



Construction News  
Telephone House  
69-77 Paul Street  
London EC2A 4NQ

8 April 2020

The Rt Hon Alok Sharma MP  
Secretary of State  
Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy  
1 Victoria Street  
London SW1H 0ET

Dear Alok Sharma

I write to you as the editor of *Construction News (CN)*, a publication that has served the interests of the construction industry for 149 years. On behalf of our readers, I would like to thank you for the kind letter you wrote on 31 March praising the industry for its work during the COVID-19 crisis.

However, I also write to draw your attention to extremely important concerns within our sector that are likely to be exacerbated by government advice [published on 7 April 2020](#).

Government guidance is having the unintended consequence of greatly increasing the risks faced by individuals working on site. These risks are not just caused by the likely spread of COVID-19 among teams. Individuals now also face dramatically elevated risks of severe injury due to the breakdown of established safety procedures in an industry where moving machinery, heavy loads and dangerous heights are commonplace.

Construction sites may be dangerous places, but the UK is a world leader in site safety. The construction industry is grateful for the government's support in helping achieve this outcome. Dangerous tasks are often rendered less risky only as a result of close physical teamwork. This fact lies at the heart of the conflict with current government guidance.

At issue is the matter of separation between workers to prevent the spread of infection.

The latest advice has clarified that construction work "can continue if done in accordance with the social distancing guidelines wherever possible" and adds that "where it is not possible to follow the social distancing guidelines in full in relation to a particular activity, you should consider whether that activity needs to continue".

This guidance has transferred a great deal of responsibility onto the shoulders of individual managers working on site. This is an unenviable position to be in, as I hope you will appreciate. To make matters worse, the broad policy of encouraging employees who can work from home to do so has led to a reduction in the on-site presence of senior staff who might normally make this type of complex, difficult decision.

As a result, site supervisors are effectively being asked to choose between prioritising the safety of workers and the timely fulfilment of contracts, which typically stipulate severe financial penalties for late delivery.

I would like to share some of the key concerns raised by many *CN* readers:

- Separation by 2 metres is routinely impossible on sites due to the physical restrictions of walkways, stairways, lifts, scaffolding and vehicle cabins.
- Well-intentioned attempts to maintain 2-metre separations are leading to untried and unsafe practices – the most obvious being workers lifting heavy loads unaided, where they would normally seek help from colleagues.
- Global shortages of personal protective equipment mean many workers now face increased exposure to industry-specific health hazards, such as silica dust, alongside greater risk of COVID-19 infection.
- On construction sites, first aid is unfortunately part of daily life. But first aid for typical construction injuries cannot be administered from a distance.
- The government's advice to work from home where possible has led to a dramatic reduction in oversight from safety inspectors, including those working for the Health & Safety Executive.

On behalf of *CN*'s readers, I would urge you to seriously consider whether the government should:

- Halt all construction work except for essential tasks required for public safety, the operation of national infrastructure and the provision of medical facilities.

Or, if you do not wish to close sites, whether the government should:

- Instruct the industry to place the health and safety of workers above contractual obligations, in a manner that provides clarity with respect to force majeure claims.

Many people working within the construction industry have contacted *CN*, begging for the government to make their health and safety a much clearer priority in the current crisis. I hope you will heed their call.

Yours sincerely

Dr Lem Bingley  
Editor, Construction News