

Making Television, Making Class: *What's On?*



A report on class inequality
in UK TV drama

Led by



Funded by



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Executive Summary

UK television is in a period of profound transition. Commissioning and funding models, the rise of global platforms, and changing audience behaviours are major challenges for the industry. Working conditions underpinning TV production - freelance labour, short-term contracts, long hours, and intermittent employment - have become more precarious, particularly for early-career workers.

In this environment, class inequality should be understood not primarily as an access problem, but as a workforce sustainability problem. The evidence indicates that informal recruitment, freelance precarity, London-centred progression, and uneven regional authority combine to create a labour market in which those from working-class backgrounds face greater career risk at every stage. This report addresses one of the most persistent and least resolved forms of inequality in UK television: **social class**. It demonstrates that:

- Class inequality is reproduced through routine industry practices, not isolated incidents.
- Informal hiring remains the default.
- Having financial security is now a hidden requirement for working in TV.
- Regional production has expanded, but power remains London-centred.
- Class intersects with race, gender, and disability to compound exclusion.
- Class shapes on-screen representation as well as employment.
- Class shapes audience trust.

- Class inequality in TV can be challenged and changed. The report makes the following recommendations:
- Track progression and retention outcomes, not only entry into the industry.
 - Increase recruitment transparency and reduce reliance on closed-network hiring.
 - Reduce the financial barriers that drive working-class talent out, including unpaid gaps between contracts and cumulative freelance costs.
 - Strengthen regionally sustainable career pathways, not only dispersed production activity.
 - Reduce the career penalty attached to not relocating to London, particularly for early- and mid-career workers and those with caring responsibilities.
 - Embed awareness of class into editorial and creative decision-making, recognising how class is communicated through tone, space, and production design as well as script.
 - Improve measurement of class inequality across workforce, audience, and on-screen outcomes.



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These findings matter directly for public service broadcasting, because workforce sustainability and who holds creative authority shape the credibility of representation and long-term audience trust.



Introduction

UK television is undergoing rapid change, but working conditions remain central to how class inequality is produced and sustained. Drawing on rare access to two in-depth drama case studies, the *What's On?* research traces how class shapes who works in the industry, what is made, and how it is understood by audiences.

Commissioning is increasingly risk-averse, production is more fragmented, and employment is more precarious. At the same time, audiences are watching drama across a wider range of platforms, and expectations around authenticity and representation continue to evolve.

In this environment, questions of who gets to make television - and whose lives are treated as credible on screen - are not secondary concerns. They are **central to the resilience of the UK's screen workforce and the long-term legitimacy of public service media**. The report identifies practical points of intervention for broadcasters, production companies, regulators, and policymakers.

Despite two decades of diversity initiatives, class continues to structure opportunity, progression, and creative authority - shaping who enters the industry, who can afford to remain, and who moves into senior roles.

It also intersects with race, gender, disability, age, and geography, compounding exclusion in a freelance labour market. The findings draw on the AHRC-funded project *What's On? Rethinking Class in the Television Industry* (2023–2026), conducted in partnership with the BBC and Channel 4, combining two anonymised drama case studies, 52 interviews (plus 14 supplementary interviews), case study analysis, and four audience focus groups conducted between 2024 and 2025.

The interview sample includes a higher proportion of working-class origin participants than large-scale national datasets typically indicate for the screen sector. This reflects the project's qualitative design and purposive recruitment strategy. The evidence should not be read as representative of the industry's overall class composition. Instead, it provides detailed insight into how class advantage and disadvantage are reproduced within television careers, including among workers who are already established but face structural barriers to progression and authority.

