



Special OFSC Industry Reference Group (IRG) Meeting – Examples of COVID-19 Response Actions

On 20 April 2020, the Federal Safety Commissioner's Industry Reference Group (IRG) met in a special session to exchange information and experience in managing COVID-19 in the building and construction industry. Eleven accredited companies, representatives from Master Builders Association (MBA), Australian Constructors Association (ACA) and Civil Contractors Federation (CCF) as well as OFSC representatives canvassed industry experiences in managing the COVID-19 situation on sites. This document draws together some of the practical measures accredited companies have been taking to minimise the risks associated with COVID-19 while building sites remain operational.

The OFSC provides this summary of measures as examples to other building and construction companies around control measures and the types of considerations that can be taken during this time. For ease of reference, examples have been grouped based on key themes.

Site Access / Materials Delivery

IRG members have all implemented additional access controls covering workers and other visitors on building and construction sites, such as temperature tests using infra-red thermometers prior to entry, contactless delivery of materials, reinforcing messaging around if a person is feeling sick to not come to work, and having a single location offsite for deliveries. These controls aim to assist in physical distancing by limiting the number of people accessing building sites and preventing people who are potentially sick and/or people at high risk of infection from entering sites. IRG members have also outlined various revisions to supplier delivery arrangements based on risk assessments of the goods/services being delivered and likelihood of COVID-19 being transmitted with them.

Specific examples:

- Health screening survey before entry to site for all workers and visitors. Survey covers symptoms of COVID-19, travel history, and close contact with cases of COVID-19. If answering yes to any of the questions, the person is excluded from site for the day (with consideration given to self-isolation requirements depending on the circumstances).
- Company specific health screening smartphone app for all workers and visitors seeking to enter site. The app asks for information on the person's symptoms of COVID-19, travel history, and close contact with cases of COVID-19. If answering yes to any of the questions, the person is excluded from site for the day (with consideration given to self-isolation requirements depending on the circumstances). This is separate from the Australian Government's COVID Safe app.
- For workers having to travel between sites to perform their usual duties, the CEO has provided a 'letter to authorities' confirming the worker's identity, role and explaining the need for them to travel. The letter can be provided to authorities enforcing COVID-19 restrictions.
- Use of photos or geofence technology for site attendance records rather than utilising physical sign-in register.

Preventative Measures / Management of Workforce

Accredited companies are required to take a systems-based approach to safety management onsite. IRG members generally indicated that they have expanded on or utilised their existing systems to make adjustments to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and manage their workforces differently during this time. IRG members have all implemented controls consistent with government advice such as physical distancing

markers in shared areas, sanitizers and disinfectants, split shifts and preventative cleaning regimes. Members are also issuing stronger encouragement/advice for workers to stay home if displaying any signs of illness, limiting cross-site movement of workers, keeping trades in groups (rather than mixing), and having dedicated break areas for each group to minimise cross contact.

Specific examples:

- Include in the Project Management Plan (or equivalent) a procedure for management of COVID-19. This procedure will drive the company response systematically, and also forms part of contractual documentation with subcontractors to mandate required behaviours from all workers onsite.
- Conduct a risk assessment of close contact at the trade level and determine how to best complete work activities while incorporating physical distancing and other COVID-19 management requirements.
- Review of key subcontractors and suppliers by factors such as size and risk. Require larger/riskier subcontractors/suppliers to provide information to the principal contractor on what response actions they have put in place to manage COVID-19.
- Implementation of preventative measures during work tasks where physical distancing is not possible such as minimisation of workers on the task, use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), extended task timeframes to enable rotation of workers, and increased frequency of handwashing/ personal hygiene measures.

Management of Cases of COVID-19

IRG members spoke about the necessity of having a process in place for managing a COVID-19 case that could be enacted as soon as it was required and covered all aspects. IRG members also spoke about the need for companies to take strong initiative regarding contact tracing, given they can do this more promptly than state governments. Members further noted that the management of a COVID-19 case was a complex task that involved multiple stakeholders, including government agencies, workers and clients, with all parties needing to be considered in an effective response strategy.

Specific examples:

- Contact mapping – use of a questionnaire to contact map people and site locations. This is a critical tool to determine the extent of site and worker exposure, and assist in containing the spread of the virus.
- Communication plan including external notifications and communications to staff and contractors that is activated when a case of COVID-19 is identified.
- Protocols for return to work of workers who have had COVID-19 as well as close contacts, including evidence requirements, such as medical certification.
- A process for site closures and re-openings (including partial site closures) where a case of COVID-19 is identified, and cleaning/decontamination. For larger sites this may involve external technical experts such as hygienists or occupational physicians.

Workforce Engagement and Training

IRG members noted that their already robust communications, engagement and training processes formed a sound basis for managing the workforce during this period of COVID-19. All members have continued with essential site meetings such as inductions and toolbox talks, but have made adjustments for physical distancing, minimising numbers in groups, using outdoor venues etc. where possible.

Specific examples:

- Provision of online training and guidance regarding physical distancing, hygiene practices, personal responsibility, and work from home setup (for office based staff).
- Increased frequency of consultative meetings and provision of information to engage workers in the development of COVID-19 response and management strategies.
- Ensuring time is dedicated toward the social side of work, regardless of workers being onsite or working from home. An example is doing the weekly paper quiz as a group via teleconference or onsite, adhering to physical distancing requirements as a mechanism to keep workers engaged socially.

- Recognition that many parents have increased caring responsibilities that impact both onsite and work from home workforce. Management embrace this and adjust expectations around how work is done and hours completed, and also providing practical ideas on how to work at home or adjust time spent onsite due to childcare responsibilities.

Mental Health

IRG members acknowledged the significant impact that physical distancing, isolation and uncertainty can have on the mental health of workers. Members spoke about a variety of measures they have introduced to minimise the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of workers ranging from simply reinforcing the EAP services already available to workers through to provision of coffee or meals onsite to lift the spirits of workers.

Specific examples:

- Provision of advice and management strategies for increased alcohol use which seems common during lockdown and is already a known industry issue.
- Establishment of a buddy system so each worker has someone to check in with. This is particularly helpful in managing the mental health of remote workers.
- Provision of online training regarding mental health management, for both office based and onsite workers.
- Running team-based chats where people have a cuppa and work is not discussed. These can either be onsite adhering to social distancing requirements, or via video conference or teleconference for office based staff.

For further information:

- Safe Work Australia – [COVID-19 Information for Building and Construction Industry](#)
- Department of Health – [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) resources](#)
- Department of Health – [Local state and territory health departments](#)
- Department of Health information sheet – [Environmental cleaning and disinfection principles for COVID-19](#)
- Master Builders Association Victoria – [COVID-19 Guidelines for the building and construction industry](#)
- Housing Industry Association – [COVID-19 Update](#)
- Visit the FSC website at www.fsc.gov.au
- Contact the FSC Assist Line on **1800 652 500**
- Contact the OFSC via email at ofsc@jobs.gov.au

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