

Navigating Construction Sites amid COVID-19 Pandemic



There is no doubt that the Coronavirus pandemic outbreak (**COVID-19**) has affected countless industries and has severely impacted the economy as a whole. The building and construction industry is no exception. In the midst of current economic uncertainty, it is crucial that the construction and development of projects are dealt with pragmatically with commercial sense at the forefront of decision making. This article explores provisions introduced by the government to further support the construction industry and any additional steps that can be taken by employers and principal contractors in relation work health and safety (**WHS**) obligations on construction sites.

Construction Works on Weekends and Public Holidays

On 2 April 2020, Planning and Public Spaces Minister Rob Stokes issued and implemented the *Environmental Planning and Assessment (COVID-19 Development – Construction Work Days) Order 2020* (“Order”). This Order allows building and construction work, including demolitions of buildings, to be carried out on weekends and public holidays, regardless of whether the development consent allows it. However, there is a general obligation on builders to minimise the noise on these additional days, and certain types of works like rock breaking, rock hammering, sheet piling, pile driving, or similar activities would not be permitted under this Order.

Mr Stokes commented that *“the construction and development sectors, which make up almost 10 per cent of NSW’s economy, will be vital in keeping people in jobs and keeping investment flowing over the coming weeks and months.”* The rationale for this Order is to ensure that the extended hours on construction projects will allow projects and developments to progress whilst implementing social distancing rules and maintain productivity on construction sites over a greater number of days in the week.

Contact

Xin Gan, Lawyer | ✉ xgan@constructionlegal.com.au
☎ +61 2 8591 9132 | 🌐 www.constructionlegal.com.au

Social Distancing on Construction Sites – Potential WHS Suggestions

It is vital that employers, principal contractors and persons in control of construction sites must practice and implement social distancing and other protective measures to ensure the health and safety of their workers and others at the workplace is protected. If, construction sites do not use protective measures and workers work closely and cluster together, it may increase the risk of exposure to COVID-19, which could impact adversely on the employer's work force. Hence, employers and principals must undertake reasonably practicable steps to ensure that workers are safe and that they maintain a physical distance of 1.5 metres apart from others while carrying on work on the construction site. Principal contractors can rely on the Order by limiting the daily onsite workers and extending hours to weekends and public holidays to ensure that the project program and completion date are observed.

Set out below are some measures employers and principals could consider in light of COVID-19:

- Physical (social) distancing and reduce team interactions;
- Limit number of workers on site where possible by considering introducing morning and afternoon shifts or alternative day shifts including weekend shifts;
- Prevent congregation of workers by rotating breaks and meal times, designate and mark specific walkways to maintain physical distance;
- To reduce the risk of a COVID-19 outbreak in your team, consider splitting your task force into two groups (A and B), workers from each group work alternative shifts and cannot interact with each other in person. This means that if one group becomes compromised by COVID-19, the other group should be able to continue with construction works;
- Frequently clean high-contact surfaces on the construction site like plant and equipment, lifts, handrails, and site amenities including toilets, break rooms, and stop use of public drink fountains;
- Postpone or cancel non-essential visits to and training at construction sites;
- Implement standard operating procedures for site deliveries by minimising contact with truck drivers and perhaps set up alternatives to signature upon delivery to electronic confirmation via electronic signatures, email or photos;
- Place posters and signage about good personal hygiene through the construction site and amenity areas ([click here for Australian government posters](#));
- Educate your team on COVID-19 symptoms that they should be aware of and enforce reporting obligations on workers who are experiencing symptoms of illness, or have been exposed to a positive carrier of COVID-19;
- Enforce reporting obligations on workers who have proposed travel plans or contact with a recently quarantined or self-isolated person due to COVID-19;
- Prohibit workers from working if they display symptoms of COVID-19;
- Provide workers with support services and assistance programs; and
- Consider financial assistance programs that might be available to your business.

Despite the uncertainty that COVID-19 has caused, the construction industry continues to proceed, and projects continue to be developed. For further information on COVID-19, please [click here](#) or for advice on how COVID-19 affects your construction contracts, please [contact our offices](#).

Contact