

Cllr Ian Ward  
Birmingham City Council Leader

26 April 2021

Dear Cllr Ward

We are writing to you about the Birmingham Clean Air Zone (BCAZ) and its charges due to be implemented on 1<sup>st</sup> June 2021, and on behalf of the cultural unions who form the Midlands TUC Cultural and Leisure Industries Committee (TUC CLIC).

You will be aware that the Musicians' Union (MU) had already raised this issue with Birmingham City Council to look for at least concessions for their members from the double charging arrangements for BCAZ.

That is, when performing or working in the BCAZ zone, say in the early evening, and then leaving it after midnight, musicians get hit with a second £8 charge and so effectively doubling the cost to £16 for a gig. Musicians are not afforded the luxury of being able to use public transport (even if it is available at certain times) to carry their bulky equipment to be able to perform, so a car can be a necessity. On top of the BCAZ charge, there is then the city centre parking charges. You can imagine that the reaction of MU members has been to see this as something of a council cash-cow in the absence of any reasonable working mitigation scheme.

However, this issue doesn't only affect musicians, it is clear now that it will affect all cultural workers including those members of Equity (actors/variety artists) and BECTU (Technical, Front Of House, Box Office), not just the MU. Their members face exactly the same issues as musicians and that is why we feel it needs widening out and a resolution found. Indeed, for Equity and BECTU members performing/working at Theatres, and like musicians, they may even come into the BCAZ every day for a week if they live in the region as part of a production tour and these charges could devastate their income.

The MU had met with the overseeing Project Officer at the council, who went on to suggest concessions based on the council's existing schemes. Unfortunately, these schemes are designed around traditional models of employment, eg need to work in the zone 18 hours per week or to get help buying a new vehicle being based on certain qualifying criteria. These are not much use to those whose self-employment model is based on touring, irregular work, insecure gig economy work, on low income, or those starting out in their career. It fundamentally fails to understand the nature of the life or work that any freelance cultural sector worker has.

Further MU attempts to discuss this with the council via the Officer have proven fruitless as it appears it is impossible to get even a meeting sorted. As the clock ticks down to BCAZ implementation, this issue becomes even more critical to avoid the damage to the sector that it will inevitably impose. This issue is clearly a policy one and we'd question whether it is something that really should be devolved down to an Officer to decide upon?

We are also aware that Birmingham Trades Union Council (BTUC) passed a motion to support the MU position and wrote to you, but the response was the same as the Officer's position to the MU. So, again, it fundamentally fails to understand the nature of the work/life that a freelance cultural sector worker has.

The message that seems to be being relayed from the council is that the terms of any concessionary scheme and BCAZ are fixed by the agreement you have with the Government. Is this so? Or is it merely a case that the council want a one-size fits all approach and is treating everyone the same for fear of pressure in other areas looking for concessions?

No other industry has suffered during the past year due to the Covid19 pandemic in the way that the cultural sector has. Some 46% of freelance cultural workers in this region have fallen through Government support gaps, with a third of the workforce having left to find work outside of the sector just to survive. There is no proposed events Government insurance scheme, and the Cultural Recovery Fund has merely been used to prop up organisations and buildings rather than offer our freelancers the lifeline they need.

Is the position of the Council against this backdrop to seriously just wash its hands of the problems BCAZ charging will bring for the sector and the freelance workers the sector employs?


The council may also want to turn its attention to the impact that this may have on the sector's audiences. For example, the audiences face these costs too and may just opt out and not bother to come into the city and so see gigs or (touring) productions elsewhere. Young artists inevitably reach young audiences, so it could potentially strangle the city as a vibrant place for young creatives and young audiences alike. Is this the image the Council wishes to portray? On the back of Covid19 it is hardly the most welcoming proposition to get people back into the city for its cultural events.

The cultural unions would prefer to see BCAZ implementation put back at least a year to allow for recovery of the sector to take place without the BCAZ millstone around its neck; or at the very least the double charging structure scrapped possibly with a rolling 24 hour charging period applied. The council could also look at some sort of separate fund that

the city's cultural workers, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, low income and/or young creatives, could apply to for assistance with these charges or to undertake gigs/work in the BCAZ. Such a scheme would not affect the integrity of the BCAZ scheme and which the Council seems intent on preserving. If it is a cultural sector offer from the cultural budget it would go some way to reassure us that the city takes this matter seriously. Indeed, the MU had already proposed such a scheme without reply.

We urge the Council to think again about this and the impact BCAZ charging will have on an already fragile sector. This is not about resisting the long term need to reduce emissions because the unions recognise we need to address climate change and improve air quality. It is about finding a pragmatic and reasonable solution to the problems the BCAZ charging regime will generate for a fragile and Covid19 damaged sector to permit recovery to take place without additional burdens being placed upon the sector.

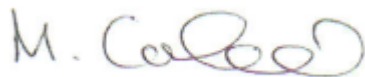
Yours sincerely,



**Lee Barron**  
Midlands Regional Secretary - TUC



**Ian Bayes**  
Midlands Official - Equity



**Mick Corfield**  
Negotiations Officer - BECTU (sector of Prospect)



**Stephen Brown**  
Midlands Regional Organiser – Musicians' Union (MU)