

REGIONAL review

NORTH WEST



Ross Dickens
Regional Chair

In this industry we are always learning, whether that's about new products, new techniques, new processes, new legislation... the list is endless. Two enormous learning curves in recent times have been Brexit and Covid.

The repercussions of Brexit continue to rumble on and there aren't many companies in any sector who haven't felt the effect on delivery of

products and parts. The NFB Brexit area on the website remains a valuable resource for you if you're navigating these challenges and if you need any more specific assistance, give Membership Services a call.

We have also had to learn a huge amount in recent months about Covid-19, safe working practices, vaccinations, testing and so on. An article in this edition of *Britbuild* takes a look at vaccinations and testing, seeking to clarify some of the complexity around testing in particular. There is Government support for construction companies meeting certain criteria to carry out a rigorous testing regime – have a look at the article and refer to the NFB Webinar on the issue: find the recording in the members' area of the website.

Many of us might have been on site pretty much throughout the Covid crisis but equally

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we might have had a number of employees working from home who we now want to reintroduce to the office. I can recommend watching another NFB webinar in the members' area: this one looks at the mental health and wellbeing

aspects of reintroducing your staff to the workplace. It's worth investing a little time to consider this rather than being faced with unexpected absence or inefficiency.

Another event to go online this year is the new Construction Awards of Excellence. As I write this, the shortlists have just been announced – and by the time you read this, we will know the winners. I'm told the standard and number of entries was high. The next event will be on 7th April 2022 and I would strongly recommend entering. Being involved provides a real boost to a company's staff and customers alike.

Finally, Regional Executive Board meetings are happening in May. Do get involved in your Federation by attending via Zoom: dates and details are on the Events pages of the website.

Welcome



Jackie Stephen
Account Manager

Is that a light at the end of the tunnel we can see? With the lockdown timetable in place and vaccinations continuing apace, I think we're all hoping that the planned return to normality is well on its way.

For the NFB, we hope that will include a return to face-to-face meetings, forums and events – although it's still too early just yet. We've run some really excellent webinars recently, especially around Covid, that members have found invaluable. If you haven't seen them, I'd urge you to go and have a look at them via the members' area of the website.

We will be running the next Large Contractors Forum over Zoom too: that's on 27 April; we hope to have the following one back in Westminster in December.

Also online are the Regional Executive Board meetings, so please do see if you can

spare just a couple of hours to help shape your Federation. Issues on the agenda include: CITB and the consensus vote; Covid-19; Reverse Charge VAT and IR35; and a host of other items relating to the NFB, its progress, performance and plans. Find the date when your region's meeting takes place by checking the website Events section.

I also want to alert you to a new service from the NFB: our bidding and procurement service. This has only just launched but represents a real step-change in the service we can offer you in this area, including a free database containing all tender

opportunities where you can set up your own searches and alerts.

Also on offer is a free telephone advice line, bid review service, bid training, bid writing support – and more. These are all provided by bid experts and designed to boost your win rate. After the challenges of Brexit and Covid, businesses will be anxious to win work and this is a great way to put yourself ahead of the rest.

Remember you can call us on 03450 578 160, whatever your query is. This is the only number you need – we'll link you up to the right person – or people – to resolve your issue.



Swab the builder

Covid vaccination and testing

As members continue to welcome staff back to work and try to maximise both productivity and efficiency on site, while maintaining Covid safety, many companies are looking at installing a Covid-19 testing regime for asymptomatic employees. Currently, NHS Test and Trace provides three schemes: workplace testing community testing and at-home testing with recent emphasis now on the latter for the population at large. Below we take a brief look at the schemes, along with a review of the situation regarding vaccination.

Workplace Testing

Introduced at the beginning of this year, this Government scheme, currently for England only, is run by the Department for Health and Social Care in partnership with businesses. It involves testing at work using a lateral flow device, which delivers results in 30 minutes. In recent months, the Government transitioned this scheme to provide test-at-home kits for those companies

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at-home testing

who couldn't test on site, with businesses being sent the kits to distribute to staff.

Lateral Flow testing identifies whether the person is asymptomatic but actively infectious. One in three people with Covid-19 are reportedly asymptomatic. These tests do not replace the standard PCR tests for those with symptoms and isolation rules for those who are feeling unwell must still be followed. People should not be at work if they feel unwell, and should not use rapid testing as a means to confirm their illness.

