

Peter Strachan, Postgraduate Research Student, Department of Media and Journalism, Glasgow Caledonian University

Scottish Broadcasting

Introduction

Following a 28-year career as a BAFTA and RTS nominated producer and director of documentaries and factual programmes for the BBC and Channel 4, in October 2024 I began an Applied Research Collaborative Scholarship ([ARCS](#)) PhD entitled: “Unseen Talent: The impact of Public Service Broadcasting commissioning and production practices on the UK’s Nations film and television freelancers.”

Working in collaboration with Glasgow Caledonian University, the University of Glasgow and [Directors UK](#) as the non-academic partner, over the next three and a half years this project will examine inequalities in commissioning and production for Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) to understand geographical disparities affecting freelancers based in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and identify alternative futures for commissioning and production practice.

The research takes a mixed methods approach (interviews, focus groups, ethnographic triangulation, coding, survey design, sampling and survey analysis), participatory observation, reflexive collaboration with Directors UK and other broadcast organisations and figures, and desk-based research. Sampling will encompass working directors, freelance off-screen production talent, broadcast executives and policymakers, supported by professional networks.

Core research questions include:

- How the Ofcom regional production regulatory system works in practice, and what patterns can be observed in commissioning and production across the UK, particularly Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.
- How commissioning and production practices affect geographical employment opportunities for off-screen talent living and working in the UK Nations.

- What policy and regulatory reforms would improve employment opportunities for off-screen talent in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Context: A commissioning, not a freelancer crisis

The UK broadcasting production ecosystem is undergoing a seismic shift with profound consequences for Scotland's off-screen film and TV freelancers. This is not primarily a freelancer crisis but a commissioning crisis, driven by market factors and exacerbated by commissioning and production decisions made principally in London.

With commissioning levels decreasing and commissioner risk aversion increasing as the impact of falling advertising and reductions in license fee income took a greater toll, freelance job opportunities began to collapse from mid-2023. Far fewer single documentaries and short factual series, where many Scottish freelancers traditionally found work, were being commissioned. Also, historically, few returnable network series have been commissioned in Scotland which elsewhere in the UK provide longer freelance contracts, making broadcast production careers more sustainable. As a result, many have been forced to abandon hard-won careers. Meanwhile, instead of concrete initiatives to sustain established and experienced talent, millions are being poured into training for new entrants and "createch" jobs that do not exist at scale and possibly never will.

Decades of under-investment, precarity, low pay and poor progression mean long-term sustainable freelance careers are increasingly impossible for most based in Scotland. High profile productions like *The Traitors* and *The Outrun* may film in Scotland, but this does not imply that Scotland's freelance production community is thriving. Evidence suggests Scottish off-screen freelancers are systematically sidelined - especially at senior levels - and, when employed, often endure toxic working conditions. Job precarity is widespread and a constant concern.

A Screen Scotland [report](#) has claimed the screen sector is on course to contribute £1 billion GVA, but such modelling rarely reflects the lived experience of freelancers and little of this boon reaches Scottish off-screen talent.

The mental-health implications are stark. The Film & TV Charity's [Looking Glass Report 2024](#) found that 30% of respondents had thoughts of taking their own life in the past 12 months. This must be treated as an urgent warning and considered when evaluating policy, regulation, annual accounts and press releases from the DCMS, the Scottish Government, Ofcom, the BBC and Channel 4 et al.

Regional production: a system that fails Scotland's freelancers

While many adverse factors are at play, my research focuses on the broadcast regulatory system and how it operates in commissioning and production practices - beginning with notable BBC Network Scottish commissions as the BBC remains Scotland's single most significant provider of job opportunities.

Sample data supporting my research funding came from investigating the geographical distribution of freelancers named in the end credits of productions listed as "Scotland" in Ofcom's annually published Made Outside London Titles Registers. While it is not possible to access electoral roll or tax records, it is possible to establish where production talent is based using publicly available sources such as job portals, CVs and social media platforms. Findings are supported by anonymised datasets, linked from the [SUSST home page](#), (Speaking Up For Scotland's Screen Talent), on Substack.