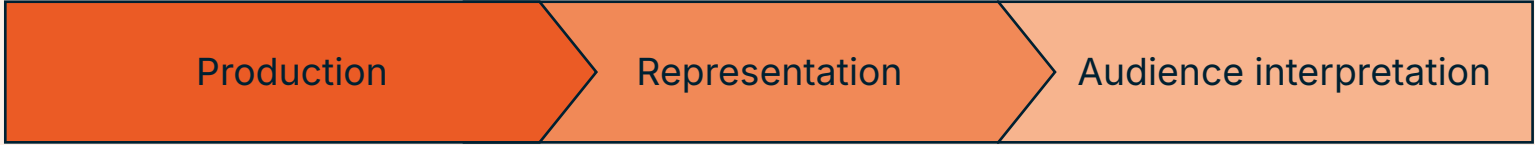
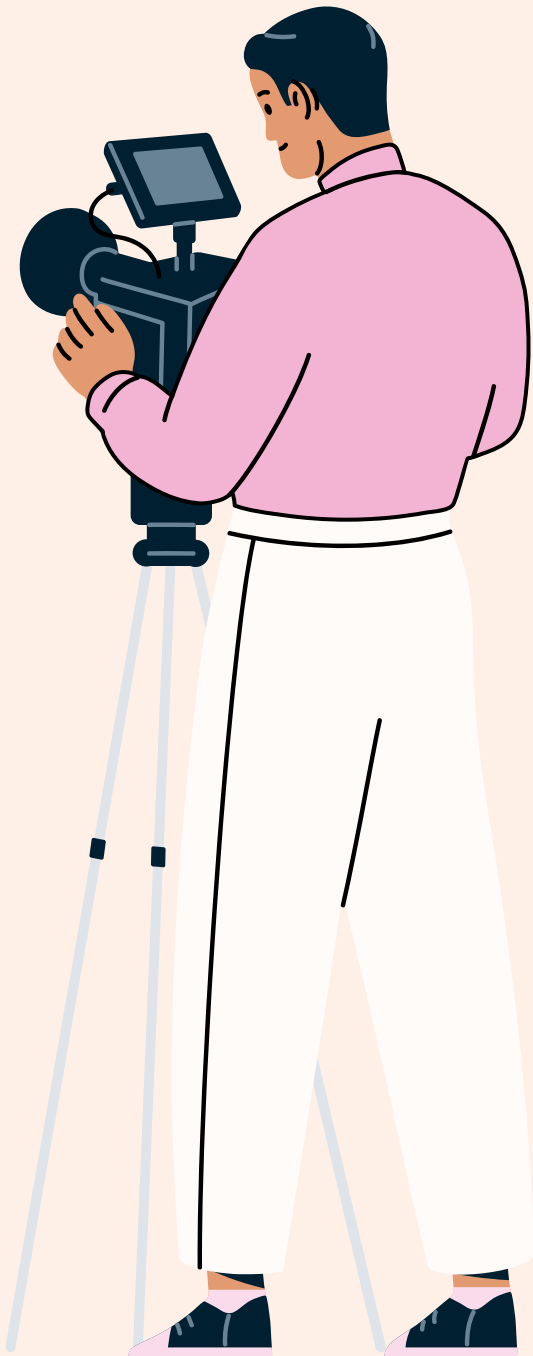
This report focuses primarily on UK television drama. Drama remains one of the most culturally influential genres in UK television, shaping public understandings of inequality, belonging, and national life. However, many of the **structural mechanisms** identified in this research - informal recruitment, freelance precarity, regional power imbalances, and cultural gatekeeping - have wider relevance across the television industry.

If current trends continue, the sector risks narrowing the talent pipeline at the point of greatest economic pressure, losing skilled workers who cannot afford to remain in the industry. It also risks reinforcing London-centric creative authority even as production disperses, and weakening the credibility of public service drama among audiences who feel under-represented or talked down to.

The findings in this report indicate that class inequality in UK television drama is solvable, but only through sustained attention to recruitment norms, workforce sustainability, regional power, and progression into creative authority.

This project is distinctive in tracing two anonymised drama productions end-to-end: from production cultures, to on-screen representation, to audience interpretation.

Analytical model used in the *What's On?* research to trace class across production, representation, and audience interpretation.



Findings

These findings draw together interview evidence, drama case study analysis, and audience focus groups, tracing class across production cultures, representation, and reception.



1

Informal recruitment remains the default – and reproduces class inequality.

Interview evidence shows that recruitment is one of the primary mechanisms through which class inequality is reproduced in UK television drama. Participants described an industry where roles are routinely filled through word-of-mouth hiring, informal referrals, and repeated collaborations.

These practices are often justified as necessary for production speed, trust, and 'fit'. However, they systematically disadvantage those without inherited industry connections or the cultural capital to access these networks.

Analysis of how 49 participants obtained their current roles reveals the scale of informal hiring. 61% of their jobs came through personal networks – word of mouth, personal connections, and previous working relationships – compared with just 8% via open advertisements. A further 16% of our participants entered through training schemes such as ScreenSkills, and 12% via agents.

Percentages are based on participants who provided this information and may not sum to 100%.

