

Infrastructure Leaders Roundtable Discussion

May 2020



r.
rullion™

Introduction

On Tuesday 5th May, seven weeks into the UK's lockdown, we welcomed Leaders in Infrastructure and Construction to our first digital roundtable discussion, talking about critical infrastructure projects in a post Covid-19 world. Amongst our contributors were Paul Tuckett, Project Director at Skanska, Justin Moss, Strategy Development Manager at Siemens, David Aimable-Lina, Construction Director at London City Airport, Neal Whittle, Managing Director at Eric Wright Water and David Speight, Construction Director. Hosting the roundtable for Rullion was Executive Director for Infrastructure, Mark Clinch, who prompted the group to think about topics including the challenges of returning to site, the 'new normal', mental health, supply of PPE (personal protective equipment), remote working and the importance of embracing technology in construction.

By hosting these events, we aim to spark discussion, share knowledge and form strong cross-sector networks that will support and improve the industry we operate in. In this article, we detail some of the highlights from the discussion, sharing the key learnings that can be taken away for other Infrastructure Leaders.

Reacting to Covid-19

Firstly, we spoke as a group about the initial reaction to Covid-19, sharing key learnings from some of the businesses that reacted the quickest to the pandemic. One Construction Director shared their learnings to kick off the discussion. Being based across the road from a key hospital fighting the pandemic, they planned for the outbreak weeks before most, closing all operations before they were required to in order to ensure worker safety.

"We assembled a Covid-19 Sub-Committee to adhere to the guidance produced by the Construction Leadership Council and navigate the coming challenges. We required all our suppliers to demonstrate compliance against all 14 points in

order to return to site, albeit in a reduced capacity. Initially, I think people thought we were overreacting, but as the severity of the situation became clearer, everyone was happy to stick to our plan. The end result was brilliant, we had minimised the stand-down period, before we were able begin our return to site safely and compliantly after Easter."

A Director from an organisation taking a completely different but equally effective approach also shared their strategy of "last to close, first to open", detailing the incredible hard work that went into ensuring that the business did not need to close. They said; "We're involved in building hospitals, so closing our doors completely just wasn't an option. It was so important to win the hearts and minds of family members and friends, as well as the key workers, we had to really communicate about safety and make sure that people were 100% sure that it was our priority to look after them."

In the Utilities Sector, one attendee said that his customers have been working hard to maintain services for people and businesses across the UK throughout the pandemic. But although all companies are continuing with vital emergency works, businesses have reacted differently to continuing BAU activities, ranging from complete shut down to one company managing to successfully and safely keep works going at as much as 80% capacity. Where possible, they have introduced social distancing, but in other areas air hoods have become commonplace to allow people to work in close proximity. In some cases, workers have even started living together and isolating together to ensure they adhere to Government Guidelines. "We've been overwhelmed by the response, we offered everyone the chance to Furlough, but only a handful took it. They [workers that are living together] are making real sacrifices to ensure the safety of their loved ones, it can't be easy for them. The country as a whole has really come together and so have our employees – I think we're lucky to still be operating and to be in a critical industry."

Moving Forward Together

On the subject of 'what next?', one participant was clear about how he wanted to see the construction industry move forward. "We're used to collaborating, but now we need to do so more than ever. Information sharing will be key to our recovery. Getting the right information about what's going on onsite needs to be quicker, clearer and more accurate and we need to use technology to do that. As an industry, we're very used to gathering data, we just have a new dataset to gather and monitor now. Construction has the opportunity to pave the way for all other industries here in terms of best practice. We're experts in risk mitigation and health and safety, it's what we do."

So, what are some of the practical measures these businesses are implementing? From hiring 'Social Distancing Marshalls' to stand on site and enforce measures, to trialling high tech kit that tells a worker when they are too close to another worker, the solutions were many and often creative. "We have to invest, and we have to rethink everything because this problem is not going away quickly, we may even see a spike in the Winter and we've got to be ready for that."



"Construction has the opportunity to pave the way for all other industries here in terms of best practice. We're experts in risk mitigation and health and safety, it's what we do."