NHS Test & Trace says that five out of 1,000 are false positives, while sensitivity is around 80%.

If you want to set up your own testing on site, you need to provide some of the resources but they're not onerous or expensive. It's a matter of finding the right space and facilities (such as a room with a non-porous floor, the ability to test and store at the right temperatures and a WiFi connection) and two employees to manage the processing.

Having two employees is for data protection by ensuring the person who takes the test off the employee is not the same person who inputs the results on to the online database. Those who do the processing need to do a two-hour online DHSC training and to be certified but do not need any medical knowledge.

Workers test themselves; the swabbing process is very quick, especially once you get the hang of it – just ask any secondary school pupil. Once the swabbing has taken place, the employee waits in a suitably socially distanced way (eg in a special holding room or in their

car, depending on your SOPs) for around 30 minutes until their result is known. Employees get the result, not employers, but employees can give GDPR consent for a work email to be added when they register so the result can be shared. It is up to you as the employer who is tested and when.

A positive test means the employee should self-isolate; there is no need to book a PCR test, according to Government guidance.

Community Testing

For workplaces who do not wish to set up their own testing site, or for practical reasons cannot, many local authorities are offering asymptomatic testing for businesses in England, so employees can take two tests a week on the way to or from work at a local authority testing centre.

All the same caveats apply: this is not a replacement for risk mitigation, social distancing and self-isolation as necessary. It must not be used as a PCR replacement test when employees are feeling symptomatic. Remember, the

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sensitivity of this test is 80% – so if you have 100 employees testing negative, 20 of them could have Covid-19, which is why it's crucial to respond appropriately to any symptoms at all.

Please also note: you can set up your own non-Government process but need to follow guidance very carefully. The NFB has a guidance available for members who wish to do so.

At-home testing

With the easing of the COVID-19 restrictions, the UK Government has now taken the decision to offer rapid testing to every person in England, with the scheme organised directly with employees rather than employers. This new home testing regime is expected to replace the Government offer of workplace testing going forward (although those with schemes already in place will still be supported). Test kits can be ordered on a 'per household' basis via www.gov.uk/order-coronavirus-rapid-lateral-flow-tests and either sent directly to the home or picked up at local pharmacies.

Vaccination Programme

As we go to press, people just

below the age of 50 are being vaccinated, depending where you are in the country, and over half the adult population has now had at least one dose. Once all these priority groups are complete, the rest of the population (those 16-50) will begin to get their doses, with the Government saying it will work down the age groups.

Vaccine uptake has been good so far but as an employer you might have to start working hard to reach those who are reluctant – what can your business do to ease concerns? NFB has produced a template letter for you to send to your employees, containing scientific and ethical considerations and addressing all the misconceptions you see flying around on social media.

HR and Legal Considerations

Employers must put a huge focus on communication about their approach to all things Covid, especially around testing programmes: why are you doing it, is it mandatory, what are the consequences for not taking part, what happens when employees get their result, how you will use their data? – all this needs to be communicated



clearly and well in advance. This is important both as good corporate practice and getting the most out of your employees but also to avoid legal difficulties around potential breach of contract claims and potential breach of the Equality Act 2010.

If you are processing information that relates to an identified or identifiable person, you need to comply with GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018.

Also be aware that employees have the right not to share their medical information with their employer, thanks to the Access to Medical Reports Act.

Get the relationship right, though, and these things hopefully won't come up. If employees are saying no to you, talk about what could be the problem. Deal with each employee as an individual and understand their concerns.

You have no right to insist employees take tests or the vaccine unless it's specified in a contract. Even if you add this obligation into new employees' contracts, they can still refuse.

Find more information on the NFB website in the Covid-19 Members' Library. And if you have any queries, come to us – that's what membership is all about: 03450 578 160.

The Members' View

■ Trisha Manners, T Manners & Sons:

"We remain cautious and keep all of our Covid-safe operating procedures in place. We are transitioning back employees with the increase in contracts starting to resume, and trying to cope with continued operating restrictions.

"As testing for both asymptomatic and symptomatic employees has been readily available we have not required rapid testing as yet: we felt it would be logistically difficult to manage and instead we would continue to utilise the community facilities and our pre-site process. Rapid

tests are available in the office should there be an emergency requirement.