Closed-network recruitment remains one of the strongest structural drivers of class inequality in television careers:

“

This industry is built on networking and who you know. Nepotism is rife because everyone knows each other. They're not going to employ someone they don't know.”

Junior production role

“

Very rarely are jobs advertised, to be honest. A producer will get linked to that, and then a producer will then go through a sort of process of choosing their heads of department. And then what you find is it starts to kind of run down that way.”

Production management role

2

Freelance precarity makes financial security a hidden requirement for career survival.

The television labour market increasingly selects for those with external financial support. Across interviews, workers described careers structured around intermittent contracts, long hours, and early-career roles that are poorly paid relative to living costs in production centres.

For working-class origin workers, these conditions create a structural ‘survival test’: the ability to remain in the industry often depends on access to savings, family support, or a partner’s income. This produces attrition not at the point of entry, but over time, as workers leave despite having skills and experience.

One recurring pattern described by working-class origin participants was ‘near-miss progression’: workers reached a point where they were consistently employed but could not build savings or stability because contracts were short and gaps were frequent. Many described taking on additional paid work outside the industry during breaks between productions, while peers with financial support were able to remain continuously available for work.

In practice, class inequality is reproduced through who can afford to endure insecurity long enough to progress:

“

The only people that can afford to perform professionally and sit around and wait for jobs are people that usually have got some money in the bank... I know so many people that can’t afford just to hang around. They have to have a second job.”

Senior production role

“

If you’ve got kids and you’re trying to break into it, it would be nearly impossible. In terms of working hours, you’re out of the house for like 14 hours a day.”

Junior production role



Regional production has expanded, but creative authority remains concentrated.

The research also shows that geography compounds class exclusion. While production outside London has increased, participants consistently described commissioning influence and senior creative authority as remaining concentrated in the capital. Regional workers reported longer gaps between contracts, limited access to senior decision-makers, and fewer clear pathways to senior roles.

This reinforces a two-tier industry: regional production without regional power. It also makes regional careers less sustainable for workers without financial safety nets, since intermittent employment is more difficult to manage outside established London networks.

This geographic burden falls disproportionately on working-class entrants. In one case study, around four-fifths of participants who relocated to London were from working-class backgrounds. In the other, most participants were already region-based and predominantly working-class, suggesting that access improves when productions draw on local labour rather than requiring relocation.

Regional expansion will not widen opportunity unless decision-making power moves with it:

“

When they did it, it was quite ironic for all of those who were working up there that we still weren’t getting any work because they just brought everybody from London up there.”

Senior creative role, on MediaCity move

“

I think the ship has sailed for me to move away down to London and work down there. I’ve got a family. I don’t want to work away. So, it is important that there’s work in the nations and regions.”

Production management role



Cultural gatekeeping shapes credibility, voice, and progression.

Even where formal barriers are overcome, class hierarchies continue to operate through cultural judgement. Participants described accent, vocabulary, confidence, and social performance as everyday mechanisms that shape who is trusted, who is listened to, and who is assumed to belong in senior creative spaces.

This affects more than workplace atmosphere. It shapes creative authority. Workers described how cultural gatekeeping influences who is invited into key conversations, whose ideas are treated as valuable, and who is perceived as leadership material. Over time, it can also lead to self-censorship among workers who feel they must constantly manage how they speak and present themselves to be taken seriously.

Class gatekeeping operates through everyday judgements about credibility, confidence and 'fit':

“

I come from what I would call a working-class background. When I started drama school, I had a very, very thick accent, and the heads of school drilled it out of me and told me I needed to speak in RP in order to fit in with the status quo.

Junior crew role

“

It's just not right, is it? People just presume, don't they - you've got a London accent, so he is uneducated. I had quite a good education. It was only a state school, but I didn't do bad.”

Technical crew role



Class intersects with race, gender, and disability to compound exclusion.

Class inequality does not operate in isolation. Across the case studies, workers facing multiple barriers encountered the steepest obstacles to entry, retention, and progression.

Non-white working-class participants were disproportionately concentrated in junior and trainee roles, and more likely to describe mobility pressures linked to London-centred production cultures. Disabled and neurodivergent participants were also more likely to be from working-class backgrounds, indicating that class disadvantage compounds other inequalities in freelance production. Differences between the productions suggest that dedicated access provision may shape disclosure and retention.

Intersecting inequalities require intersecting solutions: addressing class alone will not resolve the compounded barriers facing workers who are also Black, disabled, or from outside London:

“

Non-white people tend to be from poorer backgrounds and, again, going with the freelance nature of the industry, that is incredibly difficult to manage and maintain... losing out on a networking opportunity can be quite detrimental.