Supply of PPE

When shipments of PPE land in the UK, the Government can commandeer them for use by NHS workers. In some cases, construction businesses are also actively connecting the Government with their existing PPE suppliers to help ensure access to reliable and trusted resources. This demand from the NHS presents a challenge for those trying to ensure safety and compliance of workers on site.

Ensuring availability, quality and not derailing the vital work of the NHS were the key concerns for our Leaders. They all agreed that infrastructure businesses need to look at new and different PPE solutions to try to avoid utilising the same supply chain. "Going forward, we've got to really look at some innovative technology to help our workers exist in the 'new normal'. We need to think creatively so that we're not pulling on the same resources as the NHS, it's vital that they have priority."

As an example of such innovation, one contributor spoke about two-metre distance radar. The vests buzz trialling high-vis vests with a built in when workers get within two metres of each other, helping to enforce social distancing guidelines. "We're currently trialling them with a group of workers on one site as a test, if they work, we'll invest in rolling them out across our business. There is still work to be done though, at the moment this technology is bulky and not as practical as we would like. I think the race is on to try and create something a bit more seamless, the tech needs to make peoples' jobs easier, not inhibit them in any way."

Remote Working

It was clear that the changes to working life extended beyond site-based roles. The group discussed adapting to home working for white collar workers and questioned whether their organisations would ever go back to office life. “This experience has made us rethink everything. We had space for 180 people at one site, now we have room for 60 but the work isn’t stopping. We’ve all adapted so well to home working that we’re questioning whether we even need offices the same size as we have now. We could potentially save money, particularly in London, and let’s face it, our people might be happier for it.”. It also seemed that technology was the key to enabling this change for everyone; “Microsoft Teams has been a revelation for us, we held a stand up with colleagues across the UK and the response was overwhelmingly positive.”

However, it was clear that there is no one size fits all approach to managing a remote workforce. Our group also spoke about the “dark side” of remote working, discussing the need to mitigate the negative effects of home working that people who prefer an office environment may experience. Mental health was on the agenda for all parties, with a focus on staying connected and helping people avoid loneliness. “There will be those who are desperate to go back to an office environment and those who are actually scared to, we need to do what’s right for the individual and listen to people.”

“We simply can’t force people to come back to work, we need to let them be involved in the whole process. You’ve got to be sympathetic, this whole situation gives a completely different meaning to ‘bringing your work home with you!’”



And it’s not just home workers who are vulnerable to isolation, the Leaders also recognised the need to consider the mental health of lone workers on construction sites. One contributor said; “We need to introduce new check and balances, ‘safety’ is going to mean something entirely new.”. Another said; “We simply can’t force people to come back to work, we need to let them be involved in the whole process. You’ve got to be sympathetic, this whole situation gives a completely different meaning to ‘bringing your work home with you!’”

