

Covid-19 – Bill Hill, CEO, Lighthouse Construction Industry Charity

In an industry where two construction workers take their own life every single working day and where 20% of all work absence is due to poor mental wellbeing, a pandemic such as Covid 19 is always going to have a devastating impact.

That's why it was encouraging last week to hear from Business Secretary, Alok Sharma that our country and our economy needs the critical contribution of our construction workforce right now. This workforce is responsible for building our schools and homes, our energy plants and ensuring our infrastructure supports everything we do in our daily lives. Things that our society often takes for granted without perhaps a thought about the pressures behind working in this sector even on a 'normal' day.

Today, these same builders, plasterers, groundworkers, electricians; plant operators, the list is endless; are building temporary hospital wards for our country, installing complex and life-saving oxygen systems and improving the infrastructure that we need to function in this current climate.

As CEO of the Lighthouse Construction Industry Charity, the only charity that provides financial and mental wellbeing support to the construction industry, I normally refrain from political comment but as we are hearing on an almost hourly basis, these are unprecedented times.

We have a moral obligation to ensure our workforce and their families aren't left to cope alone in a crisis and I have already written to Mr Sharma to highlight the critical situation for our charity and our construction community. Given that over 50% of our workforce in construction are either self-employed, agency workers or on zero-hour contracts we are finding it impossible to keep up. Many of these workers are only one or two paydays away from poverty and need our immediate help.

Our 24/7 Construction Industry Helpline is still fully operational but we are already being overwhelmed with requests for help. Calls are increasing by 25% each week and it's going to get worse before it gets better. For individuals there are difficulties in accessing the support they need. One desperate caller to our helpline told us that he was number 22,000 in an online queue to get access to Universal Credit.

Brian Berry, Chief Executive of the Federation of Master Builders (FMB) has also said that small construction businesses are having difficulties accessing the Government funding they need. 10% of their members applications have been rejected and 84% were still waiting for a response.

The systems in place simply cannot cope with the demand. Thankfully, this is where we step in to provide a lifeline to those workers that are falling through the safety net. We're providing emergency financial aid so that they can buy food for their families and making sure they can keep the heating and lights on. We're also providing mental wellbeing support, but tragically we don't reach everyone in time. We've just heard from the partner of a worker who was already having problems with debt before the pandemic. Being laid off was just too much to cope with and he took his own life in the family home. His partner found him and she is now attempting to deal with the horror of what has happened. He leaves two young children.

As our charity receives no government funding, we rely on the generosity of those within the industry to support their own, which means that at a time when the industry needs us the most our ability to respond is at its lowest capacity.

My proposal to Mr Sharma is one that could have considerable political capital. In 2018/19, *£54.5 million in fines were issued to duty holders found guilty of health and safety offences across all business sectors. A large proportion of that will have come from construction companies. The single largest fine was £3 million and 36 cases received fines of £500,000 or more. This revenue goes straight into the treasury. Surely it's not beyond the realms of possibility that during these extraordinary times that some of this revenue could be ring-fenced and diverted to our cause? I have always thought that this money should be returned in some way back to those that need it the most, but now it's critical. As a charity we already have the processes in place to manage this and I'm certain that this proposal would receive widespread support by the construction industry. It would make headline news. I'm awaiting for a reply.

In the meantime and in the absence of any Government funding, we have launched a Crisis Appeal to raise as much money as possible to help our industry through this pandemic. I'm conscious we are asking the community in crisis to put their hands in their pockets during this time of considerable uncertainty, but any donation would be hugely appreciated.

<https://www.lighthouseclub.org/construction-workers-family-crisis-appeal>

I promise that any public funded donations to our charity will not be diverted to charity overheads, every penny will be restricted to and used to support those in need.

Finally, and on a positive note; with your support and the construction community pulling together, no matter how unpredictable the future feels at the moment, we will get through this and be stronger as a result.

Stay safe.

*Source; *Enforcement statistics in Great Britain, 2019* <https://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/enforcement.pdf>