Mid-level production role

“

I'm a mid-life, South Asian woman from the regions. I'm working hard but I think the odds are stacked against you right from the off.”

Development/editorial role



Class representation has shifted: from ‘kitchen sink’ to ‘kitchen island’.

Case study analysis shows that class has not disappeared from television drama, but it is increasingly communicated through domestic aesthetics, lifestyle cues, and tone rather than through labour, collective life, or structural inequality. The shift from ‘kitchen sink’ to ‘kitchen island’ captures this change: inequality becomes legible through taste and space, not just material constraint.

Across both case studies, class meaning was often carried by aesthetic decisions - production design, location, lighting, pace, and performance - rather than explicit dialogue alone. One drama foregrounded institutional competence and public authority, while the other used a slower, observational style that allowed class to register through proximity, discomfort and micro-detail.

In contemporary drama, class is often communicated through tone and space as much as through dialogue:

“

We end up with two extremes, don’t we? Stately homes or council estates, and nothing in between. I’ve always said, where are all the series about the Barratt home estates on the outside of Leeds?”

Senior creative role

“

There’s that peculiar thing about aspirational telly, where people who clearly couldn’t afford it live in houses that are way too big for them, with massive kitchens, with granite worktops and two cars in the drive. I loathe that, and I think that has kind of undercut the whole point of what drama is about.”

Mid-career creative role



Audience research shows that class shapes reception, trust, and broadcaster legitimacy.

Focus group evidence shows that audiences read class quickly through cues such as accent, housing, clothing, and behaviour, even when they resist naming it directly.

Across groups, the strongest responses centred on economic vulnerability and unequal treatment by institutions - insecure housing, unstable work, debt, and power in workplaces and public services. These depictions were described as emotionally credible, while portrayals seen as exploitative (‘poverty porn’) or socially narrow attracted scepticism. Participants also expressed a desire for a wider emotional range, including working-class joy, humour, and ordinary everyday life, rather than stories defined only by hardship.

Broadcaster reputations shaped expectations of authenticity: the BBC was associated with quality and seriousness but also a “safe” or “polished” tone, while Channel 4 was more consistently linked to risk-taking and a wider social range.

Class operates as a credibility test: audiences evaluate drama as a claim to social knowledge - whether it feels made by people who understand the world being represented:

“

I quite often feel like some of the BBC dramas, not all, but some are a bit stiff and, like, dry.”

Working-class participant

“

Channel 4 has always had a reputation for being more open-minded in their programming.”

Working-class participant

Conclusion, Key Actions, and Recommendations

This report shows that class inequality in UK television drama is structural. It is reproduced through routine industry practices: informal recruitment, freelance precarity, London-centric creative authority, and cultural gatekeeping.

These mechanisms shape who enters television, who can afford to remain, and who progresses into senior roles. They also shape whose experiences are treated as credible on screen, and how audiences evaluate the authenticity of public service drama.

The evidence also indicates that current industry approaches remain weighted towards entry-level access. Schemes and initiatives can provide opportunities, but they do not reliably translate into sustained employment, progression, or leadership without structural change in hiring norms and workforce sustainability. For broadcasters and policymakers, class inequality therefore needs to be treated not only as an inclusion issue, but as a long-term talent pipeline and legitimacy issue for the UK television sector.

The recommendations below are designed to be realistic within current industry conditions. They focus on interventions that address the mechanisms through which class advantage and disadvantage are reproduced.

Practical actions emerging from the evidence

Industry delivery

- Treat working-time intensity as a workforce sustainability issue (light-touch reporting).
- Evaluate entry schemes on progression and retention (12-24 months), not participation.
- Require minimum recruitment transparency on publicly funded / PSB commissions.

Independent production companies

- Formalise progression routes (step-up roles) within returning series and long-running productions.
- Resource mentoring time (recognised labour, not goodwill).
- Record recruitment routes (advert, referral, repeat hire) to reduce closed-network reliance.

Policy & regulatory delivery

- DCMS**
- Signal workforce sustainability as a screen policy priority linked to skills, productivity, and regional growth.
 - Support a short pilot of workforce indicators through funding and skills frameworks.
- Ofcom**
- Scope how workforce sustainability indicators could sit within PSB reporting aligned to public value, plurality, and regionality.