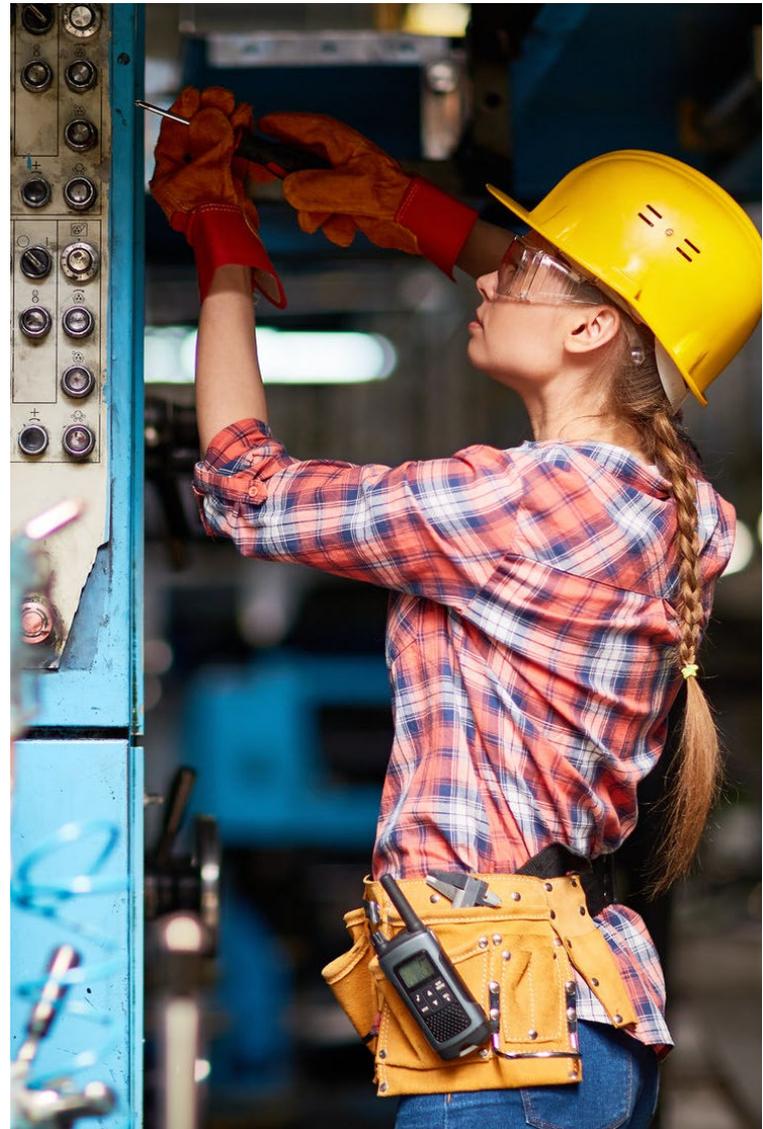
The talk also changed to what Leaders will need to do to accommodate employees. For many, it was clear that traditional leadership styles would need to change dramatically. “This new way of working will challenge those leaders who never wanted their people to work from home because they didn’t feel secure or in control. It’s a huge level of trust that we’ll be placing in our workforce, which is a good thing, but you can’t underestimate the attitude change for some people. Long term, I think these changes will also need to be reflected in our contracts. If you look at a lot of the major construction contracts in the UK, they’re based around people being together either on or near site – often workers could do things remotely, but currently our contracts don’t work in this way.”

Reflecting on the positives

Ending on a high, we asked our group to reflect on the positives that had come from home working in their businesses. For some the benefits were around digitalisation; “We’re already a technology-focussed business so the change [to remote working] wasn’t huge for us, but the biggest impact has been that our clients are now adopting the same ways of working and it’s so much easier to communicate with them remotely. Often our industry is very traditional, so travelling across the country for face to face meetings with clients that only take an hour or two is common. Now, we’re able to save everyone’s time and money by using video calls instead, and the outputs aren’t changing.”

For others, the positives revolved around better communication, both within their business but also across industry. One participant said; “Aside from the brilliant lockdown haircuts I’ve seen, the biggest positive has been the sharing of strategies, tactics and plans across our industry. People have been really open about everything from distancing and welfare to contingency plans and PPE, which really builds communication and a level of trust across the industry that we’ve never had before.”

Lastly, the effect of Coronavirus on decarbonisation was a big positive for our Leaders, whose conversation challenged the anti-green stereotypes that often surround the construction industry. With many of the group supporting projects in water, clean energy and public transport, they were quick to argue that there needed to be efforts to accelerate some areas of our decarbonisation strategy at both a company and a government level. “You only have to look outside your window to see that regeneration can happen in a really short space of time. Covid-19 has forced a change that would have been nearly impossible to make happen in a generation to happen in the space of a few weeks. We have a duty to ensure we don’t slip backwards as we come out of lockdown.” In particular, the need to invest in public transport in order to keep cars off the road in the long term was mentioned, although all were clear that social distancing must take priority before any longer-term strategies can be implemented.



Thank you to all our roundtable attendees for your insightful and honest contributions, we hope you found this networking and knowledge sharing session useful.

We hope that this report will also be been useful and insightful to other Infrastructure Leaders across the UK. Due to the success of this first event, we will be continuing to host our Infrastructure Leaders Digital Roundtable events regularly. If you would like to be a part of the next event, please **get in touch**.

**If you're interested in finding
our more about our
Infrastructure Leaders Events,
please get in touch:**



Mark Clinch

Executive Director

Mark.Clinch@rullion.co.uk

www.rullion.co.uk

0161 926 1718