



## Enough: Construction needs to get back to work

The construction industry needs to adapt and get back to work. Construction like many business sectors has been decimated by the COVID -19 outbreak. However, unlike other sectors, the COVID-19 emergency measures did not force the construction industry to partially close down, it simply folded under unnecessary intense pressure. Unfair sensationalist scrutiny by the media, badly informed attacks by journalists and keyboard warriors, harassment of building workers by the general public, confusion in government, ambiguous messaging, confusion of contractual obligations and the disgraceful exodus of the Health & Safety Executive from construction sites all added to the bedlam that was pushing the construction industry towards closure. Also, when taking in to account the combined failure of the construction industry to quickly understand and then implement safety measures to mitigate the COVID-19 infection risks and the virtual non-existent defence of the industry by the Construction Leadership Council (CLC), partial closure was inevitable, and so was the public relations failure that quickly unfolded.

It was left to Alok Sharma MP (Secretary of State for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy) to defend and emphasise that the construction industry is needed and should be at work... *"Our country and our economy needs all our support. And the construction industry has answered the call to action. Whether by building temporary hospital wards, installing complex and life-saving oxygen systems, constructing the infrastructure that society needs to function or ensuring that people have safe and healthy homes to live in, you are delivering for our Nation through this difficult time..."* And yet, the construction industry still continued to shut down.

Recent data provided by Glenigan suggests that as of the Easter break 3000 on-site projects have been impacted by COVID-19, resulting in a staggering 79% of sites being suspended in Scotland and 29% of UK sites overall.

Construction workers being laid off is increasing, and huge numbers of workers are now furloughed. Main contractors and SMEs are feeling cashflow difficulties and business failures will soon start happening if they have not already. So, it is imperative that construction sites are re-opened, and workers return to work. I am not advocating that sites should open again if the management of these sites have not carried out thorough risk assessment reviews to reflect the latest guidelines or worked with the supply chain to mitigate risk, or changed working practices to remove practices altogether that contravene the latest guidelines. Indeed, it is essential that sites stay closed if they are not taking the COVID-19 pandemic seriously. However, many

companies, including the majority of the Confederation of Construction Specialists membership, have pioneered safe working practises for processes during the last three weeks, developed and issued toolbox talks, removed suspect processes by designing them out, improved working practices and issued appropriate PPE with usage guidelines. Having the right people and approach will allow sites to open safely and these sites should open and those that do not need to remain firmly shut. The protection of the workforce is paramount as is the survival of the industry.

The CLC has shown a failure of leadership throughout this crisis. The construction industry, including its workers, are being continuously attacked on news programmes, in newspapers, on social media and by the general public. However, the CLC has failed to rigorously defend and promote the industry at every opportunity. Where are they? An easy positive promotional opportunity that would have resonated with the public was the fit out of the Nightingale hospitals by specialist building companies and their suppliers, but that golden opportunity was missed too. When this current crisis is over, the CLC needs to seriously look at its leadership and its strategy because they have been found to be wanting.

There will of course be the inevitable contractual disputes arising from this crisis. A CLC statement on Payment and Contracts states... *"Our actions at this time will be remembered. All firms should think hard about how their reputation could be damaged by not doing the right thing"*. Unbelievable! Is that it? Do they not understand what is happening in the construction industry? Main Contractors for decades have stated that their supply chains are important to them whilst systematically altering standard forms of subcontract, insisting on onerous terms and conditions, and participating in poor payment and late payment practices. Doing the right thing is not a priority.

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*For over 30 years the Confederation of Construction Specialists has been supporting construction specialist companies. By providing up-to date relevant contract training courses, professional advice and contractual guidance, the Confederation of Construction Specialists enables specialist companies to optimise the ways in which they operate contractual arrangements when dealing with Main Contractors or clients.*

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