The Traitors offers a clear example. It has been used by BBC Scotland leadership to suggest Scottish hiring is rising. However, analysis shows only a small increase, largely accounted for by Runners, (the most junior roles). These jobs were largely funded via Screen Scotland rather than the licence-fee production budget - raising the question of whether such Scottish hiring would have occurred without public subsidy. A fuller discussion is available in an [op-ed](#) for The National.

Scottish hires on The Traitors were: 7% ([Series 1](#)), 8% ([Series 2](#)), and 6% ([Series 3](#)) - all at junior levels, with no senior creative roles filled by Scotland-based freelancers bar one BBC Scotland Executive Producer. While this may not breach the letter of existing regulation, it fails the spirit of regional production rules. The Traitors is not an exception; the research project will extend analysis to Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish productions in the Ofcom MoL Titles registers across the last three years.

My research looks at the different ways licence fee money is allocated to Scotland. Despite a recent promise to spend more here, an analysis of the latest BBC annual accounts, outlined in this [op-ed](#), shows network spend in Scotland fell last year while increasing in England.

The problem is the rulebook itself

The [Ofcom Regional Production Guidance](#) is designed with "flexibility" for PSBs and production companies. This is particularly apparent in the eligibility criterion relating to freelance talent:

"At least 50% of the production talent (i.e. not on-screen talent) 'by cost' must have their usual place of employment in the UK outside the M25..."

Because the quota is measured 'by cost' rather than by the number of roles or, crucially, where talent lives and works, productions can meet the threshold while hiring relatively few freelancers from Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. Combined with the use of the M25 as the dividing line, commissions attributed to Scotland can still be staffed to significant extents by talent based outside Scotland. The design of this rule means it can't deliver on its stated aim to the extent it ought to, and can be ignored altogether.

Research in the Media Reform Coalition's 2025 [report](#) 'Who Owns the UK Media?' reveals that almost 50% of commissioning spend goes to just 11% of UK production companies - none headquartered in Scotland. Often part of large media groups, these companies tend to operate closed talent networks that under-value Scotland-based off-screen talent. The research project will also examine the geographical distribution of hires on productions by this cohort to assess the systemic effects.

The issue is not only the volume of Scottish hires, but the location of senior creative and business roles. In dramas such as [Vigil](#), below-the-line craft roles, (Ads, wardrobe, make-up, SFX, camera assistants etc), may be filled locally, but key above-the-line production leadership positions are often not. This prevents Scottish producing, writing and directing talent from flourishing. Sample data indicates that directors based in Scotland account for under 38% across [all Mol Scottish scripted and unscripted productions](#) in 2003.

The Outrun won a BAFTA Scotland in 2025 but it is not a Scottish film. Based on the work of a Scottish novelist and partly filmed here, the Director/Screenwriter and Cinematographer are German. The star of the film is Irish and is credited as a Producer. Likewise her husband, actor Jack Lowdon. He is Scottish. This is the connection that allowed the production to receive Screen Scotland funding but it's a stretch to argue he actively produced the film. The film's two main Producers are based in London. Still Pushing Pineapples, the feature doc that opened the prestigious Sheffield Doc Fest last year also received Screen Scotland funding. The director is based in the northeast of England. As was the production. To obtain Scottish government funding, an Edinburgh Producer was attached. It's a common occurrence which I will be examining further.

Our screen funding system is being gamed, with genuinely Scottish productions in the pipeline losing out. With so little funding, our national screen agency is resorting to buying in success from outside Scotland.

Screen Scotland's Broadcast Content Fund has massively cut back on awarding development funds because proposals aren't being commissioned. To stand a chance of being successful, proposals now must have 'broadcaster interest'

attached, despite the fact that if you have it, you probably won't then need the development funding.

The three [new Scottish BBC dramas](#), currently in production and supported by Screen Scotland, are a more positive development. They all have senior Scottish creative talent attached. However, 2 of the 3 production companies involved are HQ-ed outside Scotland so it's possible the IP will not be invested here.