"Meanwhile we continue to deep clean, provide PPE, social distance, wear masks and temperature check to keep everyone safe and stay operational. We will continue to err on the side of caution while trying to attain some level of stability and recovery."

■ John Bagley, Trustland Construction:

"The industries we work in all remained open so it was full steam ahead on most sites – it was just a lot harder to carry out the work and keep up

with programmes.

"The clinically vulnerable guys have been vaccinated, which means a return to work for them in April - good from an operational point of view and also for their mental health.

"We went for a blanket 'everybody needs weekly tests from 4th January to access any Trustland place of work' and then registered with the Government to carry out workplace testing as soon as we could. We now have three test sites and test everyone twice a week. It is an expensive use of resources but ultimately is better than sending everyone off site to get tested and it

means that we should be able to head off infections and stop sites closing.

"We have had a couple of subbies refuse testing but they are just refused entry to site. All other measures are still in place: face coverings, temp checks, one person only in vehicles, social distancing in brew rooms and offices. I can't see anything changing for a good six months. One sensible solution that a client has been happy with for the last nine months is having half of my teams on night shifts so the number of my people in their buildings is kept to a minimum (they are paying the uplift in costs!)"

DISCLAIMER: Information correct at time of going to press. The situation moves quickly: please do your own research before beginning any new programmes

A quick word with...



Neil Robinson
MD, Heat-Elek Ltd

What do you like best about working in construction?

The variety and the challenge: I see myself as a problem solver and get great satisfaction when the job is done and the client is happy. We always seek feedback and try to improve each time – it's a constant process.

If you could change one thing in construction, what would it be?

First, we need to bring our manufacturing base home following Brexit. There was a time when we had a world leading workforce of skilled people but not now. Expand and extend apprenticeship programmes and make them tougher. Another thing is to increase the VAT registration threshold: many private customers would benefit from not having VAT on their home

improvements, especially following Covid and Brexit when money is tight.

If you weren't working in construction, what would be your dream job?

Probably a criminal barrister. I used to teach Criminal Law in a previous life – it's fascinating stuff.

What do you like to do to unwind?

I drink lots of red wine and cook.

What's your favourite holiday location and why?

Probably St Ives, Cornwall as it brings back so many fond memories of my youth, especially Mr Peggotty's nightclub – now long gone. If abroad, La Duquesa, southern Spain, the most amazing hidden gem.

What's the last movie you saw? Which character best sums up your life?

Can't remember the last movie – tend to watch a lot of mini-series nowadays like *Breaking Bad* and *The Crown*. Looking forward to *Top Gun 2* and the new Bond film though.

What's your favourite TV viewing?

Has to be *BlackAdder* and *Father Ted* – I still crack up every time I watch them!

What sports do you follow and what teams do you support?

My main sport is squash – I'm still playing, although it's not as easy now at 61; I've dropped down the leagues and continue to do so – knees bugged nowadays. Also like Rugby Union internationals and I'm a big Man United fan. When I was a kid my father used to take me to both Man United and Man City games so I was very lucky to have seen Best, Law, Charlton, Bell, Lee and Summerbee.

If you could have lunch with a celebrity or historical figure of your choice, who would it be and why?

John Bonham (former drummer of Led Zeppelin). I'm a big Zeppelin fan but unfortunately Bonzo is no longer with us.

Who has been the most inspiring person in your life?

My Uncle Cliff Wooliscroft. He was a highly skilled toolmaker and I spent all my spare time with him when I was a child making things, building things, repairing things. During WW2 worked on some secret stuff but never shared it with us. He did know about Magnetic Particle Inspection which is how missiles were inspected for faults so we suspect something to do with that but he never breached the Official Secrets Act.

If time travel was possible, what era would you most like to visit and why?

Medieval times. I always fancied a go at jousting and still intend to buy a suit of armour for the hall. Imagine being a knight in those days: no computers or TV but plenty of travel, not without the odd bit of danger but I'm sure it was never boring (not forgetting the occasional damsel in distress). What more could you want?



St Ives, Cornwall

Can you think of someone in your organisation who would be perfect for this feature? Or perhaps it's you? This magazine goes to 52,000 contacts in the business and is a fantastic opportunity to put your business in the spotlight. Do get in touch with us at membershipservices@builders.org.uk