

THE STAGE

Anger growing over Equity restructure in Scotland and Northern Ireland

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Paul W Fleming. Photo: Mark Thomas

Equity is facing growing opposition from members over plans for a staffing restructure in Scotland and Northern Ireland, with leadership accused of a lack of transparency over its decision-making.

Nearly 3,000 people have now [signed a petition](#) calling on the union to put a stop to compulsory redundancy proposals at its Glasgow office, which are being carried out as part of wider changes that will also move responsibility for Northern Ireland to the London office in the medium term.

Equity has said it needs to make savings in order to weather the coronavirus crisis, and must primarily look at its staffing costs to address a £600,000 deficit. Under plans to save £457,000, outlined by general secretary Paul Fleming before Christmas, the [slimmed down Glasgow office](#) – which currently deals with both Scotland and Northern Ireland – will cover members in Scotland only. Northern Irish members will be represented by Fleming in the London office until a dedicated organiser for the country is recruited.

One full-time member of staff will be made redundant, who is widely understood to be longstanding employee Lorne Boswell.

The plan's critics have described compulsory redundancies as anti-trade unionist, and have also condemned attempts to make changes in Scotland and Northern Ireland without proper consultation with members that would result in nations being controlled from London.

Members in both countries met with Fleming and senior Equity staff last week at two online meetings set up specifically to discuss the issue, which is attracting rising hostility.

Among the 2,829 people who have signed the petition are House of Lords peer and actor Michael Cashman, who described the proposals as "utter nonsense".

"As a trade union, now is not the time for us to make compulsory redundancies. Now is the time to stand by our staff during this national crisis," he said.

Actor and Scottish National Committee member Kirstin McLean, who created the petition, said around 170 Scottish members attended the online meeting last week, the vast majority of which she believed were in

opposition to the plans, while a meeting with Northern Ireland members was attended by about 50 people.

She said the meeting was disappointing and had been "typical of the way the nations are regarded in many institutions, from the perspective of London", describing Fleming as "selective" and "evasive" when answering questions, particularly around the financial details.

When Fleming set out the restructuring plan in December, he said savings were necessary to "insulate" the union financially over the coming years, and that the cost-cutting decisions made had been based on 25 "metrics" that would achieve "a more equal distribution of resource around the UK".

However, McLean said that despite ongoing requests from members, the details of these 25 factors have not been made public. She also questioned why staff cuts are being implemented when the union is simultaneously hiring two new officials, based at its London head office.

In an open letter to Fleming seen by The Stage, actor Greg Powrie said what he "failed to grasp was how making this particular staff member redundant is going to benefit the membership, or the union, financially or otherwise".

"The staff member in question is one of Equity's finest lieutenants, and the very fact that so many of the membership do have a personal relationship with him is partly what makes him so valuable. These relationships, and his knowledge, have taken years to accumulate, and for it to be so quickly disregarded is unfathomable to me and to my fellow members," his letter said.

He urged Fleming to reconsider the decision and "really examine the ramifications", warning of the risk of "separatism and disintegration" between Equity's leadership and its members in Scotland and Northern Ireland unless action is taken.

Equity declined to comment further on the situation while redundancy consultations were ongoing.