Documentaries with important Scottish stories such as Salmond and Sturgeon: A Troubled Union and Strike! The Village That Fought Back, both BBC, were directed by freelancers based in London hired by Firecrest Films (Glasgow). Bluelight series such as Highland Cops and Paramedics on the Scene, also made by Firecrest, often hire junior, less experienced and therefore less expensive producer directors who are rarely given an opportunity to edit the programmes. This 'factory' production model decreases the future employment prospects of both cohorts as it both diminishes the development of editorial skills and distinctive directing voices.

Against this backdrop, heavy policy emphasis and funding aimed at enticing young people into broadcast production feel ethically questionable when existing professional careers cannot be sustained.

Policy and regulatory recommendations

Many solutions to the commissioning collapse are not within devolved Scottish powers. A 'cultural contribution levy' on SVOD subscriptions - used across Europe to fund domestic production - has been rejected by the UK Government. However, this Committee can call for measures that would strengthen sustainability and create meaningful careers for Scotland's freelancers, including:

1. Devolve broadcasting regulation in Scotland to align PSB obligations with better Scottish employment outcomes.
2. Retain 5% of the licence fee raised in Scotland to fund development of Scottish scripted and unscripted proposals.
3. Close the BBC Scotland Channel and its huge operating costs to further fund development and production here with programmes going straight to the iPlayer.
4. Extend PSB ethos in the next BBC Charter to include the workforce that creates content and IP, supporting sustainable careers and healthy working conditions.
5. Require the BBC to commission more Scottish-headquartered production companies and producers/directors to ensure IP and future production capacity remain in Scotland.

6. Increase Screen Scotland's budget, (currently approximately three times smaller than Screen Ireland's), and rebalance support toward script development and meaningful production finance.
7. Introduce stricter cultural eligibility tests for Screen Scotland funding to prevent "buying in" success and ensure Scottish funding supports genuinely Scottish productions with substantial levels of Scottish senior creative talent attached. Alternatively, funding could be used to support writers, producers and directors, based in Scotland rather than productions originating elsewhere.
8. Reform Ofcom regional production rules so the 50% off-screen quota is measured by where freelancers live and habitually work, not "by cost," and not using the M25 as the main boundary.
9. Require detailed production reporting and end self-monitoring and self-policing that obscure regional underinvestment.
10. Stop valuing Scotland's screen sector primarily via 'wider economic impact' metrics such as tourism; screen tourism is a welcome by-product, not the prime directive.
11. Introduce tax relief for all factual production, as recently announced in [Ireland](#).
12. [Extend current tax reliefs](#), (HETV, feature docs, animation VFX etc), as well as all factual productions to include lower threshold e.g. 5/Paramount's proposal to support mid-level drama production to bring UK productions back to being made in this country rather than overseas shooting.
13. Reform benefits and income support for creative freelancers. The report '[Make Freelancing Pay](#)' provides detailed evidence; Ireland's Basic Income for the Arts scheme is being made permanent from 2026 after a pilot that improved stability and wellbeing.
14. Ensure [SVOD subscriptions](#) are appropriately taxed in the UK; streamer inward investment is often overstated and does not substantially benefit Scotland's freelance workforce.
15. Reduce excessive public spend on training schemes and redirect funding toward development and production that supports established broadcast talent.
16. Regulate YouTube as part of the broadcast ecosystem, recognising it is not currently a way to secure job creation for Scottish off-screen talent but this could change if seed funding is made available.
17. Require all PSB production jobs to be publicly advertised; most recruitment is currently through closed networks.

Conclusion

The broadcast market is structurally failing Scotland's freelance production workforce. The crisis is not primarily caused by freelancers, but by commissioning decline and a regulatory system that allows PSBs to meet obligations without meaningful investment in Scotland's talent.

Without significant policy and regulatory reform, Scotland's broadcast freelancers will continue to be treated as a disposable resource rather than valued contributors to PSB content and IP.

If PSBs and production companies are not obliged to act differently, Scotland's freelancers will not flourish to the extent they should.