

Dear Chancellor,

Protecting the jobs of workers who have been shielding or are at high-risk and who can neither work from home nor return to the workplace safely

We are writing to you as charities which support people who have been shielding or are at high-risk because they are considered particularly vulnerable to Covid-19.

We know that there is a subset of 'shielders' and those who are high-risk of all ages who are usually very productively employed but whose capacity to keep working has been undermined by the advent of the virus.

Our concern is that, especially as your furlough arrangements start to unwind and the shielding scheme is paused from next week, some of these workers will find themselves in an impossible position. This is because if their occupation is one which they cannot carry out from home, and if it is extremely difficult to make their workplace safe for them, they may be forced to choose between putting their health on the line by returning, or staying safe by giving up their job.

Some of these people work for very flexible and understanding employers, but others are not so lucky. In addition, having spoken to organisations that represent employers we are conscious that these issues pose real concerns for them too, as managers will face unenviable decisions about whether to let go an affected staff member – who may be highly valued – or essentially funding them to stay at home, not working.

With the financial pressures on most organisations being as they are at the moment we fear the inevitable result of the situation we have described is that many of these individuals will very quickly lose their jobs. We are already hearing from some who have been made redundant, told to retrain or forced to return to work when they do not feel it safe for them to do so.

It seems desperately unfair for those who have made great sacrifices over the last few months to protect themselves, their families and the NHS, to now lose their employment. We do not have to tell you that this will also add to the unemployment figures which we know you are working tremendously hard to try to keep down.

For these reasons we are asking you to take action through a targeted intervention to protect these shielding and high-risk workers' livelihoods and to support their employers to keep them in their jobs. There are various mechanisms that could be used, one being a furlough-style scheme for this finite group of people.

We urge you to consider helping these employees and their employers in this way. These people have supported all of us by keeping themselves safe from the virus and we believe that now it's time for us to reciprocate by helping to protect their jobs, their lives, and the progress we have all made as a society in fighting this terrible virus.

Yours sincerely,

Caroline Abrahams, Charity Director, Age UK

Dr Alison Cook, Director of External Affairs, Asthma UK and the British Lung Foundation

Sue Millman, Chief Executive, Ataxia UK

Gemma Peters, Chief Executive, Blood Cancer UK

Genevieve Edwards, Chief Executive, Bowel Cancer UK

Dr Keith Brownlee, Director of Policy Programmes and Support, Cystic Fibrosis Trust

Chris Askew, Chief Executive, Diabetes UK

Paul Bristow, Chief Executive, Kidney Care UK

Lynda Thomas, Chief Executive, Macmillan Cancer Support

Nick Moberly, Chief Executive, MS Society

David Martin, Chief Executive, Multiple Sclerosis Trust

Charlotte Augst, Chief Executive, National Voices

Georgina Carr, Chief Executive, Neurological Alliance

Steve Ford, Chief Executive, Parkinson's UK

Simon Parritt, Chair, Polio Survivors Network