Creative Industries Independent Standards Authority (CIISA) / industry bodies

- Ensure classed risk is recognised in interventions on workplace harm, especially for freelancers and early/mid-career workers.

The evidence in this report points to a small number of practical actions that can improve workforce sustainability and reduce class-based inequalities in UK television. These actions focus on progression, recruitment transparency, working conditions, and the distribution of career risk. They can be implemented through broadcaster and production company practice, commissioning expectations, and sector workforce strategies.

Together, these actions rebalance the conditions under which television careers are sustained, reducing the class-based concentration of insecurity and unpaid labour.



Recommendations

1

Strengthen progression into mid-career and senior roles, not just entry

Broadcasters, funders and skills bodies should strengthen progression routes from access and entry initiatives into sustained employment and career development. A practical priority is to support working-class origin workers to progress into mid-level and senior roles, including creative leadership, production management, and commissioning pathways.

Where schemes are used, linking placements to paid credits on real productions and clear step-up opportunities would strengthen impact.



Increase recruitment transparency and reduce reliance on closed networks

Broadcasters and production companies should increase recruitment transparency by reducing reliance on closed networks and word-of-mouth hiring, particularly above entry level and on publicly funded and PSB-commissioned productions.

Practical steps include advertising more roles, making recruitment routes more transparent (including where roles are filled through referral or repeat hire), and strengthening HR support for freelance hiring.

This is urgent given evidence in this report that 61% of roles were secured through informal networks compared with only 8% through open advertisements.

3

Reduce the financial barriers that drive working-class talent out

Broadcasters, production companies, and funders should recognise that financial security now functions as a hidden requirement for sustaining a career in television, and take steps to reduce the financial pressures that accelerate exit. This includes addressing low early-career pay, unpaid gaps between contracts, insecure progression pathways, and the cumulative costs of freelance labour.

Interventions that improve pay, expenses and employment sustainability - including during gaps between contracts - would reduce attrition among skilled workers who cannot rely on external financial support.



Strengthen regional career pathways, not just regional production

Policy and commissioning frameworks should move beyond counting regional production activity and instead support regionally sustainable career pathways, including progression routes into senior creative and decision-making roles. This requires attention to where commissioning influence, senior authority, and long-term opportunity remain concentrated.

Regional strategies would be strengthened by sustained employment ecosystems and meaningful editorial influence in the nations and regions, supporting both workforce resilience and audience credibility.



5

Reduce the career penalty attached to not relocating to London

Broadcasters, production companies, and funders should recognise relocation and mobility expectations as a classed barrier to progression, and reduce the extent to which career sustainability depends on proximity to London-centred networks and decision-making.

Practical steps include funding relocation and accommodation where required, supporting remote development and editorial work where feasible, and prioritising local hiring when productions move to the nations and regions. This is particularly important for early- and mid-career workers and for those with caring responsibilities.



Embed awareness of class into editorial and creative decision-making

Broadcasters and commissioners should recognise that class representation is closely linked to authenticity and audience trust, and that class is often communicated through tone, space, and production design as much as through script.

Supporting storytelling that remains socially grounded - without narrowing working-class lives into respectability or stigma framings - would strengthen the credibility of public service drama.



Improve measurement of class inequality across workforce, audiences, and on-screen representation

Broadcasters, streamers, funders, and industry bodies should support more consistent measurement of class inequality, including class of origin, across workforce monitoring, commissioning practices, and audience trust and authenticity.

Without agreed measures, it is difficult to track retention, progression, and representation over time, or to assess whether interventions are effective. This should include ensuring class is not treated as secondary to other protected characteristics.

Final reflection

Class inequality in UK television drama is solvable. But it cannot be addressed through isolated interventions. The evidence points to a need for sustained attention to recruitment norms, workforce sustainability, regional power, and progression into creative authority.

Drama remains one of the most culturally influential genres in UK television. Ensuring that drama production cultures are open to a wider range of workers - and that class representation remains credible and socially grounded - is central to the long-term resilience and legitimacy of UK television.

Recent sector developments also indicate that portrayal, authenticity, and lived experience are now receiving renewed institutional attention. The publication of the BBC's independent thematic review of portrayal and representation - which identifies areas for improvement including socioeconomic and geographic representation - is one example of a wider shift toward more systematic reflection on how UK communities are represented on screen.

The findings in this report align with that broader direction of travel: improving class inclusion in production and strengthening the credibility of class representation in drama are not simply equity goals, but strategic priorities for the future of UK television.



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