen circumstances and the normal peaks and troughs of creative industry work. While employers need flexibility to respond to changing demand, predictable fluctuations should not in themselves justify ongoing insecurity.

Despite predictability, workers also reported receiving relatively short notice of their work schedules. Around a quarter (24.6%) said they usually receive less than one week's notice of work, while more than half (51.1%) receive less than two weeks' notice. By contrast, when asked what would constitute reasonable notice, 30.4% said two weeks and almost half (46.9%) considered three weeks or more to be reasonable. These findings suggest that many workers receive substantially less notice than they believe is necessary to effectively plan their working lives.

> *"I give my availability a month at a time but I only get my rota on a Thursday evening, sometimes a Saturday evening to know what I am doing on the Sunday. This makes it hard to plan activities with family and friends."*

"I have found that the places I work are giving less notice about work and often being offered it with a few days notice."

A framework that encourages better workforce planning, through ensuring decent notice periods and cancellation protections for workers, while recognising the realities of seasonal and project-based work, is likely to provide greater security for workers without sacrificing the flexibility required by the sector.

Workers currently bear the costs of cancellation

The risks associated with fluctuating demand and last-minute changes to work are often borne by workers rather than employers. At present, relatively few workers receive reliable compensation when work is cancelled. Just 8.6% of respondents said they always receive compensation when a scheduled shift is cancelled, while 48.6% said they only sometimes receive compensation and 35.7% said they never receive compensation.

Research by the Living Wage Foundation found that workers with variable hours frequently face additional financial costs as a result of short-notice scheduling, with 27% reporting higher travel costs and 17% incurring additional childcare expenses. The research estimated that these insecurity-related costs can amount to as much as £600 per year for affected workers, before accounting for the costs of lost work.

The impact on creative industry workers is particularly stark given that most are balancing multiple jobs. More than two thirds (67.6%) of respondents reported having another paid job alongside their current role, meaning that accepting one shift can often involve turning down other work opportunities.

Workers described a range of consequences when shifts or engagements were cancelled, including lost income, difficulties securing alternative work, and the costs of rearranging personal commitments:

"Currently if a conference is cancelled it is always within a week... just outside the 48 hours period before we can get compensation. So with less than a week's notice of cancellation it's then hard to pick up work elsewhere."

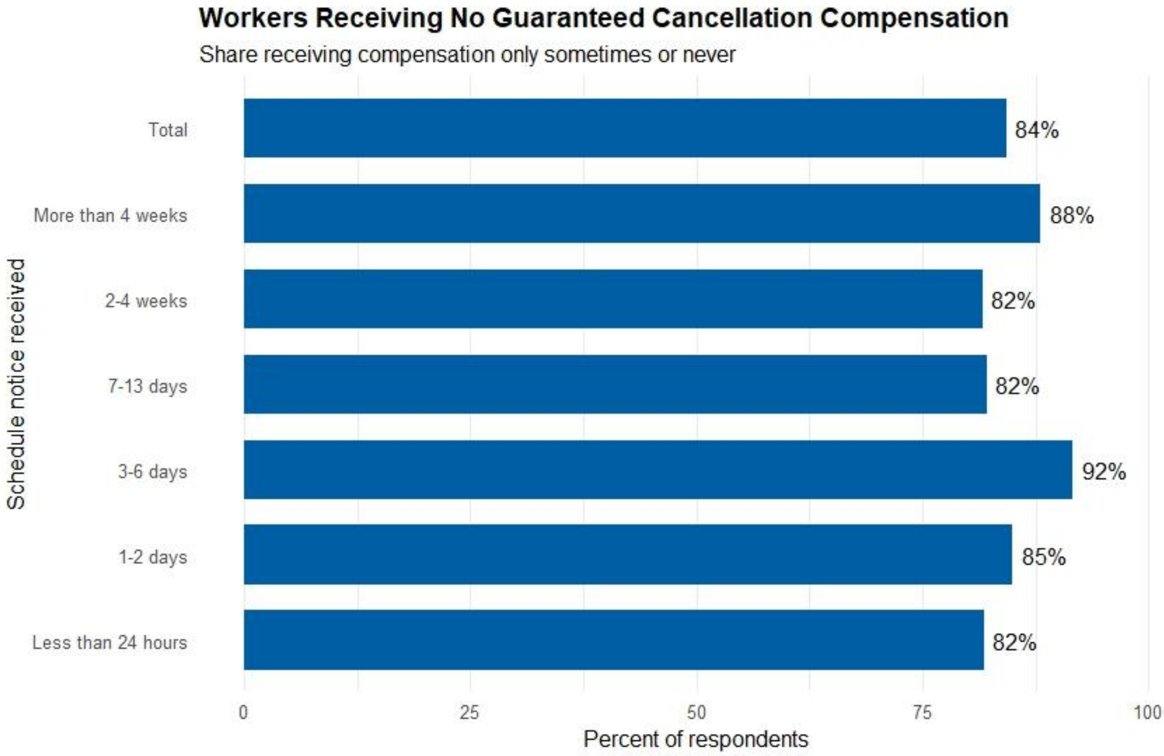
"Having no obligation to provide work has left me without income at various points."

"Cancellations not paid for, sent home early and not paid all call that booked for where could have taken work elsewhere."

One theatre worker reserved almost three weeks for a production expected to generate around £2,650 in earnings, only for most dates to be cancelled with a few days' notice. Because most of this was recurrent cancellations at two to three days notice, just above the 48-hour cancellation payment trigger in the collective agreement between us and the employer, the worker ultimately earned around £600 and was unable to replace much of the lost work. The worker had moved a planned family holiday after being told they would be required during a technical rehearsal period. When the work was later cancelled, they had already incurred costs rearranging the booking.

When asked about compensation for short-notice cancellations, 80.6% of respondents believed some compensation should be payable where a shift is cancelled less than seven days before it starts. The most common response was compensation equivalent to 50% of expected pay.

Support increased significantly where cancellations occurred very close to the start of a shift. When asked about cancellations made less than 48 hours before work was due to begin, 56.2% of respondents supported compensation equivalent to 100% of expected pay, while almost three quarters (72.6%) supported compensation of at least 80% of expected earnings.



Existing agreements across the sector provide practical examples of how cancellation protections can operate. Under our agreement with Pact covering crew engaged on commercial productions, cancellations made between four and six days before an engagement attract a payment of 50% of the agreed fee, rising to 75% for cancellations two to three days before an engagement and 100% where cancellation occurs the day before work is due to take place. Similar principles exist in agreements covering television drama, major motion picture production and BBC Studios productions.

The agreements have helped discourage speculative bookings and encourages employers to confirm staffing requirements before committing workers' time, demonstrating that meaningful cancellation payments can both protect workers and improve workforce planning.

The Government's proposed reforms provide an opportunity to extend similar protections more widely across the creative industries, ensuring that the costs of cancellations are shared more fairly between workers and employers. By reducing one-sided flexibility while recognising the realities of project-based, seasonal and portfolio working, the Government's proposed reforms offer an important opportunity to improve security across the creative industries.

About Bectu

Bectu is a sector of the trade union Prospect, representing around 40,000 workers in non-performing roles across the creative industries, including film, television, theatre, live events, fashion, gaming and cinema. Across the sector, we represent many workers on zero hour and contracts with minimal guaranteed hours, predominantly in theatre, live performance and cinema.